

Equine Empiric Psychoanalyst

Idaho horseman Martin Black travels the country starting 400-plus colts each year. What he instills is confidence and the basic skills these youngsters need to prepare for whatever the future may hold.

Story and Photos by Annie Lambert

Martin Black smiled when asked what in the world an "equine empiric psychoanalyst" is. That phrase can be found on his business card right below his name. No doubt, it's a conversation-starter when he passes his cards out to prospective clients at events such as the NCHA Futurity.

So what does it mean?

"Empirical knowledge is knowledge you have learned from your senses. So an empiric psychoanalyst would analyze the mind of something through feel or through his senses. It is not analyzing it based on book knowledge or somebody's research," Black explained.

In this case, that "something" is the horse. And what Black does is put his feel and understanding to work getting young horses off to the best start possible.

"Basically the only place to learn about a horse is from the horse," Black observed. "People go to clinics, read books and watch videos, but without being able to relate to the experience of working with the horse. That is where the word *empiric* comes in – you have to learn it from the feel – from the horse."

Black focuses on getting a colt to arc to the left and right; pushing and pulling with its hindquarters; and parking. Left, right, forward, reverse and stop compose the basis for everything a horse will be asked to do.



Martin Black spent a week with trainer Benny Guitron in California, starting a dozen colts that are slated for the reining or cow horse arenas. It's the most important week in a horse's life, according to Guitron, and he trusts Black's intuition and skill to do the job right.

Work for Hire

During January, Black spent seven days starting a dozen colts for reining and cow horse trainer Benny Guitron of Merced, Calif.

"The initial breaking is the part most people do the fastest, and it should be the slowest," said Guitron, explaining why he employs Black to work with his colts.

"Once you get on them, it is a piece of cake. It is the getting them ready to ride that is the most important," Guitron emphasized. "Getting them gentle when you get on and off and getting basic movement are the most important times in a colt's life."

After a week with Black, Guitron feels confident that he can turn his colts out for about a month and then pick right back up where they left off.

"When we bring them back, we'll freshen them up in the round pen, then start riding them again," Guitron said. "One



Black works the colts individually in the round pen using a halter with a long lead rope. Standing on one side of the colt with the rope to the off side and around the rump, he gets the horse to quietly turn away from him and then circle back to him. After accomplishing this in each direction, Black repeats it using the direct rein behind the cantle of the saddle.

year we started a bunch before we went to the World Show (in November) and then turned them out until the following March. You would not have known that those colts were ever turned out. They were right exactly where we left off. You turn them out after a good experience, they mature and come back ready to go to work."

The normal barn routine of tractors, horses spinning and corral construction continues while Black begins to work with Guitron's colts.

"I like to start them like this, with everything going on," Black said. "This way they are accustomed to noise. Sure, it might take you a little longer to get their attention, but when you get it, it's true. Personally, I don't like a real solid round pen because when you take a horse out of a confined, enclosed area, they start seeing things. These are going to be show horses; they have to get accustomed to busy surroundings."

Crash Dummy Days

When starting colts, Black prefers to work for short periods of time. He tries to keep all the colts progressing at about the same level each day. Some catch on in just a few minutes, some take a little longer, but no colt gets worked past its attention span.

Black hesitates to lay out a step-by-step program because the routine can vary. Generally, the first week involves laying a foundation of confidence. That first day or two, he may let the colt pack a snaffle on a string headstall just to get used to it. Colts are initially saddled and moved around a pen with a saddle horse.



The second day, Black adds the "crash dummy" – a person in the saddle – while he repeats day one's activities. With a laugh, he attributes the use of "crash dummies" (meaning riders other than himself) to age and experience.

During the third lesson, Black asks his colts to do more turning. Each horse is saddled and turned loose in a large, adjacent pen while the previous colt is worked. The youngster can stand or move about at its own speed, but if he starts to buck, Black diverts the colt's attention to discourage the behavior.

Black works the colts individually in the round pen off a halter with a long lead rope. When the colts are confident enough, he gets on them. With a foot in the stirrup and using the lead rope rather than the reins, Black moves the saddle back and forth to teach the colt to brace its body and get its legs underneath itself in preparation to hold his weight. He



With a foot in the stirrup and using the lead rope rather than the reins, Black moves the saddle back and forth to teach the colt to brace and get its legs under itself in preparation to hold his weight. Black uses his left hand to keep the colt's head and neck straight so the horse remains balanced, without walking off, while he gets on.

uses his left hand to keep the colt's head and neck straight so the horse can stay balanced without walking away while he gets on. Once mounted, he asks the colt to turn in each direction and also to walk in a straight line. The more progressive horses are also asked to "pull with their hindquarters," Black's term for backing up.

In his own mind is an important distinction of just what this entails: pull versus push.

"For a horse to back up really free, his hind feet need to leave the ground just a few inches before his front feet do," Black explained. "If the feet leave at the same time, they are still pretty good. But a horse that leaves the ground with the front end first backs up like they are pushing a chain. They just kind of wad up and get heavy in the face. A horse that is really straight, like they are dragging that chain, let their hind end do most of the work.

"I think it is important for people to notice when the hindquarters are pushing and when they are pulling," he added.

Getting a horse to pull himself with his hind end is a matter of preparation, he said. "When the hindquarters out-travel the front, and the rider can direct them, the horse will back up free and straight."

He demonstrated on one of the colts, explaining, "You see the front end moved, but the hind end didn't. But he rocked back, so I'll reward him for the try."

Getting a horse to "pull with his hindquarters" is all done by feel – which is where his "empiric" horsemanship comes in.

Deeper Insight

By day four, Black gets a little deeper insight into the individual minds of his colts. That's when Black starts asking them to accept a little more pressure.

Using a flag attached to the end of a telescoping fishing rod, Black quietly encourages a saddled colt to walk and trot around the round pen. He wants the horse to make subtle transitions, changing speed gradually and with confidence, not panicked and scared.

Using the flag, Black can ask a horse to accelerate and develop smooth transitions from the stop, walk, trot and lope, then slow down by shortening its steps, not just hurrying to stop. He also can ask the horse to back up or, as he prefers to say, pull with its hindquarters.

Using the flag, Black also asks the horse to slow down and turn around. When a colt stops rapidly, wheels and takes off in the other direction, Black interprets what that colt is telling him.

Martin Black

Martin Black, a fifth-generation rancher from Homedale, Idaho, grew up with horses and horsemen. Black's great-grandparents settled during the mid-1800s in the same county as his current ranch. The families raised remount horses for the army and had cattle ranches.

In addition to ranching, Black has worked as a heavy equipment operator, welder, truck driver and bush pilot. Yes, bush pilot.

Black managed the Wine Cup and Gamble ranches as one 1.25 million-acre enterprise with 10,000 head of cattle. "Both ranches were originally part of the old UC, and the outfit I worked

for bought them both and put them back together," Black said. "It bordered Utah for 60 miles, came within 15 miles of the Idaho border and then ran west for about 65 miles."

This is where the cowboy used his piloting skills. He mounted a siren on the plane and trained the cattle so he could gather them into closer pastures where the hands on horseback could easily move them. When the ranch sold he drove a truck one winter for a friend.

On one of his truck runs, he stopped in Chowchilla, Calif., to visit trainer Don Buttrey. His colt-starting business began with that visit in 1995.



"Don drug me out of that 18-wheeler to help him start colts," Martin laughed. "Then Doug Jordan, a cutter, came by and took me to Texas. From

Performance Horse / March 2001

"Those are the spots, when you are on their back and ask for a little bit more, that they can get scared and take off. But if they are comfortable, those transitions will be softer," he explained.

"I just asked for acceleration. When I first asked him to trot, he loped. It was too fast and he got scared. This time he thought about trotting, but didn't. Rewarding the thought of trotting is just as good as the trot. If he thinks about it, and he keeps thinking about it, he will eventually do it."

Black firmly believes in giving his colts choices.

"It's like they come to an intersection and look down these different avenues," he said. "When they choose one and start down it and then run into some pressure and are upset, they will try a different avenue. But if they are just barely thinking about the avenue, I wait. I get out of their way and it encourages them to proceed to their relief."

Once Black is on the colt in the pen, he drives it forward and shows the horse where he wants it to go, frequently changing direction and speed. He asks for additional speed only when the horse is confident.

"If you are lacking control and you speed up, you just get to the wrong place quicker," he pointed out.

When the horses progress from the round pen into a larger arena, Black starts by asking his horses to sidle up to the gate so he can push the latch and swing it open. He explained with a laugh that he was starting "trail horses" for Benny. Once they are in the bigger pen, they are asked to move out a little more.

During the final days of their first week under saddle, Black rides the colts outside, away from the arenas, and continues to concentrate on the four basic maneuvers.

Engender Confidence

At Guitron's, Black spent time riding one filly whose attention was totally absorbed with a horse turned out in the neighboring arena. The filly gravitated to that side of the round pen. Martin had a simple remedy.

"Whenever she thinks about that mare," Black said, "I'm going to redirect her away from the other horse. When she is moving away from that horse and is thinking about something else, I'll get out of her way. When she heads back toward her, I'll keep getting in her way until she heads a new direction."

In response, the filly pawed and swished her tail. She sweated, and her muscles trembled. She was obviously

unhappy with her situation and anxious to get back to the other horses.

"She's a little frustrated," Black commented. "She'd like to be over there (near the other mare). This is not comfortable for her. I've tried to lead her away, and it is not very effective, so I'll put her to work when she gets to the wrong area and let her find relief when she gets to the right area."

As the filly, who was not moving off his leg, got to the "wrong" area, Martin began to tap her on the neck with the end of the rein. When she responded by moving, Martin rewarded her; he stopped tapping. Within a few minutes, the mare was turning back



Black hangs the snaffle bit so it sits just above the incisors, so the horse learns to pick it up with their tongue and pack it.

there, Brook Royster, another cutter and race horse man, introduced me to the Thoroughbred industry. Then my business ended up coast-to-coast and overseas."

Some of his Thoroughbred clients include the historic Calumet Farm; Brookside Farms and Brook Royster's Chance Farm near Lexington, Ky.; Nick de Meric in Ocala, Fla.; and Kip Elser in South Carolina.

"An Australian, Allen Abdy, came and stayed with me for a time after spending the summer with Doug Jordan in Texas," Black said. "What we do with reined cow horses is relatively close to the Australian Camp Drafting, so he was interested in learning more about it. That was my connection to

Australia, and I have been there the past three years.

"People ask me how I learned this and how long it took," the 42-year-old Black said. "It started when I was too little to remember – a horse steps on your toe and you learn to keep out of his way or keep him out of your way," Black laughed.

He spends six months a year traveling the United States and Australia, starting between 400-500 horses. Black then returns home to his wife and family in April to prepare for farming, high school rodeos and his training operation there. Wife Elaine, sons Will and Wade (20 and 18, respectively), and daughter Sara (12) help run the ranch. "I encourage my kids to live their own

lives, which is college and other interests right now," he said. "But, at home, they are my crew – they're good hands and a real asset."

The family has about 75 head of horses, including 30 mares that are pasture-bred to their own stallion.

"I enjoy taking colts to brandings and ranch work through the summer," he said. "I also take a limited number of horses to ride through the summer with the help of my family. In September, after the production sale in Elko, all the hay is up, and we turn the horses out and shut down the training operation for the winter."

That's when he hits the road again to help other owners and breeders get their colts off to the right start.

Sharing His Thoughts on Horses



Black keeps his colts very relaxed and supple. Using his leg and light rein pressure, he made sure this filly never gapped her mouth while bringing her head around. The next time, all he needed to turn her head was leg pressure; no pulling the rein at all.



This filly had a tough day. Frustrated about being separated from the other horses, she went through several options before finding comfort with Black. After such a session, Black likes a horse to drop her head and stretch the neck muscles and relax. "It's money in the bank if a horse will put his head down," he said.

- Eliminate the cause. Don't try fixing the symptoms.
- Horses don't reason the past, only the present and future.
- Eliminate the horse's self-defense and his mind will open for new ideas.
- Relief allows the horse to evaluate an uncertain situation, and it builds his confidence.
- There is a lot of value in knowing what undesirable actions will be overcome by desirable actions if given time.
- Two like reactions are the beginning of a pattern.
- We have one chance to make a first impression – and a first impression is the most lasting.
- Drill to condition, not to educate.
- Repetition can make an active mind dull.
- If you are lacking control when you speed up, you just get to the wrong place quicker.
- "I believe if a person would read these scriptures: Psalm 5:4-6, Psalm 18:19-27, Psalm 25:4-11, Philippians 2:1-4 and I Corinthians 13:4-7 with an open mind and a soft heart, it would prepare them to be a better horseman and a better person."
- A favorite story with a valuable lesson: Black was starting a very touchy horse. An observer asked if he was going to ride him and offered that he thought the horse would buck; Black responded that he didn't think he would. The fellow wagered Black that the horse would buck with him. "I stepped on him, rocked the saddle around a little bit, got off and put him away," Black laughed. "That guy's yelling, 'Now wait a minute,' and I just told him I rode him. But, on that horse, it was enough."

toward the proper side of the pen because that's where she found relief.

"That is a perfect example of using pressure on the bad side of the pen to try to get her to appreciate the better deal on the good side of the pen," Black said. "It's like horses on a ranch. They may spend the morning in a meadow, but the minute the flies come after them, they get up on a ridge where the wind is blowing and there are no flies. If just a little horse fly can be that effective to move a horse, it gives you an idea of how little pressure it takes to change a horse's mind."

Black noted that had he pushed the filly a little harder, she might have gotten mad.

"Before they get mad, I try to give them some relief," he said. "But even frustrated or mad, she has got to be able to find that relief.

"A young horse's attention span isn't very long," he continued. "I normally try not to work them more than 20

minutes. But this filly had to work through a lot of other options before appreciating what I was offering her."

Once Black got the filly arcing in both directions and traveling a straight line without resistance, he began asking her to pull with her hindquarters. At this point, still not totally happy, the filly started putting her head down and wandering around as if she was looking for a place to roll.

"I don't discourage that," Black said. "If they are, like this filly, pretty upset, I'll let them lie down.

"I don't want to do anything to distract her," he explained. "Before, she wanted to be with her friends so bad it really frustrated her. Now she is looking for comfort here with me, and that is a big change. It is like putting a horse on a cow. When the horse really has its attention on a cow, you sure don't want to do anything to distract it."

If the filly had found a suitable spot to lie down, Black casually would have

"Drill to condition a horse, not to educate him, but remember that repetition can make an active mind dull."

— Martin Black

stepped off — although he would not have let her roll with the saddle on.

Fresh Minds

"People say horses learn through repetition, but I don't think that is necessarily the best way to work with a fresh mind," Black said. "If you plant the seed and leave it, motivating with relief, he'll try a lot harder to do it next time and have a better attitude than he would if you drilled him.

"Drill to condition a horse, not to educate him," Black advised, "but remember that repetition can make an active mind dull.

"I think it is good for a horse to learn to lope circles and get to the point where he feels like you put him in that mode and he could go all day," Black continued. "It takes repetition to get him there, but if you are trying to in-

troduce him to an exercise, try to keep him motivated by giving him relief before he gets upset or bored."

On The Bit

Before introducing the bit, Black recommends dentistry so the horse will be comfortable. "If it is a money issue," he said, "I'd rather have their teeth done than shoeing."

When first introducing the bit, Black adjusts the headstall so the bit sits just above the incisors. That way the horse learns to pick the bit up with his tongue and pack it without fear. It also helps the horse bridle and unbridle, he said. Also, if the horse gets his tongue over the bit, he can easily get it back under again.

When a horse continually tries to put his tongue over the bit, there is usually a reason, according to Black. The horse may simply be experimenting, trying to

find the most comfortable place to carry it, or trying to find relief from a rider who is pulling too hard.

For problem horses, Black prefers to turn them loose overnight with the snaffle bit dangling loosely in their mouths. They won't eat with the bit under their tongue, so they pick it up. His second choice is to pull the bit up tighter in the mouth so the horse cannot get his tongue over it.

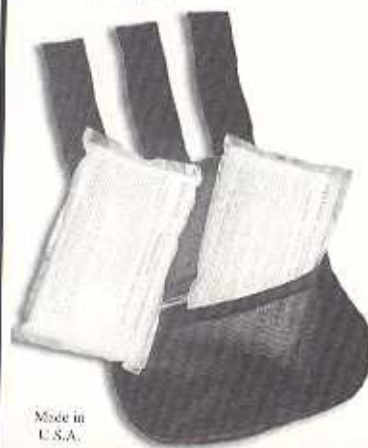
Preparing For The Rider

In most cases, Black is involved with the colts he starts only during the first week to 10 days of their training. While he works, he shows the riders who will be taking over from him how to keep the program moving forward. He is also preparing the horses for those riders. He tries to instill confidence in both.

Black was sent to work an East Coast Kentucky Derby hopeful who had bucked off more than 20 different riders. The owners didn't want to give up on him. After riding and evaluating the horse, Black left a rider to stay with his program and continue to develop the

Beat the Heat... with Instant Relief FIRST + ICE®

NEW!



Made in U.S.A.

- 2 Hours of cold power
- Configures to the Leg
- Simple to use
- Reusable

Before and after a workout!

- Convenient to Pack
- Quick Relief
- Non-gel formula that's soft
- No Ice Mess
- On-site Cold Therapy

- ~ Affordable cold therapy you can trust.
- ~ Recommended by veterinarians.
- ~ For prevention and treatment of trauma to the leg.

Two quality boots and
Four Cold Therapy
Packs, per set, just

\$69⁹⁵ + s&h

ICE HORSE
Simply Better Icing



MACKINNON

FAX 858-792-1373

For dealer locations or
direct customer service, call:

800-786-6633

www.mackinnonicehorse.com
email: macequine@aol.com