

HIGH PLAINS

INDEPENDENT

by Bill Kiley



[1099PROFILE]

STORIES OF BOSS-FREE PEOPLE

Montana can be a tough place to live. In winter, the temperatures are so bitter, you'd rather eat a Vaseline-and-cat-fur sandwich than step outdoors. And most of the dirt roads are so jarring, they'll knock the freckles right off your face. Maybe that's why the state has such a macho reputation. Montana is a man's world. Oh, they'll tell you that the white stuff on top of their mountains is snow, but it's not. It's testosterone.

A few years ago, one independent professional discovered that the state's machismo was pushing away his female clients. This is how he roped them back in.

Rusty Hebel is a veteran horseman. His ranch is tucked among the rolling hills outside Ennis, in western Montana. Long recognized as one of the state's top horse trainers, he learned everything from his father, Rollie Hebel. "I never decided to become a horse trainer. I was just born into it and never thought of anything else for very long," Hebel laughs. He's been training horses full-time for 30 years.

Hebel runs clinics to teach the best and safest ways of handling a horse. "I teach them how to tell a good horse from a bad horse, and how to pick certain horses for certain jobs, and what to do if they've made a mistake."

Students bring their own horses to the clinics to receive personalized instruction. Hebel shows his students how to hold a line when walking their horse and where to position themselves while doing it. "My advice to them is to never take their eyes off the horse when they're working them or walking them. An animal that weighs over a ton can do a lot of damage — even by accident," he says.

Because horse training is serious business, Hebel limits his classes to 6 pupils at a time. "I've had classes with 30 people, and that's just too many to do justice to the job. You don't have the time for slow, one-on-one instruction when you have that many people."

“If someone pays you good money to teach them something, your job is to teach it well. If you let them get away without learning, just so you can keep your manners and be polite, you're cheating the customer.”
— Rusty Hebel

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Me Cowboy, You Jane

Several years back, at the end of one clinic, Hebel made an observation that changed the course of his business. He turned to his wife and said, "I wonder why the wives never ask questions during these classes. You know damn well that they will be using the horses too, but they just look at their shoes if I ask them to take part."

Margaret Hebel, a schoolteacher, began her husband's business education: "They're afraid of the men, that's why."

"Afraid?" asked Hebel. "Afraid of what?"

"They're afraid of doing something better than their husband or of embarrassing him in front of all those other men with a silly question."

Q & A

Q: What was the worst project you ever worked on, and why?

A: I drove a truck for a while, and I hated it. You can't feel a truck breathing under you, and I feel awful when I'm on concrete instead of dirt.

Q: What was the best project you ever worked on, and why?

A: A class consisting of one old woman. She was my only student, and she just worked herself silly to learn everything she could about horses. She worked, studied, practiced, and demanded more than anyone I ever dealt with.

Q: What's your guiding philosophy?

A: If you don't enjoy doing what you're doing, don't do it anymore.

Q: What do you say when people ask about your job?

A: I tell them my job is to protect horses by teaching people not to do stupid, dangerous things with them.

Q: What's the best thing about being an IP?

A: The fun of looking around for different ways to improve your business; the freedom of turning things upside down to see if there's anything neat under there that will make the business better.

Q: Do you have any advice for other IPs?

A: Never sit down, put your feet up, and think everything's under control. There's always something you're overlooking that would make things better.

Q: If you could be anything other than what you are now, what would it be?

A: I'd be a millionaire. I'd still do exactly what I'm doing now, but it wouldn't hurt to do it as a millionaire, would it?

Hebel considered the problem for a while and then began to advertise "family clinics." He wanted to send the message that women were welcome ... and were expected to take part in the classes.

The women came, but they held to the back and seldom participated. When Hebel would throw a question at a woman or try to get her to step forward and take the reins during a demonstration, she would glance sideways at her man, slip behind him, and say, "You do it, honey. I'll watch."

Puzzled, Hebel turned to Margaret again for advice. "What am I doing wrong? Why won't they take part?" Margaret's answer: "A lot of those gents laugh at females' questions because they are afraid to admit that they don't have the answer either," she laughed. "So get rid of the men."

"No men?" he asked.

"No men! As long as the guys are standing there watching them, they'll play the role of housewife. They won't ask even the most elementary question if they think their husband is going to laugh and roll his eyes. Do a ladies-only class, and you'll see what I mean."

Hebel took his wife's advice. "So many times there are things in the business world that just sit there, waiting for someone to notice their value."

Ladies Only

Hebel held his first women's class in the spring of 1998. "It worked right from the start," he says. Without the men, the women asked lots of questions and eagerly took part in demonstrations.

Hebel remembers that in the family clinics, the men often would step in, take the reins out of their wives' hands, and say, "No, no, no. That's not the way to do it."

"They were good, loving men," he says. "They weren't aware that they were browbeating their wives. It was



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY HEBEL

just plain old male ego.” But when the women were given instruction in a single-sex setting, they gained confidence — and started doing a little friendly browbeating of their own.

One day a man drove onto the ranch to pick up his wife and three daughters, who were attending one of Hebel’s ladies-only clinics. When he strolled over to the training area and offered a suggestion, all four women turned on him and jokingly told him to be quiet and go wait in the truck.

Hebel held 5 women-only classes that first year. Since then, his business has grown 25 percent, and he’s held at least 10 of them a year, about half of his training classes. And his clients couldn’t be happier. They’re coming back for advanced classes, and they’re bringing their friends. He now gets students from all over the West.



Rusty and Margaret Hebel



Give ‘Em What They Need

Hebel found that he had to change the course a bit to fit the needs of his female clients. “I learned that women were just too damned nice to their horses. Men treat horses like machinery; but women treat them like house pets, and that’s dangerous. I had to teach them how to be demanding of their animals.

“At first, women are a little upset by the loud, harsh demands and commands I use on the horse. But when they see the result, they’re so happy they sign up to bring another horse to the next clinic.

“If someone pays you good money to teach them something, your job is to teach it well. If you let them get away without learning, just so you can keep your manners and be polite, you’re cheating the customer. Forget your manners now and then and demand that they get what they’re paying for. They’ll be thankful in the end,” he explains.

And how does Hebel help his students understand what horse discipline is all about? At some point in each clinic, he says, “Any woman who has raised a teenager knows exactly how to handle and train a horse. Teenagers and horses need the same kind of instruction and discipline. Be loving and gentle, but be firm and set boundaries.

IP STATS

Field:

Horse trainer

Specialty:

Teaching women the basics of horsemanship

Hours per week:

50 to 60

Typical working hours:

5 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Rates:

\$400 per three-day clinic

Best way to get clients:

Let satisfied customers bring them to you

“That always leads to a happy kid, and it’ll lead to a happy, safer horse too.”

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