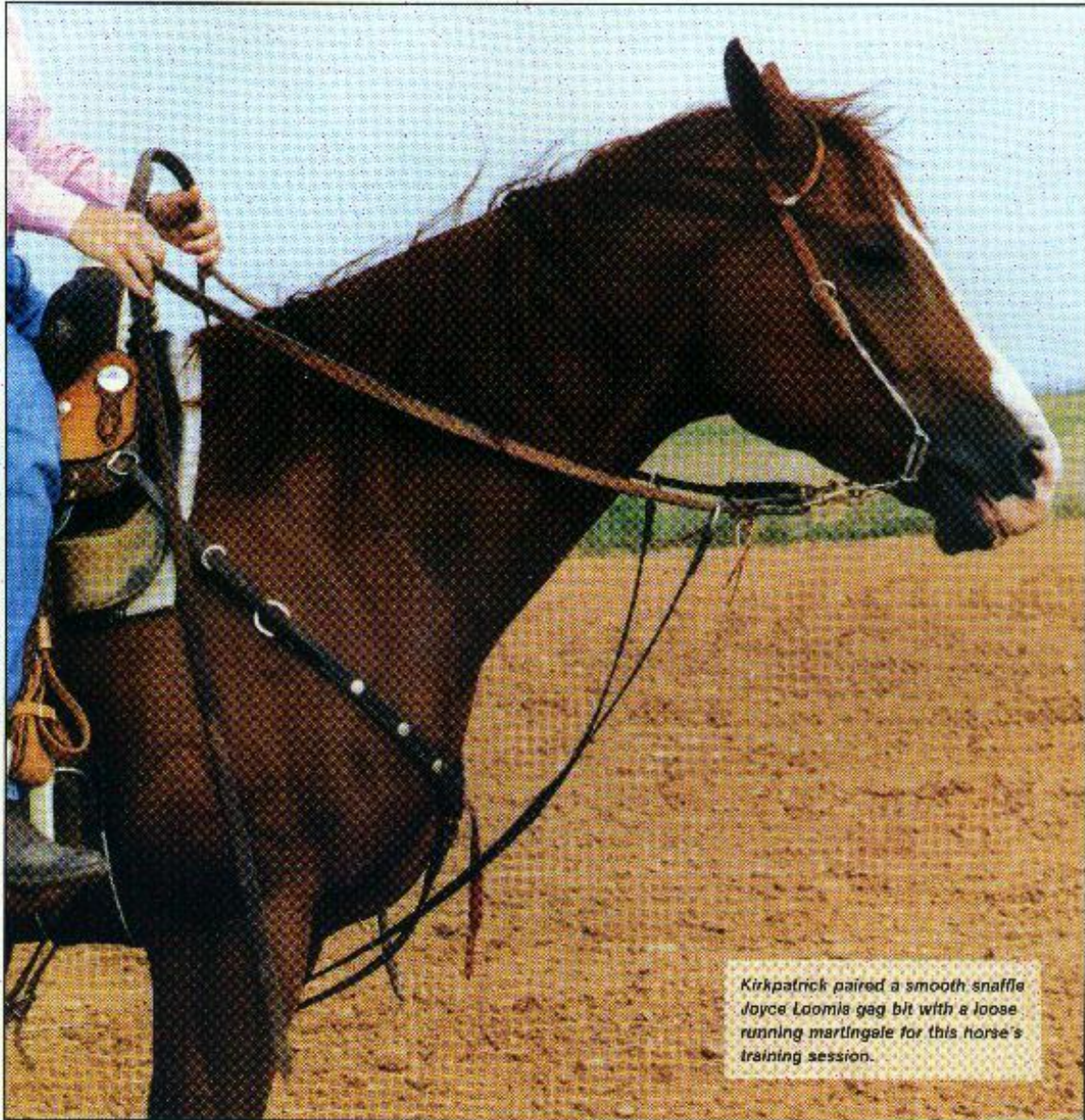


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Articles from The Quarter Horse Journal December 1998 & January 1999

# Barrel racing basics

*Barrel horse trainer Dena Kirkpatrick uses specific horsemanship techniques to prep horses for the barrel pattern. Article and photos by Roy Jo Sartin.*



*Kirkpatrick paired a smooth snaffle Joyce Loomis gag bit with a loose running martingale for this horse's training session.*



**G**ood horsemanship is good horsemanship, no matter the discipline. The techniques used by reiners to get controlled-explosion stops and by dressage riders to get sweeping lateral movements can also be applied in an event that's growing increasingly technical – barrel racing.

Seconds no longer count in barrel racing – *thousandths* of seconds do. Ever more competitive, barrel racing is a marriage of speed and precision grounded in a firm foundation of horsemanship and patterning. Basics have never influenced barrel racing success more than they do today.

Dena Kirkpatrick, who trained barrel futurity winners Chicago Moon Express and Willy Nick Bar, explains how to couple light control with universal horsemanship basics to prep horses for the barrel pattern. Next month, she'll take you to the barrel course for a look at patterning.

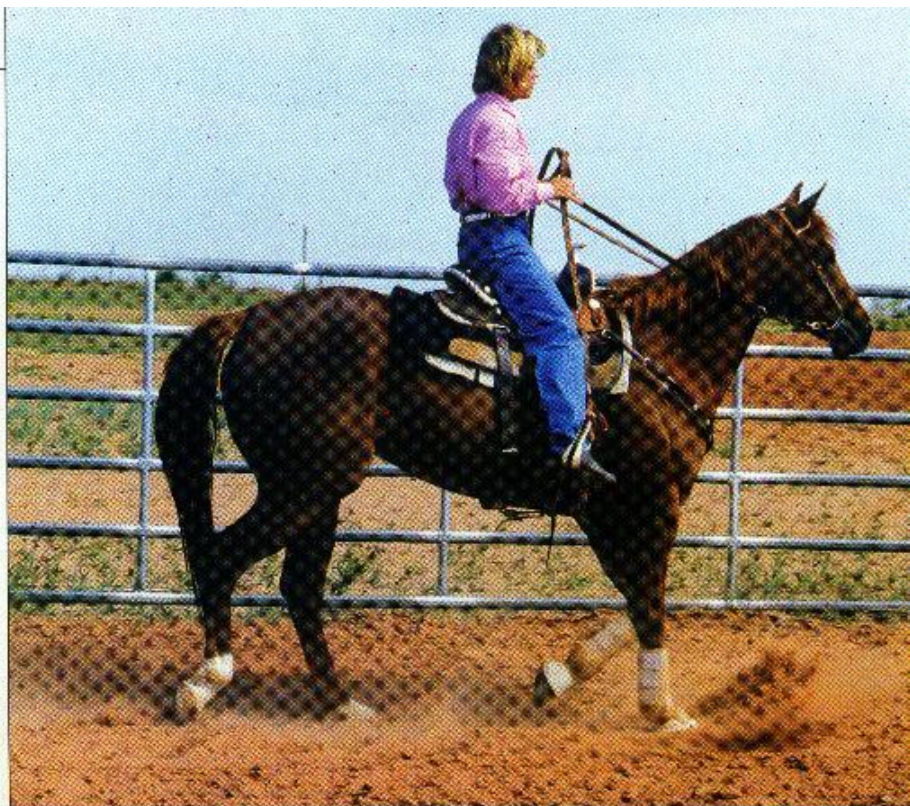
#### Stop

"A good stop is when a horse tucks and slides," Kirkpatrick says. "It's not good enough to just cease forward motion. The horse must be really backed off the bit."

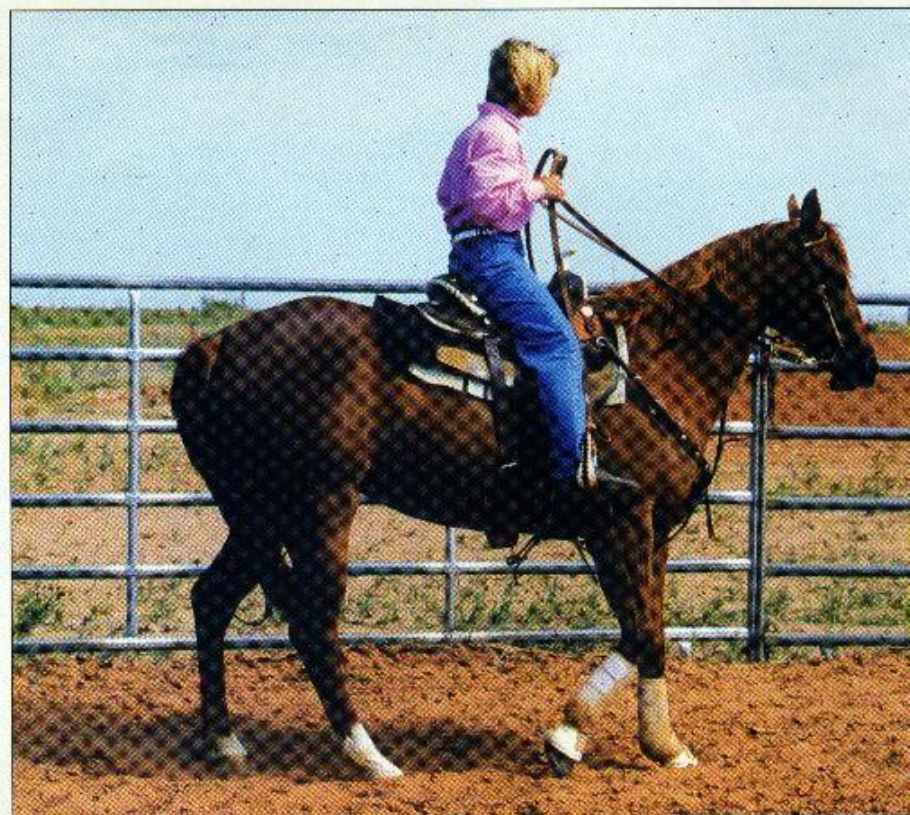
Being backed off the bit means that a horse gathers his rear end under him, or collects himself, in response to light rein pressure. Collection is the most fundamental basic of all, the prerequisite for all other maneuvers in any discipline. Before a horse can learn to control his body, he must understand how to collect himself at the rider's request.

Since one of Kirkpatrick's goals is to teach horses to work with as little headgear as possible, she starts all her horses in an O-ring snaffle and then moves on to a light Joyce Loomis gag bit. While training the basic maneuvers discussed here, Kirkpatrick often couples a gag bit with a running martingale to teach a horse to give at the poll.

To get a horse backed off the bit, Kirkpatrick first walks the horse on a loose rein. Then she sits down in the saddle and applies steady pressure on the reins, holding the



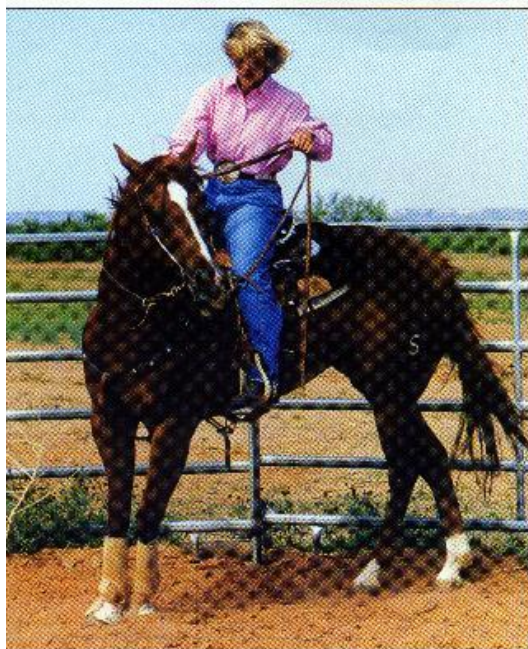
*To back this horse off the bit, Kirkpatrick asks him to stop by sitting down in the saddle and applying steady pressure on the reins.*



*The horse has stopped and is rocking back. Notice that Kirkpatrick's hands have stayed in the same position, applying the same amount of rein pressure, throughout the maneuver.*



To rollover away from the fence, Kirkpatrick first asks the horse to stop and rock back, to collect his weight on his hind end. Then she lifts with the "inside" (here, the left) rein to draw the horse's nose away from the fence.



Kirkpatrick applies "outside" (here, the right) neck rein and leg pressure to move the horse's front end away from the fence. Notice the horse has taken a small step forward with his left, or "inside," hind leg; this better positions that leg to support the horse's weight.

Due to neck rein and leg pressure from Kirkpatrick, the horse walks his front end around his back end by stepping out with his left front foot and crossing over with his right front. By pulling back slightly on the outside neck rein, Kirkpatrick helps the horse keep his hind end stationary throughout the maneuver.



pressure until the horse stops and takes a step or two back, after which she immediately releases the rein pressure. Kirkpatrick repeats this until the horse stops and rocks back as soon as she takes the slack out of the reins. She then duplicates the process at a trot and lope.

This exercise helps green horses learn to respond to the bit, and reminds seasoned veterans to respect rein pressure. Once a horse can gather himself at the lightest touch of the rein, he's ready to use that collection and learn to move.

#### Rollover

"I like a horse that is naturally broken at the poll and that flexes softly and easily both directions," says Kirkpatrick. "They must be able to flex off of the rein, stop well and roll over their hocks before starting on barrels."

Kirkpatrick's theory of rollovers directly prepares a horse to carry his weight on his inside hind leg during turns. Adding a flexion maneuver at the end of the rollover keeps horses supple and sets their body positions up for Kirkpatrick's method for finishing barrel turns, which she'll explain next month.



The rollover starts as an extension of the stop-and-rock-back technique. Kirkpatrick introduces horses to the rollover while riding next to a fence. After the horse stops and rocks back, Kirkpatrick continues the backward motion and lifts the "inside" rein to guide the horse's nose away from the fence. Pressing the horse with the fence-side, or "outside," rein and leg helps him walk his front legs away from the fence.

"In a correct rollover," says Kirkpatrick, "one hind leg stays planted and the horse rolls over that leg." Steady backward rein pressure on the inside keeps that hind leg as stationary as possible. The horse learns to shift his weight onto his back end and carry it on the leg inside this pivoting turn. After the 180-degree rollover is complete, Kirkpatrick releases rein pressure and walks the horse off on a loose rein.

Once a horse is comfortable turning away from the fence in both directions, Kirkpatrick asks the horse to perform the same maneuver toward the fence. To rollover toward the fence, a horse must learn how to collect and shift his weight to his hind end even more than with rollovers away from the fence.

Kirkpatrick works with her horses until they can perform rollovers at a trot and at a lope, in straight lines and in circles, along fences and in open areas. "When loping circles, use your feet and hands to keep your horse's shoulder lifted and body arched accordingly," says Kirkpatrick. "I trot, stop, rollover, lope, stop, rollover, in very controlled circles. I control the horse's body all the time."

Kirkpatrick adds a flexion maneuver when a horse has mastered the rollover. Just as the horse finishes the rollover, she releases the inside rein pressure and smoothly replaces it by bringing her outside hand back and above the horse's neck, slightly tucking the horse's nose. This lifts his shoulder. Pressing the horse's side with her leg arches his body. Thus flexed and lifted, the horse moves laterally away from Kirkpatrick's rein and leg pressure. This movement prepares the horse for his final fundamental lesson.

#### Sidepass

"In my training program, I quickly move from a ring bit to a gag bit, because you can lift a horse's shoulder much easier with a gag bit," says Kirkpatrick. "Horses have to know how to sidepass to do barrels, but it's very confusing to young horses. They're taught to come toward the bit, and suddenly you want them to move away from it. The day you introduce them to sidepassing is usually their first high pressure day, and they usually get really upset. Just be patient and piddle with them. They get it eventually."

Kirkpatrick asks horses to sidepass from a standstill with their front feet only, since she wants their rear ends to stay collected underneath them. Repeating the hand and leg movements employed in the flexion maneuver, she lifts the horse's shoulder and presses with her leg to move his front end laterally for a few steps. She may add some light backward tension on the off rein to help the horse steady his rear end, although small steps or movements of the hind feet will occur as the horse redistributes his weight during the maneuver.

Learning to rollover and sidepass helps a horse recognize different types of rein and leg pressures. Both maneuvers also teach a horse to move his body at the request of his rider, and teach the rider the proper rein and leg cues to help the horse control his body.

"When horses can sidepass, stop well and rollover, they're ready to start on barrels," says Kirkpatrick. Kirkpatrick will take us through barrel patterning next month. ➤



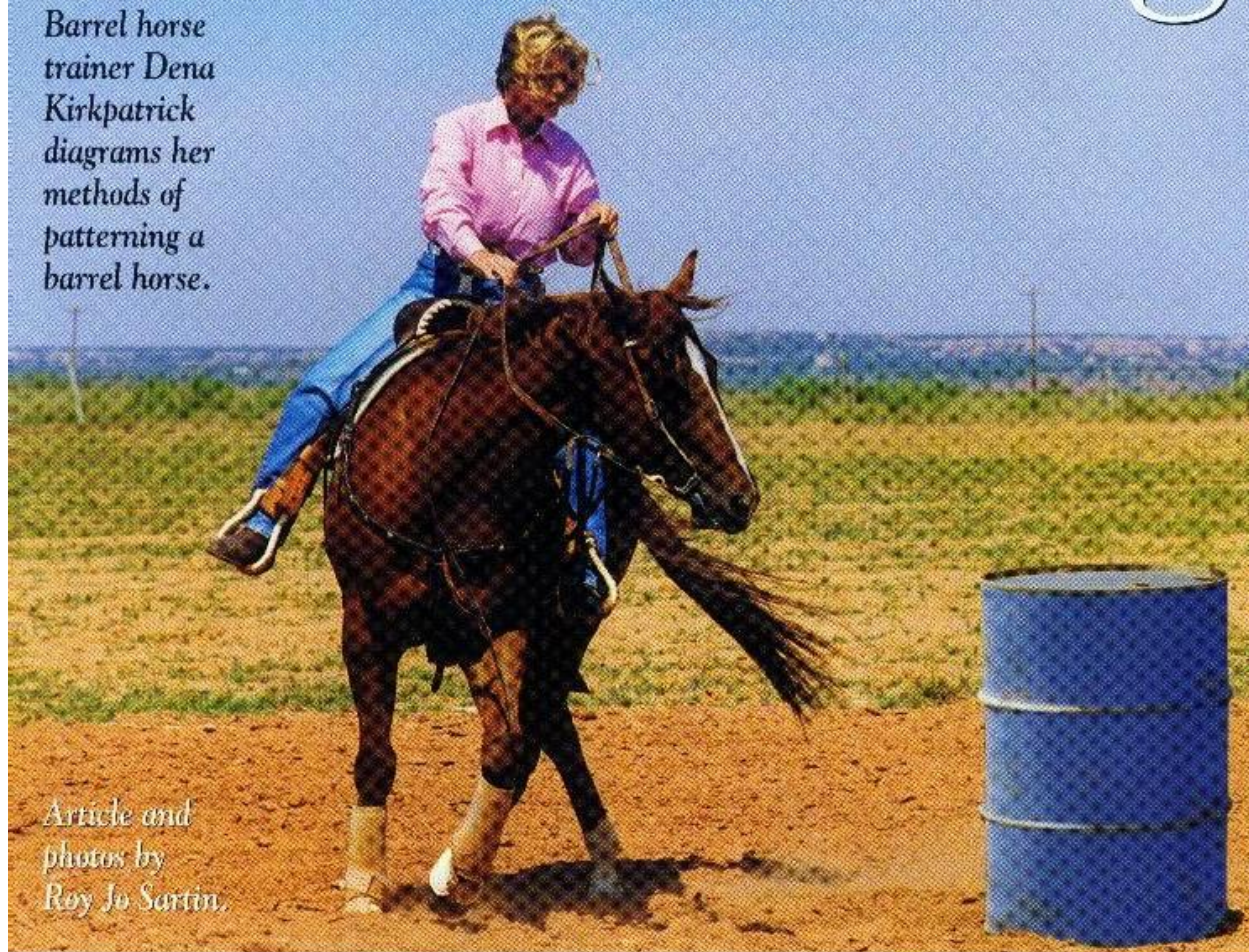
#### Bio

Dena Kirkpatrick learned how to train barrel horses the hard way - by learning from every mistake in the book. With the friendship and advice of trainer Cele Whitcomb Ray and roper/rancher/husband Cliff, Kirkpatrick developed soft hands and a quiet training style. From Bell Bottom Blues in '92 to Willy Nick Bar in '97, Kirkpatrick's barrel futurity winners have made her a top trainer in the sport. The Kirkpatricks live in Post, Texas, with their daughters, Sarah and Hannah.



# Barrel racing

Barrel horse trainer Dena Kirkpatrick diagrams her methods of patterning a barrel horse.



Article and photos by Roy Jo Sartin.

**L**AST MONTH, world champion barrel horse trainer Dena Kirkpatrick outlined the three basic maneuvers she employs to get horses ready to go to the barrel pattern: stop and rock back, rollover and sidepass. These techniques teach a horse to respond to the bit, to gather and handle his weight on his rear end, and to move his front end away from leg and rein pressure.

Here, in the final segment of this two-part series, Kirkpatrick demonstrates the specific pattern she uses on the barrel course. Kirkpatrick's patterning method is the acid test of a horse's barrel racing basics. The horse must be able to respond correctly to different kinds of

rein and leg pressure in order to successfully use Kirkpatrick's pattern for smooth, fast turns.

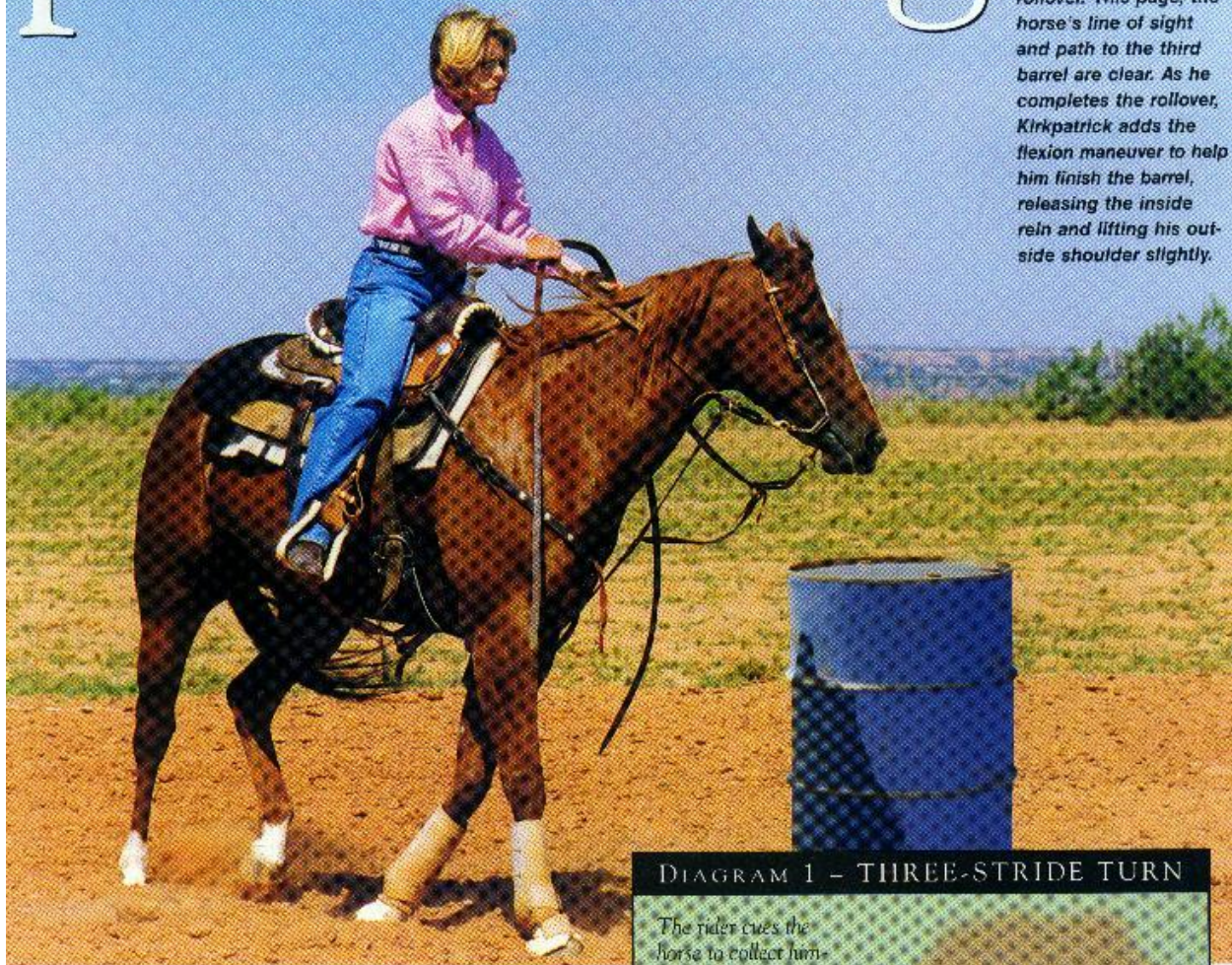
## The 3/4 place

"The ideal turn for a barrel horse is the one that's the most efficient," Kirkpatrick says. "The horse needs to have his body arched and his rear under him going into the turn to help him take as few steps as possible around the barrel."

A horse with his weight collected on his rear end is automatically lighter in the front, allowing him to lift his shoulder and flex his body when cued by the rider. He'll have proper body position coming into the barrel, with his rear end trailing directly behind his front end. He'll balance his weight



# patterning



On the opposite page, the horse has just reached the 3/4 place in his turn around the second barrel. Instead of lifting his shoulder, Kirkpatrick is now guiding his nose with the inside rein and applying outside neck rein to begin the rollover. This page, the horse's line of sight and path to the third barrel are clear. As he completes the rollover, Kirkpatrick adds the flexion maneuver to help him finish the barrel, releasing the inside rein and lifting his outside shoulder slightly.

on his driving rear end and reach around the barrel with his front feet.

To create fast turns, Kirkpatrick has developed the turn system in diagram 1. Here, a running horse turns a first barrel in three jumps, or "reaches" (At a slower speed, the horse will naturally take more strides to turn the barrel.). After Kirkpatrick cues the horse to collect himself (a), she lifts the inside rein against his neck and applies leg pressure to help him arch his body (similar to the techniques used for the flexion maneuver discussed last month). The horse's first jump after being cued to collect himself takes him to the back side of the barrel (b).

As the horse makes his second reach around the barrel, Kirkpatrick continues to lift his shoulder and arch his body

## DIAGRAM 1 - THREE-STRIDE TURN

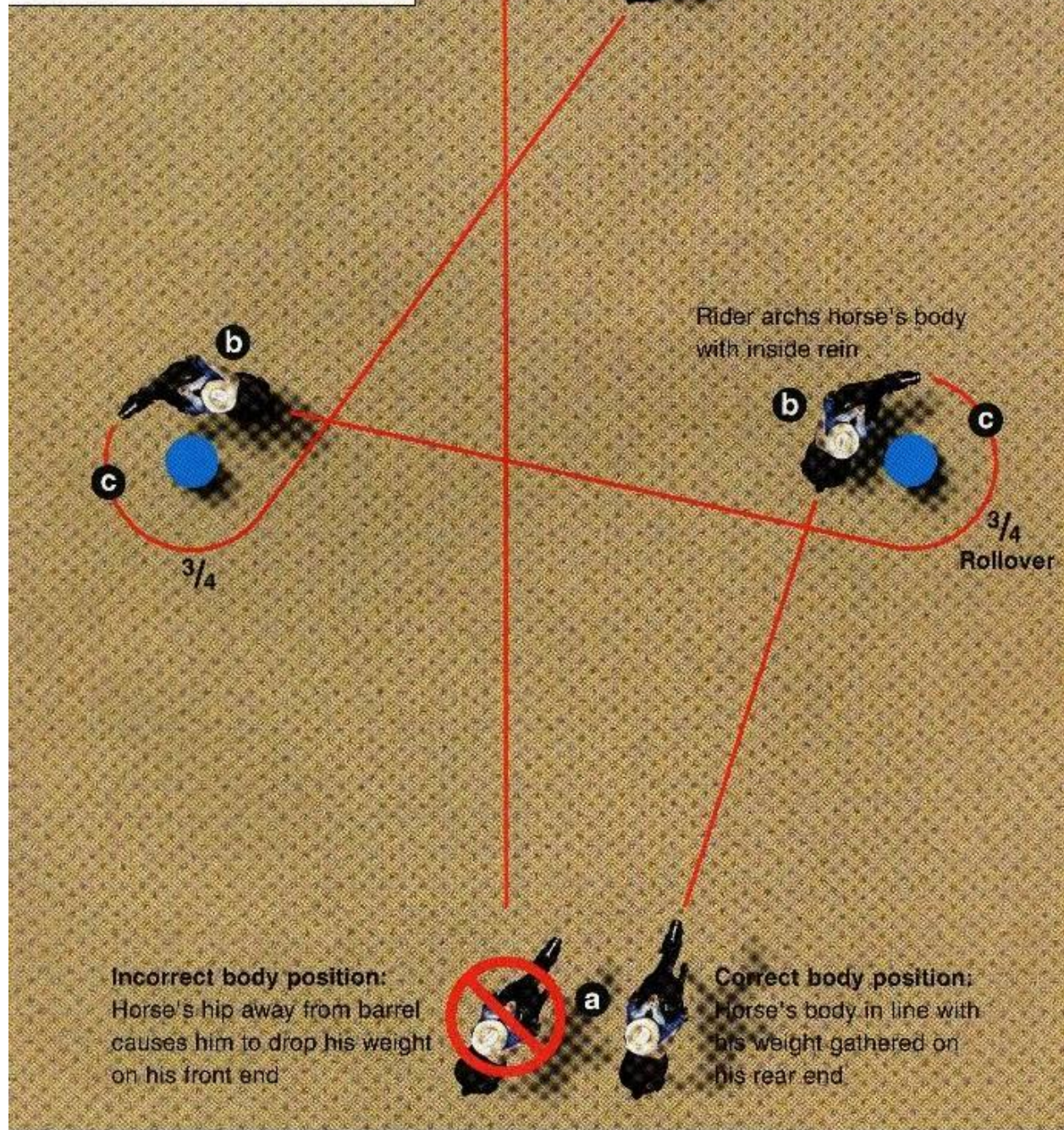
The rider cues the horse to collect himself at (a) and then uses rein and leg pressure to help him arch his body as his next stride takes him to (b). The rider continues to lift the horse's shoulder as he reaches (c): the 3/4 place, where the horse's rear end gathers under him and his line of sight is clear to the next barrel. The rider now asks the horse to roll over his hocks and drive away from the barrel in one smooth motion.





## DIAGRAM 2 – KIRKPATRICK'S BARREL PATTERN

Kirkpatrick starts her path to the first barrel from a place halfway between the first and third barrels (a), as opposed to a spot even with the third barrel, so that the horse's body is straight with his rear end in line behind his front end. At (b) at each barrel, the rider cues the horse to gather himself and then helps him arch his body around the barrel. The horse takes two strides around the first and second barrels (b to c and c to 3/4 place), but usually learns to take one jump and slide to the 3/4 place at the third barrel.





with the inside rein. This second reach takes his front end to the "three-quarter" place, due to its position at 3/4 of the way through the turn (c).

"At the 3/4 place, the horse gathers his weight on his rear end," says Kirkpatrick. "Be sure the barrel is even with his hip and his line of sight to the next barrel is clear before asking him to rollover. Then he can drive off in one smooth motion."

To help the horse with the rollover, Kirkpatrick lightly pulls his nose around with the inside rein, also using her legs and outside neck rein to encourage him to roll over his hocks. If the rider drives the horse to the 3/4 place properly, the horse will finish the turn cleanly, collected on his rear end and in line for the sprint to the next barrel.

#### Taking them to the pattern

"I usually start horses on barrels – just going slow – before they can do all the basics perfectly," says Kirkpatrick. "Sometimes it helps them figure out the basics if they have to use them to do something else."

Kirkpatrick uses the same equipment for the barrel pattern as she used for the basics: a light Joyce Loomis gag bit with split reins and a running martingale. For competition, she'll leave the split reins and martingale at home, but the bridle stays the same. "My goal is to get a horse to work with as little headgear as possible," says Kirkpatrick, "and I only use spurs when they're necessary."

Kirkpatrick keeps both hands on the reins to better guide horses during slow work. In the beginning, she walks the pattern smoothly with no stops, shaping each turn according to diagram 2. She adds a little more room around each barrel since turns get tighter with speed. At each turn's 3/4 place, she asks the horse to finish the turn with a rollover and flexion maneuver (explained in last month's article). It is very important that the horse's line of sight and path is clear of the barrel he's turning when the rider asks for the rollover.

After a few days of walking, Kirkpatrick will walk and trot the pattern, observing how quickly the horse is learning and how well he incorporates his basics into the pattern. When trotting, Kirkpatrick adds a stop at each barrel to teach the horse to gather himself for the turns. She stops when the barrel is beside her leg.

"One of the keys to starting a horse on barrels is to never start the turn too early," says Kirkpatrick. "A horse that tries to turn too early will drop his weight on his front end, and he won't be collected and arched for the turn. He'll have to take more steps around the barrel, and he'll probably hit lots of barrels, too, because his weight will be dumped over on his front end."

When the horse seems ready, Kirkpatrick begins loping the pattern, sometimes stopping at each barrel, sometimes loping the whole pattern. Each horse is different and will improve at his own rate.

"Every day that I go to the pattern, whether we walked, trotted, loped or ran the course, if the horse tried hard, then I'm happy, and I quit for the day," says Kirkpatrick. "They can't be perfect every day. You can tell whether they had a clumsy day or they just didn't try. Remember that their attention spans are short – 15 to 20 minutes – and be happy with a little progress."

*"Every day that I go to the pattern, if the horse tried hard, then I'm happy and I quit for the day. They can't be perfect every day. Be happy with a little progress."*

#### Adding intensity

When a horse can trot and lope the pattern, it's time for a road trip to a barrel race or a friend's house. "Things that come untrained at a jackpot are things to go home and work on," says Kirkpatrick.

But, she stresses, if they're not turning a barrel correctly, it's because they're not doing one of the basics correctly. "Leave the barrel pattern and work on the problem, so they don't associate anything bad or uncomfortable with the pattern," Kirkpatrick says. "If they're acting up and you need to discipline them, leave the barrel pattern to do it. You want every training or tuning session out there on the pattern to be easy and quiet. They learn better if they're calm and happy."

As a horse begins competing, Kirkpatrick tries to keep her riding style and cues consistent with what she does at home, so as not to confuse the horse. A green horse needs brief training sessions between runs to remind him of his basics and the correct pattern around the barrels. A seasoned horse can sometimes benefit from a tune-up, as well.

"Transitions in speed are tricky places," says Kirkpatrick. "If you've trained a horse on the pattern correctly, he will start to accelerate leaving the barrels. Stick to the basics and gradually build the speed."

"I never worry about what kind of time they're going to run," she continues. "I'm a firm believer in three smooth turns. Your job as a rider is to help that horse turn three smooth barrels. If you do that, and your horse has the talent, then you'll win." ♣



#### BIO

A junior rodeo competitor-turned-barrel futurity horse trainer, Dena Kirkpatrick of Post, Texas, has trained barrel futurity and rodeo winners, like Chicago Moon Express and Willy Nick Bar. Willy Nick Bar won the '97 Barrel Futurities of America World Championship Barrel Racing Futurity and the '98 AQHA junior barrel racing world championship.