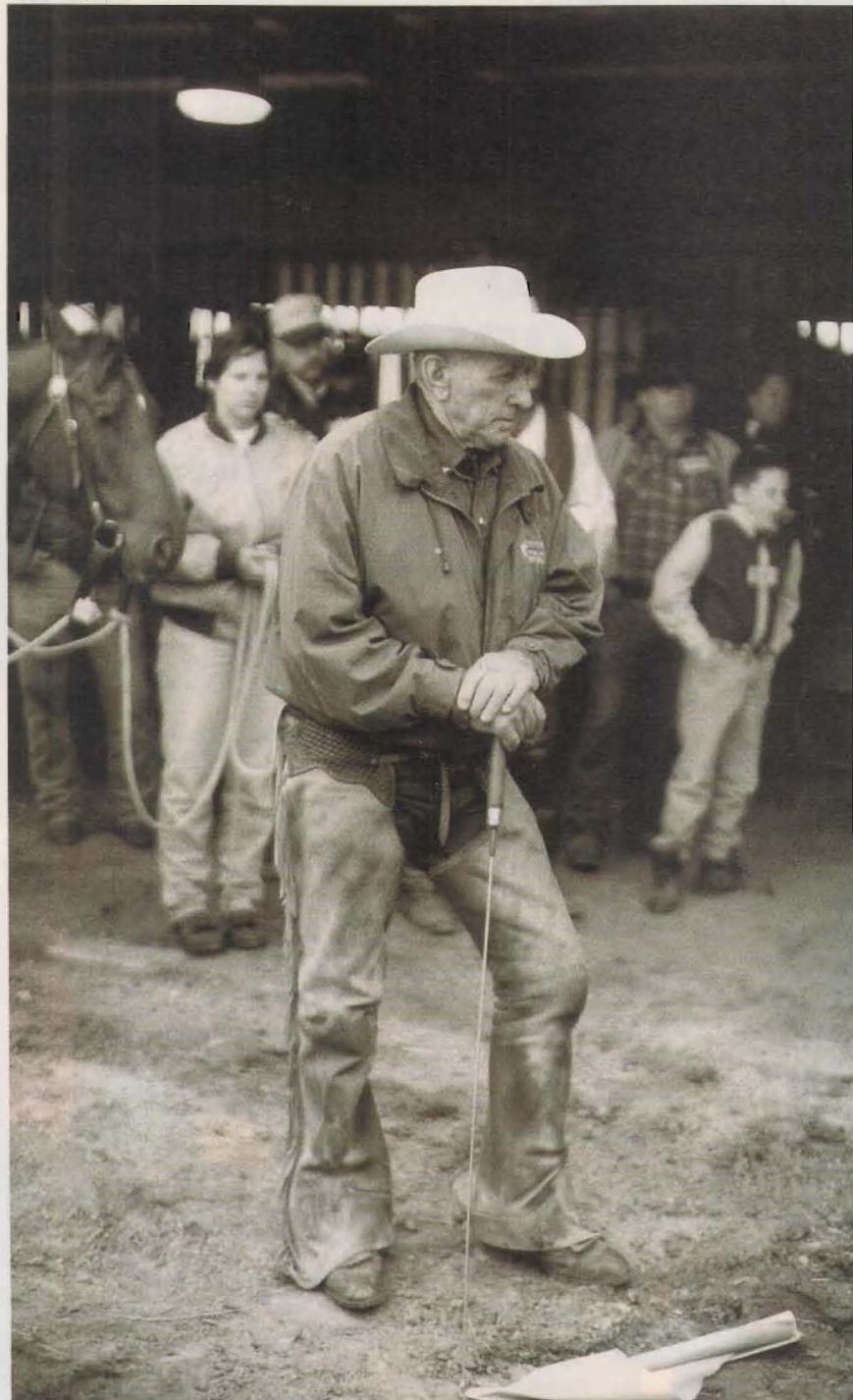


# Ray Hunt's Mission

One of the world's most respected horsemen discusses his mentors, and the reasons he'll never stop learning from horses.

**Article by Susan Smith**

BRADLEY LANGENBURG



Hunt has influenced countless riders, including many younger clinicians working today.

**R**ay Hunt, one of the most prominent horsemen of all time, offered his first horsemanship and colt-starting clinics in 1961. Today, at 75, he still travels across the United States and abroad, spreading his message of respect for the horse.

During his career, he's influenced countless horsemen, including younger generations of clinicians for whom Hunt is a mentor and continued inspiration.

As his protégés and students can attest, Hunt doesn't mince words when explaining to clinic-goers that his priority is the horse, not the human. His job, as he sees it, is to make horses' lives better by influencing their riders' ways of thinking.

Here, the revered horseman offers a rare glimpse into his personal background, and comments on his strongest influence, the late Tom Dorrance.

#### **How did you meet Tom Dorrance?**

I was in trouble with a horse. He was a really good horse, except he kept bucking. I was 30 years old, and nobody could tell me anything. I knew Bill Dorrance, a real good hand, and he said, "I've got a brother who's pretty good."

So that's when I met Tom, about 1960. When I first met him, I didn't have the horse with me and he said, "How am I supposed to help you? You're here and the horse is back there."

He told me to try some things, and I went home and tried them. But the horse got worse because I did what Tom said, not what he meant.

When Tom came to visit, he met the horse and told me to lay down the horse to get him to relax. I got the horse to do this every time before riding him, and he

## Q&A: Carolyn Hunt

Ray Hunt's wife discusses life on and off the clinic trail.

### **Very little is known about what you and Ray do in your downtime.**

When we're home in Idaho, we're either starting our young horses or working on the ranch. My son, Preston, is on the ranch at home, and he runs 250 head of mother cows. We help work cattle. This is why, at 75, Ray's still doing clinics. If there's a horse out there, he wants to do something with it.

### **You all share the same ranch?**

Yes, but we're not there very much. We try to keep Ray in a warmer climate because of his emphysema. We're there in the summer, when it's warm. In the winter, we go to a little place we have in the desert in Southern California. We take December and January off and ride our horses.

### **Do you have a place in Alaska?**

We have a daughter who was in Alaska for 7 years, so we'd go up there and try to spend a month or 6 weeks. Ray loves to fish and he loves that country, so we ended up buying a place. That's why you see the Alaska plates on our rig.

### **Were you involved with horses before you met Ray?**

I grew up on a ranch in Idaho. My father was an old cowboy, and my mother said when they got married he made \$1 more a month than the rest of the cowboys by riding the rough string. He never lived to meet Ray, but his whole life revolved around the horse, just like Ray's does.

### **How long have you two been married?**

Twenty-five years. He's the most amazing man I've ever been around. What he can do for the horse and what he can get people to do with horses ... it's amazing how he can talk you through something and get you to another place.

### **I understand that your sons-in-law are all accomplished horsemen?**

Martin Black is one of Ray's sons-in-law. We have another son-in-law that trains cutting horses, and another, Bill Van Norman, who's a rancher in Nevada and won the (American Quarter Horse Association) Best Remuda Award. We've got grandkids involved in high-school and college rodeo. You can't help but be proud of them.

### **What are some of the most important things people need to know about horses?**

Find out where the horse's feet are, because the answer to everything you want to do is the feet, the feet, the feet. All that other stuff comes in, but if he's right on his feet, he's right in his head and there's an understanding there.

A person should work with a horse where the horse is at, not where the person's at, and realize that the horse isn't working against him, ever. No matter what the horse does, he's right. We're the teachers, and if we were presenting it to him in a way he understood, he'd definitely come through and do it. Of the thousands of horses Ray's worked with, there's never been one that didn't understand him.

You run into humans who don't want to be bothered with it, but every horse understands it. There are so many physical things you can do — learn where the feet are, and then learn your leg cues. Each person's ability will come out and the horse will reflect it.

The majority of people out there just want a horse to get on and go for a ride. And that connection they make with their hearts and souls is what it's all about.



Hunt looks on as a clinic participant makes some final adjustments before mounting a colt.

stopped bucking. I never had any more problems with him. I won some ribbons on that horse — he was a fine horse.

I guess Tom thought I was something worthwhile, or I don't guess he would've come back. He'd show up once or twice a year, stay a few days and encourage me. Everything he said made a lot of sense. I needed to learn it, and I haven't learned it all yet.

#### **Discuss the differences between working with a horse and working with a rider.**

The human isn't near as interesting to work with as the horse. The horse is always wide open to you. There's no selfishness, no pride or ego in his way, and a lot of times the human has things in his way to hold him back.

I think most humans really want to get along with the animals. But what they don't know is that self-preservation is very strong in a horse. The horse is scared, doesn't know how to do something, and wants to protect himself. He's telling us he has to be sure of what's taking place. We don't look at it that way.

Most things we want to do with animals are good ideas, but our presentation isn't right. It's too demanding. We're not letting the horse learn it, and not fixing it so he can make it happen. The horse can figure things out, if we allow him, but we're taking his mind away from him and replacing it with ours.

So if I can make people more aware,

tell them there's more out there if they want it, that's my goal. I'm not gonna quit. I can't, because I can learn something from every horse.

#### **What do you tell people who just can't make things work with their horses?**

The reason it isn't working is the horse doesn't understand — and that goes into a lot of other areas, such as discipline. He might be thinking about other things. He's like a child in a classroom looking out the window while you're trying to teach him something. You're not going to teach him anything.

You have to get the horse to listen. Then you notice little changes. He learns that when you're with him, something can be gained. He gets interested in what you're doing, and you allow that to work.

There will be discouraging times, but you need to accept them, make the best of them and go on. We have to accept some things not working so we know we don't have to keep doing them. We have to accept defeat to gain success. It's a way of life.

#### **How did you get started doing clinics?**

I went out on my own looking for more horses to teach me things.

#### **What about Tom? Did he do clinics?**

Not in the beginning. Tom was a rancher, and people would come to him with difficult horses. In his later years he started doing clinics. ➤

**As a result of your clinics, there's now a natural-horsemanship phenomenon. Many clinicians copy your formula for clinics.**

They take clinics from me, then go out and teach on their own. On a certain level, they do some good, but most are teaching the mechanics and leaving out the mental part that I'm so interested in.

**You've said that people come to your clinics, then go home and sometimes make the horse worse. They hear what you say, but not what you mean.**

Correct. When I met Tom he told me what to do and I did it, but it didn't work. I can ask 10 people the same question and get 10 wrong answers and they'll say, "I thought you meant this, I thought you meant that."

I rode a lot of horses people couldn't get along with for 10 years. My kids could ride them and I could ride them, but they went home and in a few days they'd be back. And I could tell the people about it, but it wouldn't work.

So I doubled my price. I didn't get half as many horses. But when people did bring horses, they were pretty sure something needed to be done. The next time I'd see them, they'd say, "Hey, Ray, that works."

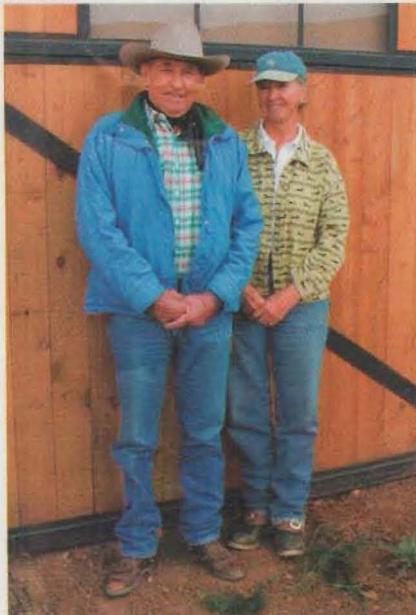
I tried to give it away and they wouldn't pay any attention, but when I started charging, they began to listen.

What I'm trying to teach, I'd give my life to share. It's everything to me.

#### **What was your childhood like?**

The horse meant so much to me growing up. I can remember as a little kid (growing up in Idaho, one of nine children), Father would drive a team in from the field. I'd limp along behind him — I had a club foot — and he'd drag the lines. I'd stop to pick them up, and I'd think I was on cloud nine. He might stop and put me on one of the workhorses, and then I was on cloud nine. That was the greatest place in the world, as a kid. I couldn't get the horse out of my system.

My father wasn't one who'd put his arms around you and give you a hug. He



**Ray and Carolyn Hunt divide their time among Idaho, California, Alaska and the open road.**

was a good father, but he could never admire you for something good. He could tell you when it wasn't. That's the way he was. He was very honest and a hard worker, and I was always going to please Father, but I don't suppose I ever did.

I got very discouraged at one time. I was about 18, and thought I'd just join the service. I was the only boy left at home. Mother said, "Raymond, Dad would really like for you to stay." I stayed.

When Father retired a few years later, he wanted to know if I wanted the place. I said no. I got a chance to go cowboying. Father never owned anything but the machinery and the horses. He had no desire to own anything. He just wanted to raise us kids and stay out of debt. When he retired from farming, he didn't have anything, so he worked. I thought a lot of my father. He was the best man at my wedding.

**You're 75 years old now and still going strong. Why are you still doing clinics?**

There's always another horse that needs help. I want to share what little I know through what Tom has taught me.

*Susan Smith is a writer based in Santa Fe, N.M. For more on Ray Hunt, see "I'm Here for the Horse," in the November 1998 WH.* 