

Behaviorist Dr. Jim McCall enjoys studying the mind of the equine. Although he received his Ph.D. in equine reproduction at Texas A&M and is very knowledgeable on breeding, he is also a leading authority and a consultant on the behavior of horses.

McCall began his association with horses as a youngster on a 2,000-acre cattle ranch in Magnolia, Arkansas. After 30 years of breaking and training horses, he has become well-known for his positive training methods, setting precedence with his "breaking without force" and "tackless training" philosophy.

McCall has been a speaker to equine groups and organizations, and has recently published the book "Influencing Horse Behavior." He is currently working on his second book, "Synchronizing Horses and Man."

McCall has taught at three major universities, including Texas A&M, the University of Maryland, and Louisiana Tech University, where he is presently an associate professor of animal science. Together with his wife, Lynda, McCall runs his own horse farm in Ruston, Louisiana, where he raises, breeds and trains performance and racehorses.

# The Gentle Touch

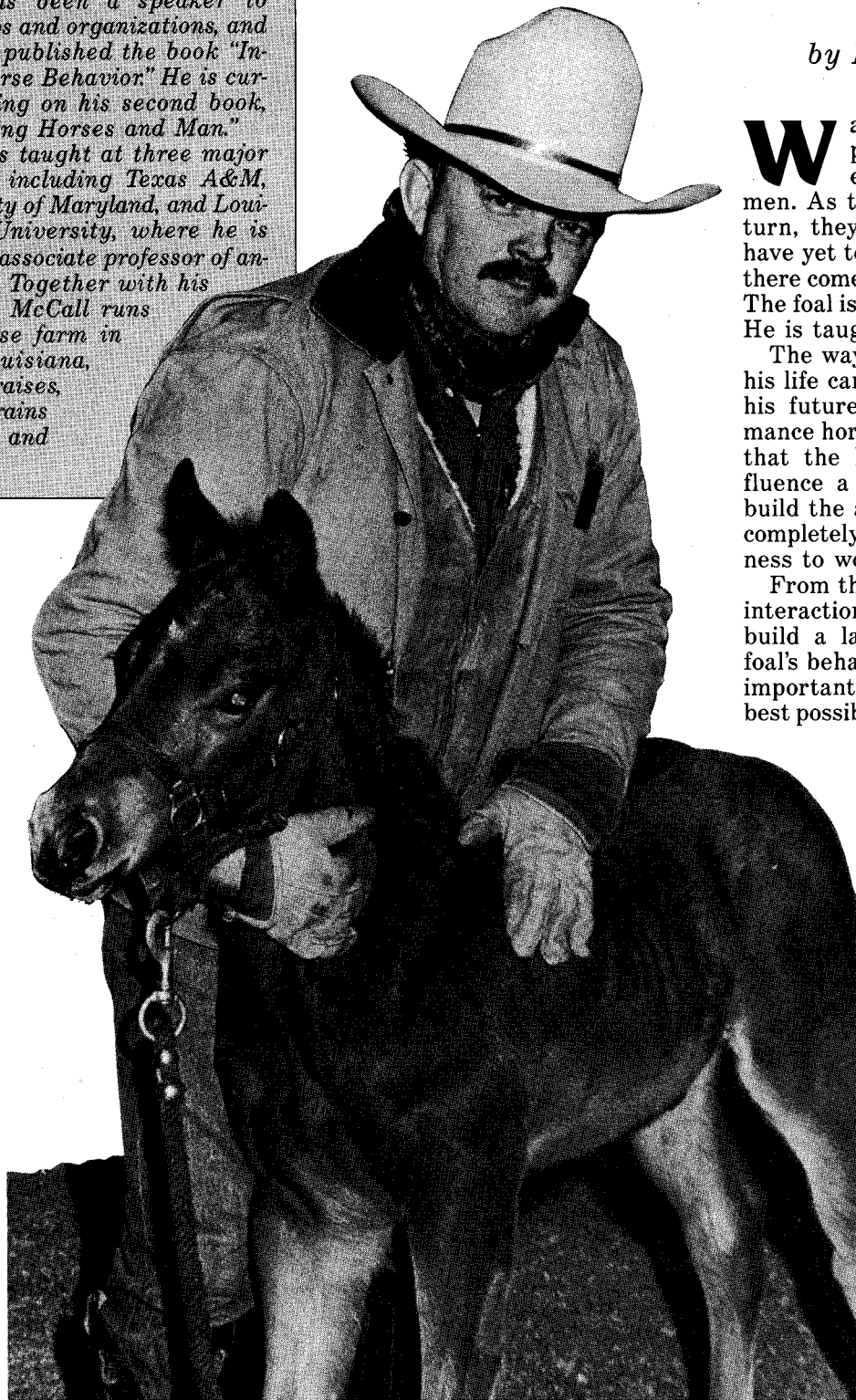
by Helena Biasatti

**W**atching foals run and play in pasture is one of the greatest pleasures of most horsemen. As these foals buck, twist and turn, they enjoy their freedom and have yet to experience restraint. But there comes a time when this changes. The foal is caught. He is halter broke. He is taught to respect man.

The way a foal is handled early in his life can either hinder or enhance his future as a competitive performance horse. Dr. Jim McCall believes that the handler can definitely influence a horse's behavior. "He can build the animal's self confidence, or completely destroy the horse's willingness to work," he said.

From the moment of birth, a foal's interaction with man will begin to build a lasting impression. As the foal's behavior patterns develop, it is important that he be handled in the best possible manner so that the horse

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will be willing to give his all to his trainer or jockey later in life.

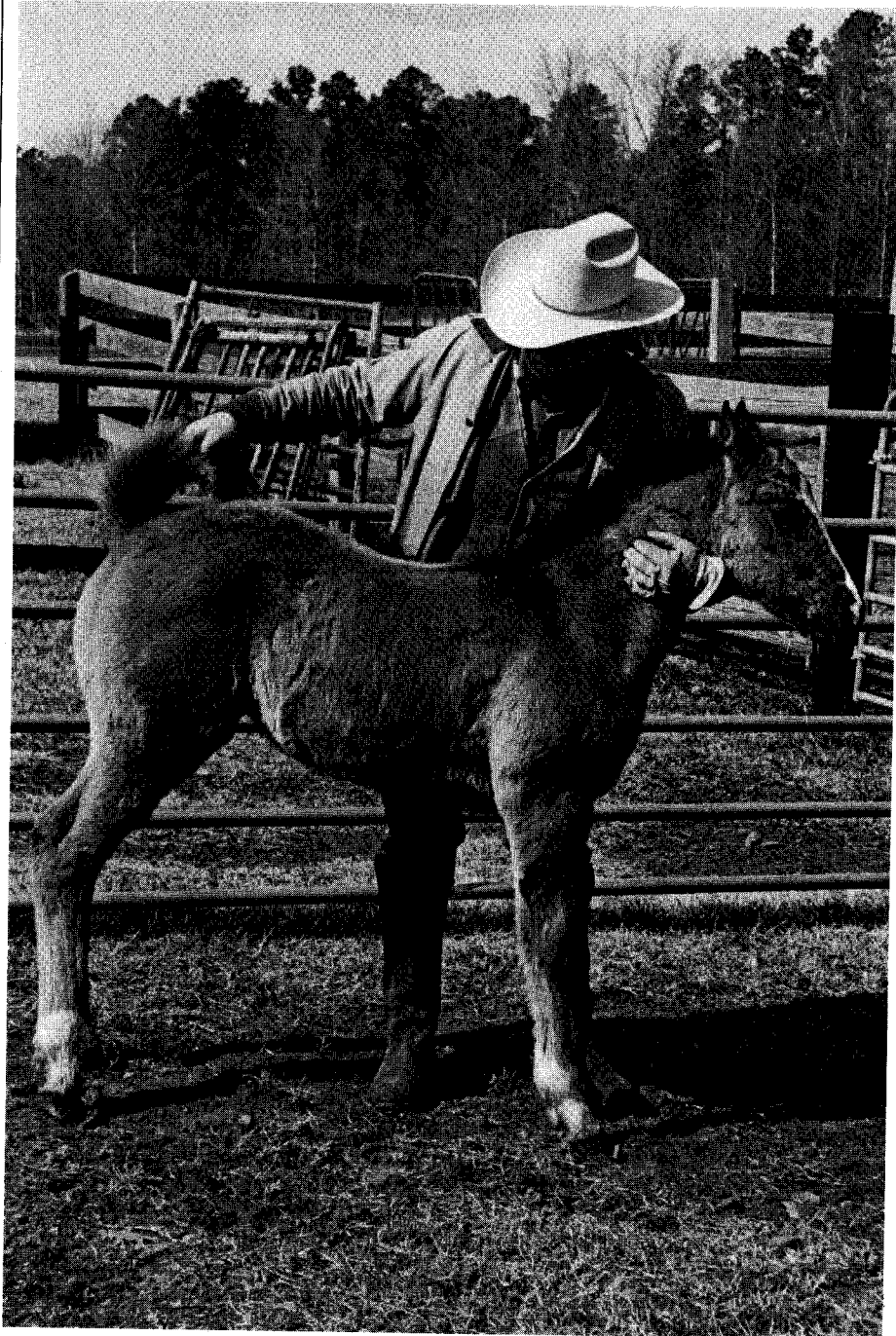
Even though the relationship of horse to man is of vital importance in the way a horse performs, it is best not to begin your introduction until several hours after birth. Man should not be overly anxious to interfere with the foal during birth. When foaling a mare, McCall stresses not to disrupt the dam-foal bond. "You have to allow a maternal instinct to develop with that mare so that she takes care of the foal," he said. "There is a time frame where a certain amount of imprinting goes on between the mother and foal, and during this time I don't like to handle the foal unless an emergency situation arises."

A foal's first introduction to man should be a positive and rewarding experience. To achieve this goal it helps to get the foal used to people before it's asked to accept control. "Ideally, you don't want to force yourself on a foal. Most foals are easy to approach if you play upon their natural curiosity," said McCall. "This will allow the foal to realize that he's not going to be hurt and you are not trying to scare him."

To get a foal to approach you, you must be relaxed and move very slowly. Curiosity will draw him to you. With a very timid or scared foal, McCall suggests lowering yourself to the foal's eye level. "This makes a person less intimidating to a skitish foal. Given a little time, curiosity will overcome his apprehension, and the foal will begin to explore the person. Taking your time and lowering your position is worth the effort in the long run."

Once the foal has achieved a level of confidence being around a human, it is time to approach him. McCall said, "The safest position from which to approach him is the side, slightly in front of the shoulder. If the foal begins to move away, stop. When he relaxes, walk toward him again. Often he will let you get closer the second time before he shows uneasiness. With most totally naive foals, it will only take a few attempts and you will be close enough to touch him."

But once by his side, don't be in a hurry to touch the foal. His instincts



The handler puts his arm around the horse's neck and pulls his tail up over his spine, which keeps the foal from kicking.

tell him to be on guard and to flee at a moment's notice. By remaining still and calm, the foal will relax and be interested in exploring you rather than escaping. McCall said, "His first contact will be with his nose. He will want to smell you. Some older colts may then want to explore with their lips. I never encourage a horse at any age to place his mouth on me. With young colts it's easy for you to gently push the attempt off."

Introduction of the hands is an important point to make. First contact with the hand should mimic the sensation of touch created when the mare comforts her foal by rubbing her lips on his back. Using gentle but firm strokes, begin to rub the foal. Rubbing

and scratching the wither area is a sign of acceptance. Stroking around the top of the tail and over the croup is another place the foal is used to being touched. Gently begin to work your hands up his neck, rubbing his withers and watching his response. Allow him to realize that your presence did not scare him, and then leave the stall.

"If you showed kindness, the foal will not be afraid to be caught again," said McCall.

To catch a foal that turns his tail, McCall said it's necessary to show the foal that you are not afraid. "Walk up to the foal off to one side of the hip at an angle, and then reach over and touch the hip. Be confident and don't

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flinch. If you go in aggressively, you will probably scare the foal and he will be more likely to kick out. As you touch his hip, most foals will relax. Soothing rubbing can take you from the hip to the back to the neck — a position from which the halter can be introduced.”

A foal that becomes used to people is often easier to halter. Many large farms put halters on their newborns right away, whereas others choose to wait until the foals are older. But McCall emphasizes not to leave nylon halters on young foals, as they could easily hang on a gate or fence, caus-

ing the animal to choke to death or break a neck.

Newborn foals are often handled by placing your arms around their necks and hindquarters, and moving them with your body. Extreme caution must be taken while handling new foals, since many dams are protective of their offspring. McCall suggests that the mare be haltered, then held or tied so that she does not harm the handler.

Foals which have not been handled early are usually more difficult to catch and halter. “After weaning we bring these foals up at about five or six months of age and put them in a stall. It takes about five days until we feel confident that we can catch them anywhere and lead them to where we want to go,” said McCall.

To catch an older foal, the handler will put his arm around and in front of the horse’s neck, and hold the tail over the horse’s spine with his other hand. By pulling the tail up, the foal is unable to kick out. If the handler allows the tail to come down just a little bit, the foal could kick.

While holding the foal, another helper can easily slip the halter over the foal’s nose. “Some horses will turn their heads away, and others don’t mind the halter,” said McCall. “It is important to be patient and talk softly so that the animal knows that he’s not going to get hurt. The elimination of fear decreases the chance of injury to the foal, and there is no trauma due to force.”

Once the halter is on, the foal is introduced to physical restraint in a positive and rewarding manner. Small increments of pressure are used to allow the foal to understand that the pressure on his head is asking him to move forward, backwards or sideways. Never face toward the foal as you ask him to lead. He does not understand how he can move forward when you are standing in front of him. Leading can be quickly accomplished once the basics are learned.

“I don’t like to see foals halter broke by leaving halters on them with the lead rope dragging the ground,” he ad-



While holding the foal, another helper can easily slip the halter over the foal’s nose.

ded. "I think that depresses a horse terribly, and I hate to see a horse's spirit broken like that."

When teaching an older foal to lead, McCall likes to use a butt rope. This can be accomplished by using the loop of a lariat or a long lead rope. McCall sometimes uses a figure-eight, which wraps around the horse's hindquarters to where both ends of a lead rope come through the halter. This teaches the foal to lead and stop straight.

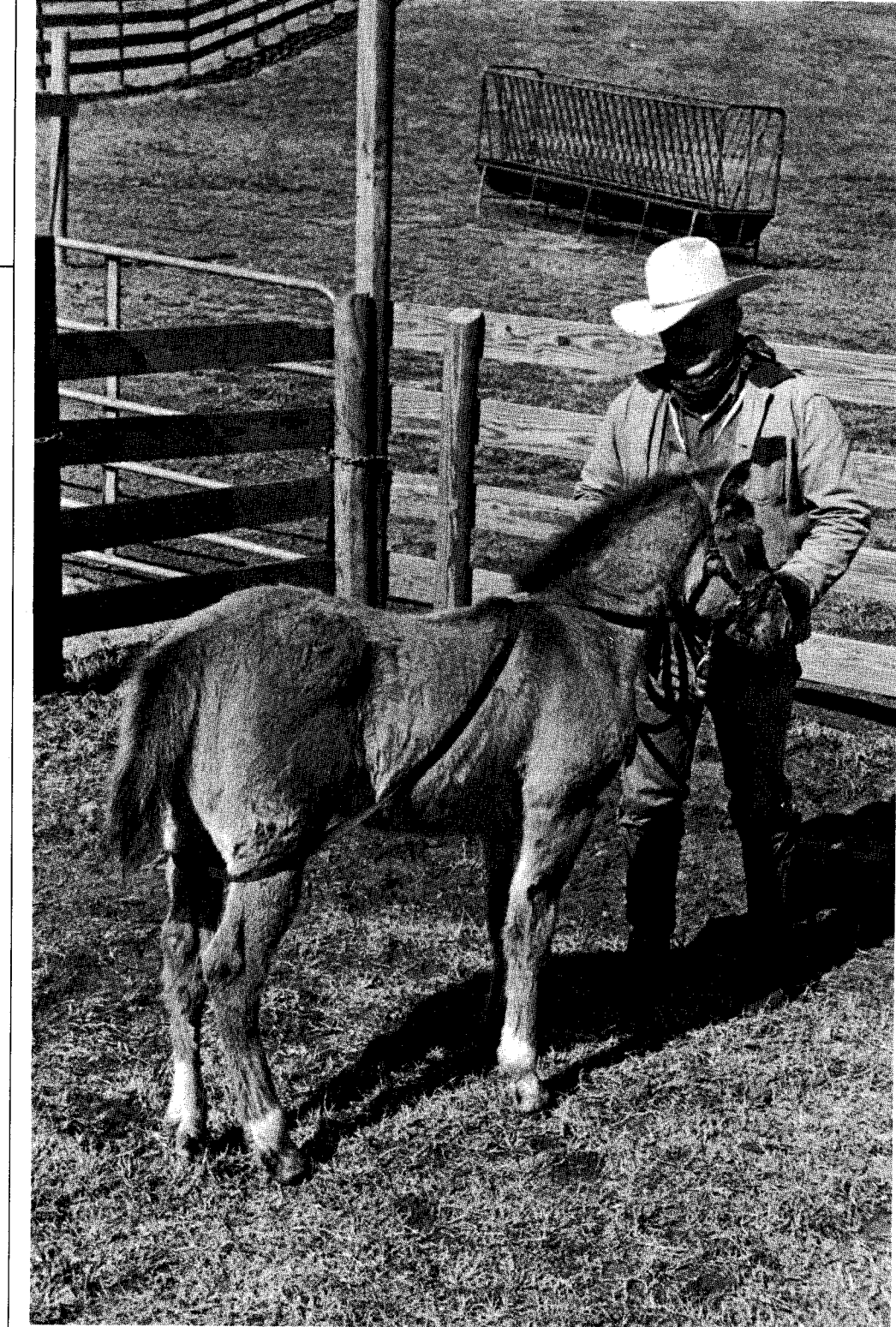
Teaching leading can be less traumatic when the foal is still with his dam. The handler can walk the foal alongside his mother, starting in an enclosed area. After the foal learns what is expected of him, he can be led down an alleyway, and then from the barn to a round pen. Shortly thereafter, he can be led without his mother. However, it's important that the foal be broke enough to where he doesn't pull away.

When working with young horses use a lot of routines. "They are confident with routines because they know what to expect," said McCall. "Changing one thing in the routine leads to learning, not a new, scary experience. Lead them out of the stall and to the round pen. Turn them loose, catch them and lead them back to the stall. When they are comfortable doing that, lead them to another pen."

**F**oals are less trainable at one and two months old than when they are five and six months old, and they are also more fragile. McCall has noticed that three- and four-month-old foals seem to be very resistant to restraint. "They will fight really hard and they don't remember a great deal about what they learned the day before," he said.

For this reason, McCall advises that the horse not be introduced to forceful restraint until he is at least five or six months old. Instead, the horse owner should introduce his foal to a positive relationship where the owner is rubbing and handling the foal with a gentle hand.

"The more you can keep training a positive experience, the more pliable and trainable the horse is going to be as he gets older," said McCall. "Any time you have to use trauma, mental



The figure-eight butt rope teaches the horse to lead in a straight line.

and physical abuse, you are making training a bad experience and this will show up later. It's like the first time you go into a classroom and the teacher gives you a spanking. From then on, every class you go in to, it's got a bad connotation."

But McCall points out that you should teach an older foal to handle some aggression because if you don't, the horse will tend to be fractious in training situations where aggression

is used. "But aggression is not punishing a horse for something he doesn't understand. Undesirable behaviors can be easily produced by people who lack feeling about a horse's individuality, and they, in turn, can teach a horse to be mean and lack respect. Aggression simply means that when you lead a foal, you don't let him walk over the top of you. He accepts you as his leader and willingly follows your command. Keep in mind that foals are

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not horses and they can't handle the same amount of aggression that a mature horse can."

The foal should be handled the way he is socially handled in the herd. The relationship between horse and man is that the horse accepts man as dominant. Put yourself in his dam's position, and teach the horse to accept dominance from you like he does from his mother.

According to McCall you can generally tell by the time a foal is five or six months old what he'd be like to train. "When you halter break him, you can tell a lot about his personality — how much he remembers, how he accepts pressure and how trainable he is."

Although behavior has its genetic components, it is also learned. A handler can either build a horse's confidence or strip it from him, and shaping his behavior can be either right or wrong. "If you want a horse to be self confident and not dependent on humans, one of the best things you can do is late wean him," said McCall. "If you want the horse to be dependent on the person and more easily shaped, the earlier you wean him the better."

Therefore, a racehorse would be weaned later, around six months, since you would want him to build a lot of self-confidence. Confidence in a horse comes from being comfortable in his environment and comfortable with people. McCall said, "A horse that would be conditioned for the National Cutting Horse Association Futurity would be weaned later since you don't want to take away any competitive edge from that individual.

"Give me a horse that is a super athlete and I want it to have all the mental confidence it can get — from the day he's born. I want him to think he can't be beat. I want a cutting horse to think there's not a calf alive that can get by him, and a racehorse to think there's not a horse in the world that can outrun him. In his mind, he's a winner."

Gaining a foal's respect, allowing the horse to build self-confidence and owning a horse that accepts training begins early in a foal's life. McCall stresses that there's probably more to

gain from handling a foal shortly after birth than waiting until he's a lot older, just so long as he gets positive training. "Just remember that the first gentle touch he experiences formulates his opinion about man." □



The loop of a lariat can be placed around the hindquarters of the foal when teaching him to lead.