

Reading, writing and **wrangling**'

New UM degree program at La Cense
Ranch in Dillon shows students
how to cowboy up

BY DAVE REESE



Bud Griffith manages the La Cense Montana ranch in Dillon. The ranch, which also has a sister operation in Paris, France, now offers degree programs through the University of Montana-Western.

DAVE REESE PHOTO

Steve Byrne climbed aboard a three-year-old quarter horse and stretched out atop her back.

The horse stood perfectly still as he gently touched her neck and hindquarters. Byrne slid off the horse, satisfied with the progress the horse had made today, and he led her to a field where she was free to run.

This was just another pop quiz for this horse, which was enrolled at the La Cense Montana Ranch in Dillon. The ranch for years has been known for running cows on its more than 80,000 acres of deeded and leased land in the Big Hole Valley. Now the ranch is becoming known for something else: getting an education.

Through the University of Montana-Western, LaCense Montana last fall began offering a bachelor's degree program in Equine Studies. Students spend six months to a year at the LaCense ranch, learning the Parelli method of natural horsemanship. Last spring the Montana Board of Regents of Higher Education approved the University of Montana-Western to award a bachelor of science in Natural Horsemanship with two options, Natural Horsemanship Science and Natural Horsemanship Management.

"This degree program builds on Western's established expertise and associate level degrees in Natural Horsemanship and Equine Studies," said UM-Western Chancellor Richard Storey. "The program is unique in the nation and will allow Western to attract students from across the United States and beyond."

As is the case with its degree in Natural Horsemanship, UM-Western (formerly Western Montana College) has developed a collaborative agreement with La Cense Montana, which provides the equipment, facilities and horse trainers for the field portions of this degree program. "The partnership between La Cense Montana and UM-Western is very important," said William Kriegel, owner of La Cense Montana. "For the first time in America, there will be a Bachelor's Degree in Natural Horsemanship."

This method of equestrianism incorporates an understanding of horse behavior in order to create a more sophisticated working relationship between human and horse. The natural horsemanship method is quickly becoming the international standard by which horsemanship is judged. The creation of a university-accredited program, developed in collaboration with industry, will ensure a solid credential for students.

First and foremost, with renowned trainers like Steve Byrne of Tamworth, Australia, La Cense teaches horses how to be good horses. These horses find their way into homes with owners looking for a well-bred and well-trained horse that's going to be rider friendly. Buyers are finding that it's perfectly possible to own a horse trained only in the methods of natural horsemanship. At La Cense Montana, each horse gets about two hours a day with a private trainer. "By the time we've got a couple hundred hours on them, they'll be pretty well broke," says Byrne in his thick Australian accent. At one session in the ranch's indoor arena, Byrne used a "carrot stick" - a long cane with an orange tip - while he slid on and off the horse's withers. He'd put the stick in the horse's field of vision as he moved around on the bareback horse; this technique gets the horse

Steve Byrne of Australia is one of the world's top trainers in natural horsemanship. He trains horses at the La Cense Ranch in Dillon, Montana.



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used to being saddled or having a rope around its neck, Byrne said. In a nearby round pen, another trainer worked with four colts, gently putting pressure on them by walking toward them, then turning away. Remaining aloof like this got the horses' attention and she was soon able to catch them.

This is just another morning session in class at the LaCense Ranch on the outskirts of Dillon, where ranch manager Bud Griffith oversees operations. Griffith spent 40 years working on the Flying D ranch, a cattle ranch near Bozeman that is now owned by media magnate Ted Turner.

The ranch uses all registered quarter horses. It buys about 40 colts a year from some of the world's top bloodlines. They're looking for temperament and disposition, so that when a client buys that trained horse in two years they can plop their granddaughter in the saddle and not have to worry about Old Paint flaring up.

Griffith knows good quarter horses. He worked at the King Ranch in Texas where the first registered Quarter horses were raised. After spending 40 years on the Flying D ranch near Bozeman, Griffith was hired by Kriegel to put profitability in his

horse operation. He told Kriegel when he was hired that "There are very few horse programs that make money," Griffith said, but he also knew that the demand for a solid, well-trained horse was growing.

"People have a love and desire to own a horse," Griffith said. "I should have known this, because every time I went into town people would ask me if we had a 12- or 13-year old horse for their kid. The market has always been there."

Teaching natural horsemanship — to the horses, and to the students — takes time. "At the end of two years our objective is to have a good, gentle recreational horse," Griffith said. Other horse programs, Griffith said, are "in a hurry" to crank out a horse and sell it. "I feel good about the horses we're producing."

Natural horsemanship, essentially, is a way of having a gentle technique on the horse and "let the horse teach you what he wants," Griffith said. This process sometimes runs contrary to a typical Western working ranch, where horses were needed to get working quickly — or they were headed to the glue factory. "The foundation is very important."

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Steve Byrne trains a horse to get in a trailer at the La Cense Ranch in Dillon.

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Other people ride a horse for 30 days and say it's ready to sell. We're just getting started after 30 days."

The natural horsemanship technique is similar to traditional training in a few ways, but the main difference is that it's slower, Griffith explained. "You rush a horse and you don't get a finished product," he said. "It takes time. To get this subtle relationship between a human and a horse, it takes time. That horse has got to feel confident in you, and you in him. When they leave here, the horse isn't packing a lot of baggage. The human becomes a partner, not a predator."

The French students who arrive in Montana from the sister facility in Paris work with 50 to 100 horses. This helps the students and the horses learn about the gentle relationship. "Horses are like people," Griffith said. "They each have different temperaments and personalities. After being exposed to each horse the students learn a different temperament."

To start the horse, trainers take a two-year old Quarter horse colt and put it in a round pen. "They're running wild," says Griffith. But by finding the horse's "pressure points" of what it dislikes, and then having the trainer back away from them, it helps the horse break down its fear of humans. "In the old days you'd rope a horse, tie it up and put a halter on it," Griffith said. "Once you got the saddle on them they'd buck and kick. You never got that fear out of them."


"People come here and are amazed at how quiet our horses are," Griffith adds. "I don't know where else you can buy a four-year-old gelding and put your seven-year-old son on them."

The horses sell for \$10,000 and up. "There's a good market for this kind of horse," he says.


Griffith has been around horses and ranches long enough, from digging ditches and building fence to working with a world-class horse program like the one at LaCense, to know that the system works. "I just enjoy being around horses and different trainers," he says. "At my age and education, I'm eager to learn."


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