



A Partnership in Patience

AJ Horses builds relationships with horse and riders

By Mark Boardman

Photos by Lucinda Wood & AJ Horses

Ask Andra Olson and Jim Hanson about their training philosophy, and you'll get two words—relationships and patience. And the two concepts work hand-in-hand.

It's certainly worked for them. AJ Horses is one of the most successful partnerships in the history of mounted shooting, one that itself is based on a strong relationship and

a bunch of patience.

A Partnership is Formed

Things got rolling in 1998, when both Jim and Andra began competing in mounted shooting. They had a lot of success, individually and collectively. They together hold several CMSA World Champion Team honors, Andra has three CMSA World Champion titles, and five National Titles along

Andra Olson trains a shooting horse at home in Minnesota.

with several other top championship wins. Jim also has several top titles, but he's better known for his Rifle accomplishments, holding several World and National titles himself.

But they believed that they had more to offer the sport. While they didn't live in the same area—Jim was in South Dakota, Andra in Minnesota—they had similar ideas and approaches. And when they got together at matches, they compared notes and formulated plans. So by 2000, they had their common goals in the works.

That doesn't mean it was easy getting to that point. Andra says, "We learned the hard way ourselves, because when we started there was nothing in the sport to give you pointers. Everything was new. In fact most of the rules weren't even established yet. So once we went through it, we decided to share what we'd learned so others wouldn't have to go through the same trial and error process."

Jim—a lifelong professional horseman—says it came down to one thing: "We knew we could help people in the sport, especially in becoming better horsemen."

The first step was putting together a video on mounted shooting. It was a winner. And the AJ Horses brand soon expanded to training riders, more videos, clinics, creating and distributing a variety of products, and more. As their experience and renown grew—both in and out of the arena—Jim and Andra took on the high profile job of representing Colt Firearms.

The Process

One of the really interesting facets of the AJ Horses program is that it's done in two locations. Jim Hanson's 13-acre ranch at Sturgis, SD, is the starting point where the new horses are started and worked toward the sport. The place butts up to the Black Hills National Forest, which adds another 150,000 acres for intense training. Andra's 70-acre spread, about 40 miles from Minneapolis-St. Paul, features the arena and round pen that help finish the process (and bring the



riders into the mix as well).

For the most part, Jim and Andra work their own animals, most of which will later be sold to mounted shooters. And picking the horses is a key to success.

Andra says, "It's in their temperament, it's in their mind-frame. It's in the way they handle themselves. Before we purchase a prospect we go through a screening process. We ask the previous owner several questions to learn as much

as we can about the horse, their personality traits, their experiences and background. Then we'll ask them to ride the horse and we'll watch how the horse moves, their athletic ability, and their agility. But there's also something. . .when you've trained horses for a long time, you can see something in their eye, a kind of connection that you can read."

Very few horses meet those standards.

But those that do get the full AJ Horses

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treatment. It's a 10-step process, based on Jim's lifetime of knowledge and experience as a cowboy, a trainer and a rider. It's predicated on building a relationship between the horse and trainer, one built on trust and understanding.

And it's also a broad-based program, one that gives the horse a strong foundation for various competitions. As Jim says, "The training we do is appropriate for any discipline the person might want the horse for."

The 10-step process includes:

1. **Observation:** Getting to know them, observe their behaviors and allow them to observe you. This allows the horses to get used to the surroundings, the other horses, and the trainers.
2. **Trust and respect in basic handling:** Gaining trust in basic groundwork, manners, haltering, leading, handling legs and ears.
3. **Equipment introduction:** Leg protection, blankets, saddle, tie down,

bridle. They put an emphasis on ear plugs for the horse (they have their own brand for sale), saying it's important to protect the animal's hearing.

4. **Prop introduction:** Varies depending on your sport (do this outside of structured arena environment)—cones, poles, balloons, banners, flags, ropes, jumps, noises, guns etc.
5. **Focus and understanding:** Prepare horse for riding, tie him up so he can learn to stand quiet to focus on the job and understand the task.
6. **Disciplined riding skills:** Directional cues—leg cues, reining cues, voice commands, slow lope circles implementing correct leg cues, reining cues, correct leads and lead changes, proper body language.
7. **Combining:** Use arena props with the proper disciplined riding skills.
8. **Navigational trust:** Stopping, turning, rating.
9. **Work ethic:** Exercises, instant response to cues.
10. **Performance attitude:** Focus, patience and understanding. There's that word "patience" again.

Slow Down, You Move Too Fast

Jim Hanson is the first to admit that he had to relearn training practices. Growing up on a ranch, time was at a premium. You had to break the horse fast so that it could go to work.

But once he made the change, he was pleasantly surprised: "It's a lot easier process. It might take longer, but it's a lot easier for everybody. Instead of telling the horse to do something because I say so, the training aspect is showing them what you want and then getting them to do it."

Andra adds, "It's just like teaching a child—some learn faster than others. And you need to be patient to teach them."

For that reason, they don't estimate how long it will take to finish a horse—it varies from animal to animal.

Relationship: Horse and Rider

One of the final steps—matching the rider with an appropriate horse. Andra says it's not always easy: "A lot of people come in looking for color and size. The

Jim and Andra on location with their Colt adorned travel rig.



first thing we do is tell them that you can't buy color and size. If you're lucky, it comes together. But what you need to do is find a match. Can you work well together? Can you accept each other?"

It's a relationship thing. AJ Horses emphasizes education and developing the connection between horse and rider. They take pride in teaching the rider horsemanship skills to gain trust and confidence in themselves and their horse. It's a partnership that will stand the test of time, allowing both horse and rider to grow and develop together in the sport.

Maybe not so coincidentally, the AJ Horses partnership fits that same mold—a great fit between two well-matched horsemen who have learned and grown in mounted shooting, much to the benefit of the sport itself.

Visit their website at [www. AJHorses.com](http://www.AJHorses.com).

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