



The GATEKEEPER

Early careers on the track and in the rodeo arena were preludes to what “Ricardo Cabeza” was really meant to do, handle recalcitrant cows.





*After everyone thought this gelding was used up,
he found a partner who appreciated his work ethic
and employed him to move cattle, day-in, day-out.*

By Lisa Henry

“RICARDO CABEZA” WAS THE BIG BROWN gelding’s new code name. It was meant to replace the expletive that had been bestowed upon him, which could not be said in polite company or in front of children. A grandson of Rocket Wrangler, “Ricardo” held his own on the racetrack for more than a few years, until eventually finding his way to the rodeo arena. His blazing speed allowed for quick turns around three barrels and made him an easy sale for big money. Money big enough to purchase a new truck and trailer in the mid-’90s.

Sold.

Ricardo Cabeza went to Oregon and won buckles for his new owner until he eventually “blew-up” – the term used by horse trainers when they cannot explain why a good horse quits doing what he does best. In Ricardo’s case, this resulted in him racing around the arena as if he were back on the track and looking to win.

Anyone who has owned a good horse gone bad knows how difficult and disappointing the decision to give up can be. Time after time, Ricardo ran off and was continuously swapped from trainer to trainer to be “fixed.” After two years of trying, his barrel racing career was over and he was sold as a prospective rope horse, thanks to his speed and solid build.

But all go and no whoa forced the trader who owned him to make a call to the only guy he knew would appreciate a challenge – a guy who believed that “Anyone can ride a broke horse, and what’s the fun in that?” He called Pat Russell.

Pat put Ricardo to work. Cattle at most major cutting and cow horse events in the West, including Pacific Coast Cutting Horse Association and National Reined Cow Horse Association shows, are handled by Pat. For almost 20 years, Ricardo has been Pat’s horse of choice. Together, the duo have shipped and received more than 350,000 head of cattle. It would be impossible to estimate the number of gates Pat and Ricardo have opened and closed. Working at horse shows, long days often run late into the night – and Ricardo never disappointed.

To say this gelding likes his job is an understatement. Once, under the lights and in front of a full-capacity crowd at the Sacramento Horse Expo, Ricardo untied himself from behind the arena gate. When a herd of roping cattle needed to be pushed back up the arena, Ricardo ran through the gate and accomplished the task without Pat in the saddle. The crowd went wild. Ricardo trotted back to where he had been tied and dropped his head as if it were no big deal.

Many obstinate cattle refusing to leave the arena have found the out gate with the help of Ricardo Cabeza’s skillful insistence. But, if horses could boast, perhaps one of Ricardo’s career highlights would have been the 2012 coordinated stampede down the Las Vegas Strip to welcome Shania Twain to her two-year residency at Caesars Palace. Closing down Las Vegas Boulevard was a historic event. Thousands of cheering fans waved as Ricardo herded Shania and 40 “wild horses” to the red carpet in front of Caesars Palace.

As the sun goes down, it washes the evening with a violet haze. Pat calls Ricardo into the barn with an “ewww-wheee,” which sounds similar to a hog call. Ricardo is loose and has the run of the ranch, which includes the miles of National Forest that border it. Ricardo limps out from a thicket of manzanita brush – chewing his tongue – waiting for grain on three legs. His knee is popped, bent and swollen. Snow blankets the hollow of his fuzzy back. Time has become a burden for the old horse now. Pat fills a bucket with grain.

“He hates being in a stall,” Pat says, and scratches off a dirt clod smothering the animal’s sunken eye – knowing that putting the horse down will soon be an act of love. “He may not have been a world-beater, but how many horses do you know that can win on the track, go win as a barrel horse, then work cattle and last as long as he did? That’s a performance horse.”

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Stock contractor Pat Russell
is spent decades with this
son of Rocket Wrangler.
The gelding is now in his
sunset years.