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How to Start a Heading Horse

In the sport of team roping, there are two horses, two riders, and one steer. The event starts out with a roping chute in the middle, a headers' box on the left side, and a heelers' box on the right side. One horse and rider, or heading horse and header, are in the headers' box, and the other horse and rider, or heeling horse and heeler, are in the heelers' box. There are a few steps in turning a young "green" horse into a heading horse. The horse must learn to handle a rope, stand in the box, rate a steer, turn a steer smoothly, and face up.

The first step is to teach the horse to handle a rope. A good way to do this is to just walk the horse around quietly while swinging the rope slowly. Once the horse gets used to the sound the rope makes, swing the rope faster until the rope's motion does not bother the horse. Then swing the rope down in front of the horse's head, but be sure to try not to hit the horse with the rope. After it gets used to that, secure the rope to a solid object, a log or an old tire or anything of that nature, and have the horse drag it around until the horse gets used to the weight being put against him.

Standing in the box puts the most pressure on a horse and will usually make or break a horse. The horse must be backed into the headers' box and must stand calmly until the steer is turned loose. If the horse will not stand calmly, then walk it out of the box, and lope it around the arena until it is breathing hard. Then back the horse into the box, and let it rest until it gains its breath back. This will make it think that the box is a resting place and will make it want to go

back in there.

The third step is to rate the steer. To do this, the horse must chase the steer once it is let out of the roping chute. The ideal position for the horse is for the horse's head to be even with the steer's back legs and about one yard to the left of it. This puts the header in a good position to throw his rope. The only way to do this is practice and patience. The header must just keep the horse in this position until it goes to that spot and stays there on its own.

After that is done, the horse is ready to rope and turn a steer. The first thing to do is to just rope a steer, dally off (which is wrapping the other end of the rope around the saddle horn to secure it), and stop the steer. After the horse gets used to the weight of the steer, it is ready to turn the steer. To turn the steer smoothly once it is roped, dally off, slow the horse down, and turn the horse to the left slowly; and the horse should pull the steer until the heeler ropes the steer's hind legs.

The final step is to face up. To face up is to turn the horse around once the heeler ropes the hind legs and stretch the steer out. This can be hard to do because the horse may not want to stand and face the steer. The best thing to do is to make him stand and face the steer for ten or fifteen seconds just to calm him down.

After the horse has learned to handle a rope, stand in the box, rate a steer, turn a steer smoothly, and face up, it can proudly be called a heading horse.