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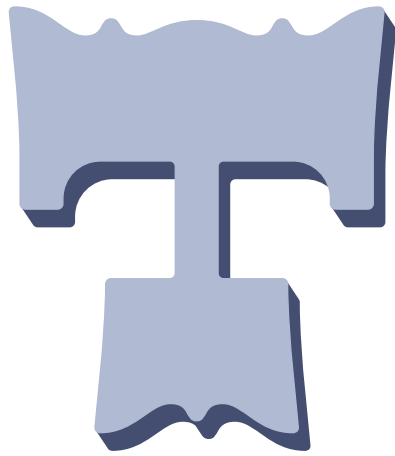
Loper Emma Lane enjoys an early morning moment with stallion Pedel To The Metall before prepping him for work.

LIFE OF A LOPER

— Words by KATE BRADLEY BYARS —

Photos by KIRSTIE MARIE PHOTOGRAPHY

Whether a gateway into the cutting industry or a way to fulfill a larger goal, a skilled loper is as valuable to a horse trainer as the horse that rider is preparing.



he most well-known description of a loper's job is someone that prepares a horse to show by loping in the warmup pen — but those in the industry know the job encompasses so much more. Whether at home or at a National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) event, a loper is responsible for the care, wellbeing and fitness of some of the trainer's most valuable possessions.

What entices someone to accept the job as a loper at a cutting trainer's barn? Kathy Daughn, NCHA Hall of Fame Rider and two-time NCHA Open Futurity Champion, likens today's loper to a highly skilled position.

"It didn't used to be such a skilled position," she said. "The horses now, and the competition in the last 10 to 15 years, require a tremendous amount of man hours to get ready. When I have a loper hired, that person is the caretaker of this





\$100,000 animal and \$200,000 rig up and down the highway. It is an extraordinary job and one that we as trainers don't take for granted. It's become a job that has a lot of responsibility, and it can be exhausting."

It's not the pay that drives most young people into the industry through the gateway of loping, though Daughn says most make between \$100 to \$150 a day. In fact, many trainers point to their wives as their best lopers, and that is probably not a paid position.

"Katie Rice, my wife, has always been my number one loper and the main reason is that she has the most feel on a horse," said Tarin Rice, of Poolville, Texas. "We are also closer and more open when saying things like, 'that was a bad work, go flag.' Things like that help when the trainer's mind is going 40 places, but that person is thinking about that specific horse."

Yet, when his wife was pregnant, Rice had to search for her replacement, and it led him to Evan Moffitt. Moffitt, like many who take a loper position, had little experience in the cutting industry. However, trainers like Rice — or like Adan Banuelos, who hired Emma Lane to work for him — have guided lopers to not only be successful at preparing the horses in their barn but to work toward their own dreams.

A loper's path to the NCHA show arenas is as varied as the duties they cover in a barn, from freelance show help like Shelby Mindrup, to long-term help like Ella Blazek, who has ridden for Kenny Platt for four years. No matter the reason someone rides into the position, their job as a loper has opened more doors than any believed possible.

FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:

Emma Lane lopes Steem, a four-year-old gelding.

Ascencion Banuelos and Rocking Cash work cattle at 6 a.m. in the air-conditioned arena while Emma Lane turns back.



SHELBY MINDRUP

FORGING THEIR OWN WAY

Shelby Mindrup was tired of working at a Minnesota dairy, so when she answered an ad for a loper's position at a trainer north of San Antonio, Texas, it sounded like the door she needed opened for her to pursue her dreams.

"The hardest part of finding a job was finding someone to take a chance on a dairy hand that didn't even have riding on their resume," she said. "I thought that first job would be a loper job, but I started all their two-year-olds. Once I got in the groove and learned a lot from that trainer, I moved on to Louisiana. I worked freelance riding and working as show help. I'd get a full-time job, then do some freelance work."

Now, Mindrup makes her living traveling from horse shows to ranches, riding for trainers like Lindy

ABOVE:

Emma Lane saddles Pedel To The Metall, a personal favorite of hers. "He was the first horse I ever got ready for Adan back in 2019."



EMMA LANE

Burch or starting colts as contract labor. While loping and preparing a horse to show is still one of the top duties she performs, a lot of others trickle in every day.

“I am a caretaker, from cleaning stalls and feeding to getting a horse ready, and I enjoy it all,” Mindrup said. “As contract labor for 10 to 30 days, I take as much pride as if I’m full-time. I am riding for their brand to show their customers and them we are trying to be the top level we can be, and professional. I enjoy the all-around aspect of it.”

Daughn is quick to explain that hiring someone as show help can often mean more responsibility than someone that works at the barn. “You need to know that you’re hiring someone that can get a horse ready because we trainers are watching cows and helping hold herd, and that [show] help has to prepare many horses all day,” said Daughn. “It’s a big deal, for sure! To have someone skilled that understands when I say what bridle to use, and knows how to boot a horse up properly, and I don’t have to explain myself — that is worth a lot to me.”

The hours spent in the saddle can be demanding. Show contracts can mean riding 18-hour days preparing and caring for multiple horses. “This job is long hours; you get tired but just put your head down and work,” Mindrup advised. “My belief is that when you put in the work, day in and day out, that will get you recognized. I didn’t start out getting to ride great horses, but now I have, and it’s made me a completely different person and rider. I am fortunate to have started on the low end of the totem pole with the one person that wanted to give me a chance.”

Emma Lane, 22, echoes her appreciation for being given a chance. She started working for Adan Banuelos four years ago, after starting to work for his father, Ascencion. Lane answered a call asking if she could ride a horse and drive a trailer, and now she can say she prepared the first horse to win the American Performance Horseman cutting: All Spice, shown by Adan.

“I started by taking off blankets and putting horses on the walker. I showed up the next day and [Ascencion] hired me; I’ve never left,” she said. “I was always super fascinated with cutting but I never had the opportunity. It is an expensive industry, and you have to have the horsepower and family behind you, and I didn’t have that. Until this job, I never got the chance to learn about it.”

Adan sees “horse preparation specialists,” aka lopers, as an important part of a successful team. Matching a loper and horse often involves trial and error.

“When you get the right person with the right horse, it makes a trainer’s job much easier,” he said. “It’s all about finding the best combination of personalities to be as competitive as possible in the show pen.”

One thing that Lane has learned is to ride each horse as an individual. She strives to befriend each one so that it has more confidence when she’s preparing it to show.

“The thing that excites me the most is the success we have,” Lane said. “If at the end of the day, you feel you’ve done your best and your horses have done their best, and they look good and feel good and are happy, it is a good feeling.”

**EVAN MOFFIT****ELLA BLAZEK**

GATEWAY TO GOALS

Dreams of walking into Will Rogers Coliseum in Fort Worth, Texas, to compete in the NCHA Futurity often fuel riders down the path to becoming horse trainers, and it was a similar goal for Evan Moffitt. From Missouri, Moffitt didn't grow up in a household that was interested in horses, but after he saw cutting as a middle-schooler, he was hooked. Through connections he made in the Missouri horse industry, Moffitt learned that Texas trainer Tarin Rice was looking for a looper.

"I knew I didn't have much to offer but would work hard and be a team player," he recalled. "They were looking for someone to help out and lope horses, and it offered \$1,250 a month with a house. I was nervous working for him; I was afraid to mess up and get fired. I was probably nervous for three or four years! I just wanted to do right."

Rice said Moffitt impressed him through hard work. While Moffitt originally wanted to be a cutting trainer, the care he took washing and grooming horses stood out to Rice. "He said as much as I like washing, brushing and being with the horses, I should fit yearlings [for sale]," Moffitt said. "While I didn't end up training cutting horses, that pushed me over to an idea of how to make a living. I worked for Tarin for seven and a half years, and I met a lot of people. When people found out I was going to fit horses, they started sending me ones to support me. They were all connected to having worked for Tarin."

Now, Moffitt Equine, located in Perrin, Texas, is fitting horses for sales across the United States. Moffitt is a success story born not only from a solid connection with his employer, but because of his personal qualities that stood out.

"You want someone who is an extremely hard worker, self-driven and a good person," Rice said. "The more natural ability a person has to ride is better, but those other qualities are first because you're trusting them with your livelihood. Evan checked every box. He rode good, sat a horse good, was a hard worker and extremely self-driven. You want someone that doesn't have any baggage because it is a long, hard job, and you need someone 100 percent dedicated to that job."

It's those same qualities that landed Emma Blazek a job with Fort Lupton, Colorado, trainer Kenny Platt. Wanting to move away from her home state of



“You want someone who is an extremely hard worker, self-driven and a good person.”

TARIN RICE

Minnesota, a connection through 4-H got Blazek, 23, a position with Platts.

“We start each day saddling horses, then I lope horses down, turnback, bathe and unsaddle horses all day,” she said. “I have a few of my own horses here that Kenny helps me work. I want to be a horse trainer and he helps me with that.”

When Blazek started, she didn’t have that “feel” Rice described that trainers look for their help to have when preparing a horse. “Kenny was super-patient! I could tell I didn’t do a good job, but I didn’t know how to make it better. He would say things like, ‘Well, this horse can’t be too tired!’ So, I would ride them and get them more tired each time, and soon I was understanding just how worked down each horse needed to be,” she recalled. “Once I understood that, Kenny gave me the opportunity to show a little bit. As soon as I started to show, it was easier to understand how to get horses ready.”

Blazek keeps focused on the goal, which is to win but also to be a positive part of the Platts’

team. The opportunities available to her after moving into the cutting industry far outweigh the long, hard days doing the job.

“It helps to go through the steps of learning to be a loper; it’s taught me a lot about horse care and barn management, and I’ve learned a lot here,” Blazek said. “You have to do whatever it takes to learn all you can from the trainers. Work really hard and opportunities will come. I don’t really focus on if I’m having fun; it’s more about working toward a goal.”

No matter if the goal is to become a horse trainer, start another equine related business or to simply ride good horses, a loper is where many get their start in the cutting industry. From the ground up, the lessons learned shape each rider’s future. ★

ABOVE:

Rocking Cash gets a bath after being worked.