

Danger Zones: Know the 5 injury-prone areas of your mount

PERFORMANCE HORSE

September/October 2009

BRING 'em BACK

How to take a horse
out of retirement

Lindy Burch and
Play Peek A Boon

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Lindy Burch rides Play Peek
A Boon, her 10-year-old
Freckles Playboy mare,
around Oxbow Ranch to
keep her in condition.





Play Peek A Boon earned more than \$180,000 with Burch on board.

But sometimes the answer to a problem is in your own backyard. One day Burch saw her 10-year-old mare, Play Peek A Boon, in the pasture and noticed how well the former show horse still traveled. She had retired the Freckles Playboy daughter, who had more than \$180,000 in career earnings, after the mare was sidelined by a torn suspensory ligament when she was 7 years old. With Burch in the saddle, Play Peek A Boon had been a finalist at a string of major aged events that included the NCHA Futurity, the NCHA Super Stakes, Augusta Futurity, the NCHA Summer Cutting Spectacular, and the South Point Winter Championships.

But for the last three years "Peek," who is out of Play Peek A Boon by Smart Little Lena, had been in the broodmare band at Oxbow Ranch, and had been bred by embryo transfer.

"Her hair was really long and she hadn't been ridden in three years," Burch says. "She was way, way out of shape, but I decided to try her. I thought I'd get her in shape and if she got sore, she'd tell me and I'd quit."

Three months later, she and Burch were Open Reserve Champions at the first event of the 6666 Ranch World Series of Cutting and crowned the Open Champion of the 2009 Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. A quarantine on Texas horses because of a case of vesicular stomatitis prevented them from competing in the second leg of the series at the Calgary Stampede in July.

Meanwhile, the team has won several week-end cuttings and plans to compete in the last two events of the series—at the All American Quarter Horse Congress in October and the American Royal in November.

Play Peek A Boon's success proves that just because a seasoned horse is a little older, you don't have to put its show career on the shelf.

What to consider

Returning an older horse to the show pen is like bringing any athlete out of retirement, whether he lobs a football, swings a bat, or cuts a cow. It's a decision that shouldn't be made lightly because of the level of competition it will face and the risk of injury. In fact, you should consider three things before you ever get the saddle out of the tack room and throw a leg over the horse.

"First, you have to have a reason or incentive to bring an older or retired horse back to competition because it's not the easiest thing in the world," Burch says. "The depth of competition and caliber of our horses seems to be greater every year. That's a good thing, but you

Returning to a sport after taking time off is a challenge, whether you're competing on four legs or just two. Champion cutting horse competitor Lindy Burch recommends riders watch out for the following to prevent problems when bringing an older horse back to competition.

Before you do anything physical, warm up your horse. This is especially true for an older or retired mount. Use the principle of long and short conditioning by getting the horse's muscles going and its blood flowing by walking it a little, then switching to a trot.

"My rule of thumb is to walk your horse both ways for five minutes, then long-trot them both ways," Burch explains. "After your horse is warmed up, you can kick it up into a long trot until it's a little bit winded, then slow back down and let it catch some air.

"Then you can kick it back up again until it's about aired out, it's getting a little sweaty, and it's having to huff and puff. Then slow back down again. After a few days, you'll be able to trot longer before they get winded."

It's also important to make sure you take the time to cool your horse down completely after riding or working a cow. While your horse is getting back in shape they will re-

What to look out for

quire a little more time to regain their wind and slow their heart rate and respiration down to resting or normal levels.

Watch for swelling and/ or heat in your horse's legs, which is a sign of inflammation. You can use polo wraps while exercising or warming your horse up.

Burch usually forgoes hot wraps and sweats, preferring to put cold on a horse's legs and wrapping them.

"In the evening I either wrap their legs in Mineral Ice or Racetrack Mud to cool them," she says.

Applying ice is always a good way to relieve swelling and soreness after riding and while a horse is getting back in shape.

"I like the turbo boots that act as an ice whirlpool," says Burch. "Most horses love them once they get used to them. If you don't have turbos, you can use ice packs wrapped on the legs or at least run cold water on them for 20 minutes."

Pay attention to your horse and make allowances for special needs an older horse might have, such as taking bathroom breaks before they cut.

"Play Peek A Boon will only take a break if I pull her around, pre-stage her, and step up pretty close to the judges' stand," Burch

says. "If she thinks I'm going to cut, then she wants to stop and urinate.

"I have to give her time, and she's not the quickest. But if I forget her bathroom break and do my pre-staging and start for the herd, she puts on the brakes and has to have a break. After I figured that out, I try to trick her so she thinks we're going to the herd, but we're actually aren't. It's really important because she's going to be uncomfortable if we try to go down there without it and cut."

Be careful your older horse, who has probably gained weight, doesn't get a cinch or saddle sore. If a horse is heavy, its girth area can get soft and flabby, and it can take a while to get its tone back.

Burch recommends using a thicker, orthopedic-type cinch when you begin to ride your horse again. Loosen the cinch and remove the saddle immediately after you ride.

"You can't tighten the cinch, tie the horse up, and forget about him because you don't want to start a saddle or cinch sore," says Burch. "You've got to toughen that area up, and that takes time.

"If you make a horse uncomfortable in any way, the first thing they do is associate that with cattle or working. You don't want to get that started."

have to make sure your horse is competitive or there's really no reason to put them back in the arena."

Second, examine why the horse was retired in the first place. Was it due to an injury? Was it because there weren't any major shows in which it could compete? Or did you decide you wanted a different hobby, so you went in another direction and put the horse on hold for several years?

If you retired the horse because of an injury, have it checked by a veterinarian, preferably someone who is familiar with its medical history. Burch talked with three vets who had treated Play Peek A Boon and after consulting with each other, they concurred with what Burch had suggested: Take conditioning slowly and stop immediately if the horse shows any sign of soreness.

That brings up the third consideration: Get the horse in shape before you even think about working a cow or returning it to any sport.

"When you get them in shape, you have to be very careful and pay attention to the horse,"

"You have to have a reason or incentive to bring an older or retired horse back to competition because it's not the easiest thing in the world."

—Lindy Burch

Burch explains. "You're taking someone like an ex-athlete who hasn't lifted a weight in years and has just sat on a couch. They can't do what they used to do until they get back in shape. If you try to do something too quickly, chances are they'll re-injure themselves or incur a new one."

Her rule of thumb is to condition a horse the way you should condition yourself. Don't expect miracles and rush to get results.

"Don't say, 'Oh no! I've to get this horse back in shape in three weeks, so I'm going to lope her 30 minutes today and 35 tomorrow,'" she

says. "You have to watch your horse because every horse is a little bit different. You want to challenge them a little, but no more than you would challenge yourself. I don't do anything to a horse that I wouldn't have done to me."

Slow and easy

If your vet believes your horse is sound enough to come out of retirement, you can start a conditioning program, but remember the cardinal rule of comebacks—take it slow and easy.

Burch began to get Play Peek A Boon back



Conditioning is a vital part of returning a horse to competition. Burch recommends putting it on a free-flow hot walker that has soft, rubber footing and gradually increasing the regimen.

in shape by putting the mare on a free-flow hot walker with a soft, rubber footing for 20 minutes a day. After about a week of walking, she increased the regimen to two 20-minute sessions daily, circling left and right.

During the third week, she added a little jog, alternating a walk with a jog for 20 minutes two times a day. The fourth week, she began riding the mare around the ranch at a walk and a jog for an hour; that regimen continued for approximately 40 days.

"Watch your horse," Burch advises. "Let her tell you what she can do and what she can't. They'll tell you when enough's enough when you first start riding them. What I love especially about the older horses is that if you pay attention, you can see any idiosyncrasies they have and adapt to them."

After two months of conditioning, Burch finally put Play Peek A Boon on a cow.

"She was just fabulous, like she'd never missed a day in three and a half years," she says. "She was as good as she ever was. The next day I was anxious to get her out and see if she was sore, but if anything, she looked better, so I kept riding her, but I didn't work her again for another week."

"When I did, I worked her a little bit and she

was just a little stiff, but she was perfect."

Burch believes it isn't necessary to work a seasoned horse every day, like you would a futurity colt or a horse in training.

"Once a cutting horse is trained and if he's trained properly and is a good horse, you don't have to work them often," she says.

"You have to work them on a cow a little bit in order to keep them in cutting shape. The physical demands of working a cow cannot really be simulated by trotting and loping. They must work a cow some to stay in optimum condition because that's a lot different from just loping. They need that conditioning, but if they're well-trained, they don't need to work a cow a lot."

So, how much is "a lot"?

"It depends on how good a horse is. Many people get into a rut or program where they think they have to work their horses every day before they show them, and that's not necessary," Burch says. "I only worked Play Peek A Boon one time in Houston, and that was on the flag. I didn't work her on a cow."

"My program may be different from a lot of people's. I don't overwork a horse if I can help it at all. I used to work with a great cutting horse horseman, Ed Smith, in the '70s. He

said, 'Lindy, you got to leave a little water in the well. You have to leave a little water left to get the next time.' That was his way of showing me you really don't have to work those horses every single day until there's nothing left."

Part of the beauty of a proven cutting horse, or any seasoned horse, for that matter, is that you can trust that horse more than a younger mount. That means you can give them more responsibility when you're showing them out of respect for their experience and abilities.

"I really marvel how much a horse can take on and become even better than they were," says Burch. "Play Peek A Boon pretty much tunes herself up when we work a cow."

"When you're showing an older horse you have to show them a little respect, give them the benefit of the doubt, and let them show you what they can do. You can trust an older horse a lot more because they're more seasoned, they've gotten themselves out of a lot of situations, and they have more confidence than a younger horse."

Aged events offer the best ground, the best arenas, and the best in help and cattle, so the conditions are ripe for a perfect run. But while weekend shows are certainly competitive, a rider can take more risks because the conditions are not as perfect.

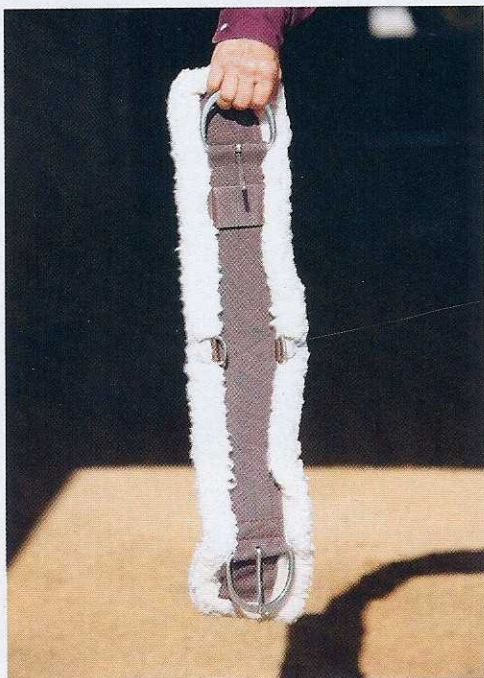
"In weekend cuttings with an older horse, you have a variety of conditions and situations, so there's a little more discretion involved in judging a weekend horse," Burch says. "Usually at weekend cuttings, you're rewarded more when you take chances. Expose your horse, control a difficult cow and you will be rewarded for doing so, and you'll be penalized less when it doesn't look as perfect."

"But for that two and a half minutes, you have to put the pedal down if you want to be competitive. You have to give your all."

Care and nutrition

Like other athletes, horses of any age require proper care and nutrition if they're going to give it their best. Burch feeds her horses a combination of alfalfa and grass hay, and Purina Mills Well-Solve L/S Horse Feed, a low-starch grain with antioxidants and digestible fiber.

She also takes special care of Play Peek A Boon's joints by giving her supplements like LubriSyn and Platinum Performance CJ, and Adequan and Legend, which are injectibles, as well as a blend of minerals that is specially prepared for her horses. In addition, she uses preventative treatments that include an Accuscope and a pain patch designed for humans that provide a pulsat-



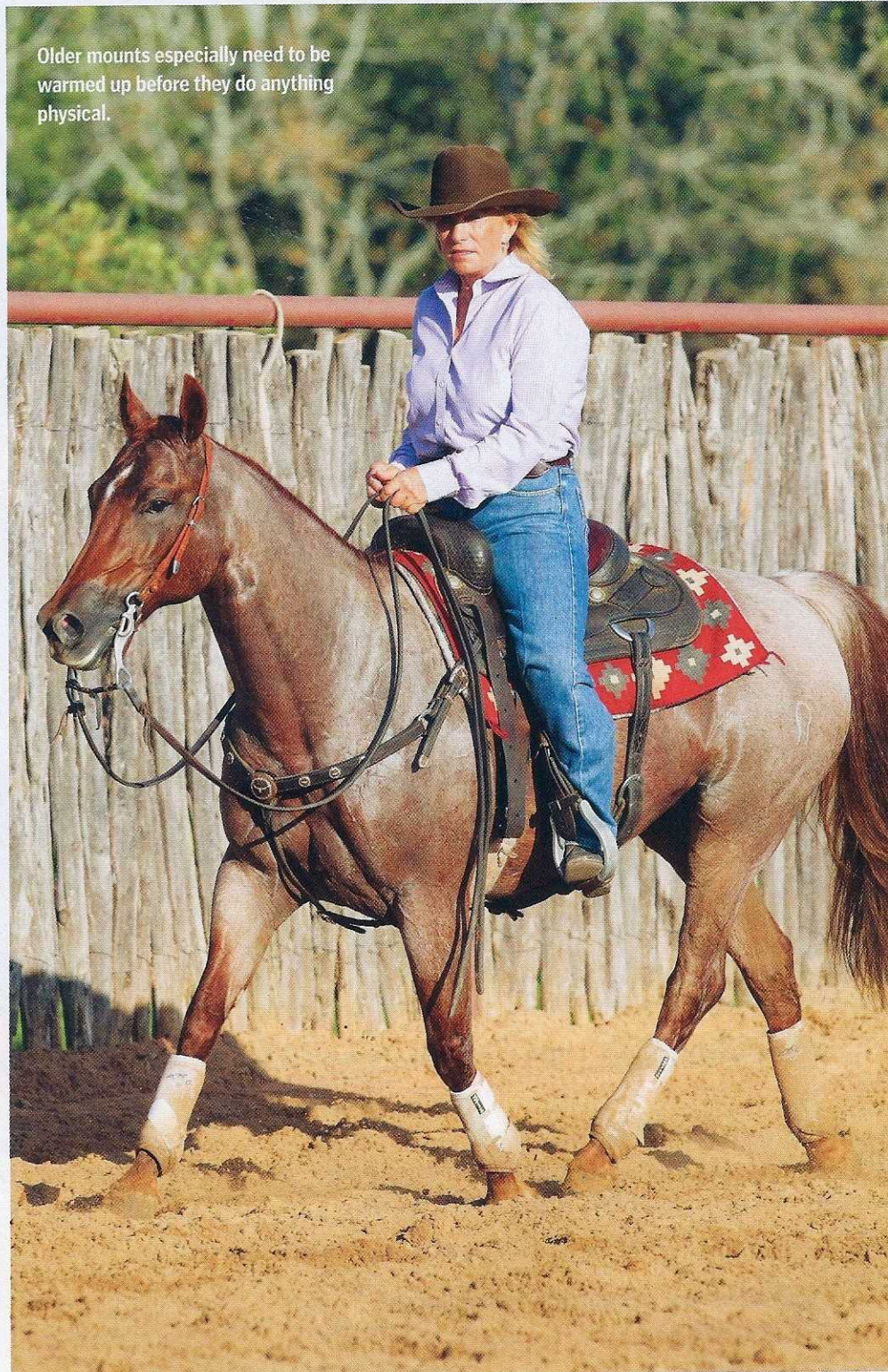
(Above) A thicker, orthopedic-type cinch helps to protect a girth that has become a little soft from extra weight. (Below) Turbo boots, when filled with ice, act like a whirlpool to relieve swelling and soreness.



ing current on Play Peek A Boon's legs.

Burch is a big believer in aqua-treads—when a knowledgeable operator runs them—in getting a horse back in shape.

"I think aqua-treads are really valuable, especially for a horse who doesn't need a lot of impact on its joints," she says. "With water displacing a lot of a horse's weight, you can get



a horse in really good shape, whether you're rehabbing them from an injury or just want to condition them without a lot of wear and tear on their joints."

Burch selects competitions for Play Peek A Boon in which conditions are favorable so the mare will be comfortable. The older horse's welfare is her greatest concern. She considers

the weather and the timing of the classes. Is the arena going to be hot, or can Play Peek A Boon be shown and return home before it gets too warm?

She considers shows that are easy to haul to, that don't involve a great distance in very hot weather. Burch prefers a climate-controlled

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Older, seasoned horses can be trusted more than young ones. "Give them the benefit of the doubt and let them show you what they can do," Burch says.

About Lindy Burch

Lindy Burch's career is full of firsts, which began in 1980 when she was the first woman to win the National Cutting Horse Association Open Futurity. Burch and Miss Royal Mahogany also caught the cutting world's attention by earning a record 225.5 points at the event



The first lady of cutting.

The previous year, the Van Nuys, California, native was the first woman to capture the NCHA Open Futurity Reserve Championship, a distinction that she still holds today. The 1979 and 1980 placings make Burch one of only six Open riders who have earned consecutive NCHA Open Futurity titles in the event's 46-year-old history.

In 1995 while piloting her homegrown mare, SHESA Smarty Lena, Burch became the first rider to win all four go-rounds of the NCHA Open World Finals. Three years later, she and Bet Yer Blue Boons, another mare she bred and trained, set a record at the NCHA Open World Finals by marking a 233, the highest score ever posted at an NCHA event.

Burch marked another milestone in 2000, again with Bet Yer Blue Boons, when she became the first and only woman so far in the NCHA's 63-year history to win the NCHA Open World Championship. The pair also netted the NCHA Open World Finals again in 2000, the same year Burch also became the first and only woman to be elected NCHA president.

She was also the first woman to serve as president of the Pacific Coast Cutting Horse Association, and has lifetime earnings of more than \$3.8 million. That includes when she and Play Peek A Boon won the Houston Livestock Open Championship and placed second in the first leg of the inaugural 6666 Ranch World Series of Cutting at Houston in March.

Burch, who holds a master's degree in endocrinology, is partner and manager of Oxbow Ranch in Weatherford, Texas, one of the cutting industry's premier breeders and owners. In 2001, she was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and is also in the NCHA Riders Hall of Fame and the NCHA Members Hall of Fame, among several others. Burch also serves as chairman of several committees of organizations that include the NCHA, the American Quarter Horse Association, and Colorado State University.

Continued from page 28

arena and stalls for the same reason. She hangs extra fans in Peek's stall at a show, and although she uses a lot of bedding in the stalls of all of her horses, "I admit I put a couple of extra bags in Peek's stall," she says.

She prefers that an arena have optimum sandy ground, like the ground in Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum in Fort Worth, Texas, where the NCHA holds its major events. She also likes four heifers per horse in Open entries, so there is a better chance of cutting a good cow.

Returning Peek to the show pen has been a bonus for Burch, and the talented mare seems to enjoy it. If 60 is the new 40 when it comes to age in people, older horses can be useful and valuable, as well.

"Play Peek A Boon was kind of like a good bottle of wine that you put up to enjoy later for years to come," Burch says. "She's a well-seasoned horse who knows the ropes.

"She's certainly one of the best horses I've ever ridden and you really appreciate that kind. I think every day I get to ride her is a gift. I don't take that for granted." ψ