

Sisters' talent 'reins' supreme

Horse and rider circle the arena at a leisurely lope, kicking up small puffs of dust in the dry summer air. The rider sits like a statue, hands unmoving, reins slack, legs resting at her mount's side. Suddenly, the horse picks up speed, circles again, changes leads, then changes direction. He stops and begins to pivot on his hind legs, spinning in a circle, still with no visible instruction from the rider. He straightens out and charges across the arena, then sits back on his haunches and comes to a smooth, sliding halt.

The horse does it all on his own, or at least it looks that way.

What looks like the impossible ability of a horse to memorize a complex pattern and carry it out with no help from his rider is actually what Sholeh Berteig calls "one of the fastest-growing sports in the horse industry."

The sport is called reining, and it's been a little known event in the southwest, that is until now.

Sholeh and her sister Shantel, competitive reiners and owners of Berteig Performance Horses in the Haddonfield area, are offering the first reining clinic ever to be held at Swift Current's Frontier Days. The two young women hope to teach horse-lovers in the southwest about what they believe is one of the most exciting, challenging and rewarding sports in the equestrian world.

Reining is a series of maneuvers that the competitor asks their horse to do in a pre-set pattern using a series of invisible cues. The horse will execute circles, rollbacks, spins, lead changes, speed changes, and of course, the crowd-pleasing sliding stop. Riders are scored on their ability to make the performance look

effortless, and as though the horse is doing it all on his own.

"The horse has to be willfully guided, and look like he wants to do it and he's happy and relaxed all of the time," explained Shantel. "Nervousness, ear-pinning and that sort of thing isn't very desirable to a judge."

The rider directs the horse through very subtle cues that include slight leg pressure and hand cues, a shift in weight or body position and voice commands such as clucking, kissing, humming, or saying "whoa."

"For example, if I was going to do a spin to the left, for my horses I train them so that I sit a little ahead in my spins, I put my leg on them slightly to get them started and then I cluck," said Shantel. "The faster that I want them to go, the more I cluck. If he doesn't speed up, I will kick him a little bit, but I'll try not to do it so the judge will see it."

The Berteigs said that reining is quickly catching on all over the country and in Europe, where both have trained and showed horses, but many people are reluctant to try it out because they are a little intimidated.

"People see it and they see these horses doing all these different maneuvers," Sholeh said. "And some people don't mind doing maneuvers but they're a little nervous at the idea of putting them all together."

"People aren't always sure exactly what it's about, and so they think you have to have a super-duper horse just to get into it at all," added Shantel.

That's not so, said the girls. Everybody's got to start somewhere, and that's why the clinic is being offered in two different classes, beginner and advanced.

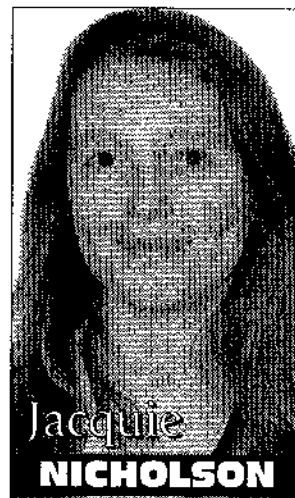
"Beginners need to know zero about reining, nothing at all," said Shantel. "They basically just need to be able to sit on their horse properly, and then we're going to teach them some of the basic maneuvers and get them started."

After the clinic there will be a reining demonstration to show fair-goers what professional reining looks like, followed by a reining competition.

The competition will offer four different classes: rookie, youth, non-pro and open. A rookie class is specially designed for non-professionals, people who don't train horses and who haven't won any money in a competition before. The youth class is restricted to young reiners. Non-pro is for reiners who have competed in the past and won money, but who don't train horses professionally, and the open category is for the more experienced bunch who train their own horses.

Although the Frontier Days show doesn't offer it, many reining competitions also have a "ranch" class, which is similar to the rookie class, but with a more simplified pattern for beginners.

The Berteigs said that enthusiasm and practice are all that's required to get into reining at the rookie level, but competing professionally is demanding. The rider must have a good seat, because even the slightest



shift of balance could throw the horse off pattern. A reining horse should be very athletic, with the ability to concentrate and listen to his rider for all of his commands.

"In any other sport, there's something else for them to concentrate on," said Sholeh. "In cutting, there's a cow. In barrels, there's a barrel. But in reining, it's just you and the horse, so they have to have a good attention span and be totally listening to you at all times."

Shantel has been seriously involved in reining for about seven years, and Sholeh for about six. Both girls have trained horses and riders in Holland, Germany and Belgium, as well as in Texas.

Shantel said that she was initially very interested in cutting, but opted for reining because of a lack of available cattle for practice. Her sister said that it was a fascination with a horse's capacity to learn new tricks that attracted her to it.

"I like the ability that horses have," said Sholeh. "To get a horse to do those types of things, that's not really natural for them to do it, and I think it's amazing that they can learn to do it."

Sholeh and Shantel have their own breeding and training operation southeast of Swift Current. They also offer riding lessons at their farm and have given numerous horsemanship clinics in the area.

Their reining clinic will take place on Friday, July 2, at 10:00 a.m. at Frontier Days.