

# **TRAINING FOR A HORSEBACK JOB**

## **A Canadian College Sends Graduates into the New Cattle-Industry Work Force**

*Article by Tim O'Byrne*

During the past two decades, the feedlot industry has expanded like a supernova, affecting everything around it. Small-town economies, highway infrastructure, farming, and grain-marketing practices all have felt the positive impact of this growth.

Feedyards rely on many variables to keep them operational. One of the most important, and sometimes the shortest supply, is the feedlot pen rider. Many of North America's ranching companies still rely on qualified riders as well. There are plenty of horseback jobs to go around, and one Canadian agricultural college is making sure its graduates are prepared to tackle anything the new beef industry throws at them.

### **Learning by Doing**

Lakeland College is situated in the east-central Alberta town of Vermilion. The school, with a dress code of boots and jeans, attracts some of the most dedicated kids in the West. Tucked into the typical college ag-related programs is a neat little course that transforms students into entry-level cowboys and cowgirls who possess enough skill and knowledge to secure a horseback job and begin the next stage of learning.

Bill Conrad, an easygoing cowhand with a master's degree in animal breeding and genetics, combines his horse and cowboying talents with the skills of other tutors to deliver a one-year Ranch and Stockhorse Rider Program that's unique in several ways. Conrad delivers the horsemanship portion of the program with help from Ron Hoffman, another educated cowboy. The students supply their own mounts and are encouraged to bring young horses to the program.

Each participant and his or her equine partner receive many hours of one-on-one instruction from either Conrad or Hoffman. Not only do the kids improve their own abilities, but their horses also benefit throughout the year. Together, they learn how to work gates, pair out young calves, work with bulls at the College Test Station, and rope animals for treatment. Veterinarians, range managers, and feedlot nutritionists are responsible for balancing the other components of the yearlong course.

Make no mistake about it though, these enrollees don't drift in here to sit behind a desk in a lecture hall. For them, the drawing card is horses.

"As long as we have cattle on feed in this country, we need horses," Conrad notes. "We tried to manage cattle with machines and found out that working with cattle on horseback is still the best way to perform certain livestock activities. I don't see that changing in the next 20 or 30 years."

## What's on the Menu

Good material is the underlying principle in quality education. Conrad's menu includes everything from coursework in feedlot disease detection and treatment to equine dentistry. Students spend the final two weeks on a practicum, a working visit to a large feedlot or ranch where they can get a peek behind the curtain and make valuable contacts.

"The teaching staff stays in touch with the trends through our involvement in the ranching and performance-horse industries," says Conrad, who grasses 300 head of cattle, raises and trains Kelpie dogs, and shows horses when he's not at the college. His involvement is an example of why the course content is so strong. It reflects what's actually going on in the world the students aspire to enter.

Conrad points out that the beef industry recognizes the need for trained individuals because the tasks have become much more demanding than in past eras. For example, animal welfare and antibiotic protocols have become standard operating procedures on all feedlots and ranches in the last seven years. Entry-level riders find it difficult to survive if they're not suitably prepared before arriving at the job site.

"This is a certificate program," explain Conrad. However, simple participation doesn't guarantee a passing grade. "Participants are evaluated on many facets of the livestock industry," he says.

## Steady Growth

The program has exceeded Hoffman's expectations. "We've taken kids who would never have attempted to apply for a livestock-related horse job and given them the confidence to say, 'Hey, this is kinda neat. I think I could actually do this for a living,'" he says.

Enrollment doubled in the second year to 18 students, and the third year's class was full soon after the catalogue came out. That school hasn't been complacent about the program's growth. At the end of the second year, Lakeland's advisory council solicited input from recent graduates, industry leaders, and operational managers on program improvements.

"I don't know of anything else in the Northwest that's similar to this Ranch and Stockhorse Rider Program," says Conrad. "I think it'll have a long duration of success if we run it right."

The students come for the horse work because that's what they enjoy. When they leave, they have a whole lot more in their war bags than when they arrived, and that's what good education is all about.

## **Specifics**

Course content at Lakeland College's Ranch and Stockhorse Rider Program:

- Equine and Cattle Nutrition
- First Aid
- Colt Training
- Performance Horse Training
- Introductory and Advanced Cattle Handling
- Ranch Roping
- Cattle Diseases and Treatment
- Equine Husbandry
- Computer Recordkeeping
- Horseshoeing
- Basic Grazing Management
- Stable Management
- Two-Week Practicum on a Feedlot or Ranch
- Optional Stockdog Class

For more information: [www.lakelandc.ab.ca](http://www.lakelandc.ab.ca)