



Ruth Sebetka rides QH "Hardwood Hancock" at the 2004 NBHA World Championships in Augusta, GA.

By Ruth Sebetka, Barrel Racing Competitor & Instructor
And Chris Egan, Freelance Writer

After the worst winter in recent history, weary equestrians began digging out their trailers. Local barrel racers scraped away 3 months of snow and ice to haul to indoor facilities in order to begin conditioning their barrel horses for the upcoming Iowa National Barrel Racing Association season. There are nearly 600 members in the IANBHA. Nationwide, there are more than 23,000 members of all ages across the United States and affiliates in 5 countries: Canada, Italy, France, Panama and Brazil.

My formal riding instruction has been in English disciplines such as balanced riding and Dressage but I've always had a lot of fun in the speed events. In an effort to understand the popular sport of barrel racing, I contacted a good friend and former co-worker, Ruth Sebetka. Ruth has competed in speed events since she was a

child. After a 10 year hiatus after high school she has been competing in the NBHA and various state and local rodeo associations. She barrel races "on a budget" and trains her own horses for herself and her daughter, Kelly.

It turned out we had more in common than I thought, as Ruth has also rode English as a youth and even "posts" with her Western saddle. Ruth was not offended when I showed up with an English saddle at our first lesson.

One of the first things Ruth and I worked on was keeping the horse's inside shoulder level. "Ideally, you want the horse to stay 'up' in the turn so that his body is balanced and the horse is using all 4 legs equally for maximum power," Ruth explained. "Think of it as four wheel drive. The more you can keep that shoulder up the more momentum you will have."

Holding the reins correctly and seat position were part of this lesson as well. The rider must stay straight in the saddle

and not lean into the turn. Ruth told me to think about carrying a small child on my shoulders and how that affects my balance, and then to apply that theory to how the horse functions with a rider on its back.

Switching disciplines a bit, to quote Hilda Gurney's article "Influencing the Horse with your body" in the May 2008 issue of *Dressage Today*, "If a rider turns her shoulders, she weights her seat bones on the side her shoulders are turned towards, putting the weight on the inside of the horse's back and encouraging him to stretch his outside back muscles, bending to the inside. If the rider leans SIDEWAYS with her upper body, she usually collapses her hip on the side toward which she leans, switching her weight onto her outside seat bone. This presses against the outside of the horse's back, making it difficult for him to bend to the inside."

Understanding how your upper body position affects your seat is necessary for learning another barrel racing technique

- approaching the pocket - that is important for achieving a good run. The term pocket means the amount of space beside the barrel that the horse needs to turn effectively with the most momentum while covering the least ground. Efficiency is as important as speed. We practiced hitting the pocket by setting up cones in a pattern. I slowed the horse as we entered the pocket before each turn. I was able to incorporate the half halt, which is a seat cue I learned for competing in Dressage. We did these exercises with an English saddle at the trot.

I also attended a barrel racing clinic at Tracy Milota's in Center Point (below). I was impressed at the amount of time that was spent on slow work. At the session that I attended, each participant would work a figure eight pattern at the trot and canter, 3 figure eights at a trot, 3 at the canter. Once they set up the barrels, they would walk or trot out of the entryway and completely through the pattern. None of the horses were ever "pulled" around a barrel, they responded to seat and leg cues. After each run the riders were given feedback. At each session, a different cone pattern was set up.

According to Ruth, "once a horse knows the pattern it's not necessary to work the pattern at home. Trail riding and slow work

other than on barrels will keep the horse relaxed and fresh." Slow work would include flexing, side passes and circles. Some barrel racers even ride English as a change of pace for them and the horse and many people hack their horses bareback also.

I'm hoping to some day take more lessons and advance to full speed and using a barrel saddle. Although an English saddle is perfect for dressage and eventing, Ruth also explained why it's not the right tool for high-powered barrel racing. "The barrel saddle is there to help the rider help the horse. Running 30 mph at a barrel and turning 360 degrees in about a four-foot circumference is a lot of torque on the rider. The barrel saddle allows the rider to stay balanced and steady while the horse is running, and also allows the rider to pull herself up and off the back of the barrel horse as the horse engages its rear end to power out to the next barrel. Just like a barrel saddle is not the correct gear for hunting and jumping, the English saddle is not the correct gear for barrel racing. Slow work is fine for an English saddle but once the speed builds, use the correct gear!"

The more I learn about riding in general and how riders communicate, the more similarities I see between English and

Western riding. The tack may be different but the basics of horsemanship are very much the same.

If you'd like to learn more about barrel racing go to www.nbha.com or www.ianbha.com. The slogan behind the NBHA format is, "Where beginners can be winners." The IA NBHA State show is June 6 -8th in Mason City, Iowa.

Besides the NBHA there are also many rodeo associations, jackpots, and family-oriented clubs across the state.

If you'd like to learn more about lessons contact Ruth at 319-448-4724. She can schedule you for lessons with her, or refer you to other qualified barrel racing instructors such as Tracy Milota and Teresa Baumgartner in Center Point, IA, or Kim Chesmore in Independence, IA, to name a few.

PHOTOS:

TOP LEFT: Jarrad Stepanek, Fairfax, rides "Steel," a Thoroughbred.

TOP CENTER: Carrie Spertslage, Vinton, rides "Harley," a Quarter Horse.

TOP RIGHT & BOTTOM CENTER: Ryan Downing, Alburnett, rides "Cody."

The other two riders and their horses are unidentified at this writing.

