

## A Rose by Any Other Name

2005

At a recent ride, I heard an old-timer declare, "I've been in this sport for over 30 years. Back when we started, we called it N-A-T-R-C. There was no Nay-track or Na-track." There followed a little cheer from the audience, and my suspicions were confirmed: If you say N-A-T-R-C, you identify yourself as a seasoned campaigner; if you say Nay-track (long "a"), you may have been around for a while; and if you say Na-track (short "a"), well, you're probably just a complete newbie.

I'm one of the newbies who says Na-track; after all, when speaking to people who are familiar with the sport, why say five syllables when you can communicate the same idea in two? Nay sounds too much like no, so I prefer the short "a." I like that the acronym includes the word "track," because for me it evokes images of trekking down a trail.

But when I really want to impress upon someone who we are, I proudly enunciate all ten syllables: North American Trail Ride Conference. I tell them it's the most fun sport I've ever done. I describe all the beautiful countryside I've had the privilege of riding through during competitions. I mention what a nice group of people participate in this sport and what good friends I've made. I tell them that a season of NATRC will improve your horse immeasurably, whether you are trying to make a working ranch horse, a pleasure mount, or a dressage champion.

I know this from personal experience. When I first got my mustang mare Gypsy, she was green-broke but still a pretty wild thing even at 9 years old. Though carefully started at six, she had been pastured with few experiences and little training or riding for the next three years. The first time I trailered her out for a trail ride, she was so squirrely that it took me an hour to get her saddled and another hour to get mounted. My first NATRC scorecard read, "Pony express mount; minus 4 points." After a season of NATRC rides, she now stands still for mounting!

Gypsy used to spook at every rustling leaf on the trail. Now she rarely spooks, and if she does, it's mostly a small startle.

She used to be lazy and would not go forward. No amount of pleasure riding or arena work would put impulsion into her steps. NATRC events did. On our last dressage test, she got an "8" on the walk and several comments on her good energy and impulsion. And she will march boldly and eagerly

down any path we take.

At one of my first rides, Horsemanship Judge Jamie Dieterich asked for a back-up between two lines on the ground. When we stepped outside the line, she said, "Well, you just fell off the cliff!" I went home determined to improve, and now my horse will back up hills, alongside cliffs, around trees, and straight through any tight space I ask her to. It was the NATRC challenge that inspired me to work hard on that.

At another ride I listened as Cheri Jeffcoat (Horsemanship Judge and President of our national organization) debriefed the Open riders on a task she'd asked them to do: dismount and side-pass your horse in hand up a hill. I couldn't wait to get home and try this. It took weeks of practice, but now Gypsy and I can do it!

As a result of NATRC, I can do a coordinated off-side mount and dismount, negotiate a gate from the saddle, ride with decent equitation up and down hills, maintain a safe riding distance between horses, and get my erstwhile headshy mare to allow her mouth examined by a stranger. I know how to camp overnight with a horse and arrange correct stabling. I can ride down a trail and estimate pretty accurately how far a mile is. I've learned how to condition a horse for distance riding, and how to evaluate my horse's current condition. I can ride her for 20 or 25 miles and bring her in "fit to continue" and with no soreness anywhere.

We still have a long way to go, I know. My mare hasn't crawled on her knees after falling down on a slippery rock, carrying me until it was safe to get up; encountered a mountain lion with equanimity; or stood quietly while I wielded a chainsaw from the saddle. We're a *good* team, though not yet Cheri Jeffcoat's definition of a *great* team. But my hope is for many future years of NATRC experiences to help us approach this goal.

So, whatever you want to call it—N-A-T-R-C, Nay-track, or Na-track—what does it matter? North American Trail Ride Conference is a jewel, a shining star, a rose... and a rose by any other name is still a rose!