



Focus and time spent practicing are important to developing a confident show seat in the arena.



# The Winner's Way

A winning cutting run takes more than simply sticking with the cow. Arizona trainer Mike Wood outlines his five keys to create a winning run.

Article & photos by Kate Bradley Byars





**Practice makes perfect**, but perfection is not always what creates a winning cutting run. For cutting horse trainer Mike Wood, practice creates a confident rider who can show through the mistakes to make a positive out of a negative.

“Talking about control and position on the cow is part of a run,” Wood said. “But to put together a full winning run game plan, you need showmanship, a game plan and the training that includes control and position.”

A native of Arizona, Wood grew up team roping and rodeoing before he went to work for multi-event Western performance horse trainer Al Dunning. After working 10 years with Dunning, Wood began his own operation in 2001. Now, he focuses on cutting with clients who range from youth riders to retirees, from \$2,000 Limit Rider competitors to top-level non-pros.

The common denominator? All of his clients want to show and want to have fun. While winning is a big part of that fun, so is the chance to ride more often, which is why he focuses on weekend shows and not larger, limited-age events.

“Cutting is a lot of fun. I believe to enjoy the sport you need to go show,” he said. “At a weekend show, they can show two or three times a day, a couple days in a row, rather than go to a major event where you show once every few days. I truly love cutting. I truly believe that the weekend shows are a great opportunity for people to cut and have fun.”

Wood outlined his five keys to create a routinely successful weekend run — a clean cut, proper position, confident quits, show-



Making a clean cut is the best way to start a run off on the right foot, Mike Wood explained.

manship and a best effort. He makes it sound simple, but the veteran trainer knows it's not always easy in the show pen.

### 1. Make a Clean Cut

First impressions set the stage for a good performance. For Wood, practicing clean cuts in which his client drives a cow, with control, up and out of the herd is the first step on the road to a successful run.

“Start off on the right foot and make a good, clean cut. We aim for a credit-earning cut, but our goal is a clean cut. A clean cut will turn into a credit-earning cut,” Wood explained. “I mean that you stay in position to control the cow and get above the other traffic. You have to drive up into the cut, and the goal is to get above the traffic.”

The second goal, according to Wood, is to maintain control of the cow on the cut. Lagging behind in a nonchalant or confi-

dence-lacking manner puts a negative impression in the judge's mind.

“To me, driving up far enough is a huge deal,” he said. “Part of gaining control of a cow is driving up. You drive up to get in position to control it, instead of laying in wait or being so nonchalant that you don't get out of the herd. It's also showing the judge you're there to cut, you're in control.”

Wood cautions against driving up too aggressively, which could look rushed to the judge. He said practice on making cuts at home is beneficial to showing confidence in the show ring.

### 2. Stay in Position

It's so simple, it can almost go unsaid: Stay between the cow and the herd. Still, proper positioning can sometimes be a challenge to maintain, depending on the cow.

Wood advised that understanding how to remain in the proper position can keep riders out of a judge's penalty box.

“You don't want to incur a miss or loss of working advantage,” he explained. “You want to stay in position, to where your horse mirrors the image of the cow at all times, rather than falling behind the cow or getting too far ahead of the cow.”

“You want to maintain that position of control without overexposing yourself out in front of the cow or under-riding to not go as far as the cow goes. Do what the cow does; stay between the cow and the herd.”

Overthinking the simplicity of keeping the cow out of the herd has been many riders' downfall. Wood said it is the key to developing a winning run.



Staying between the cow and the herd seems like such a simple goal, it is often an afterthought; however, proper positioning is key to a successful run. Even when a horse gets out of position, the rider should regain control and continue showing with confidence.





A rider should be confident that when they quit, it is the right time. Wood also advises riders to keep their eyes on the cow and slowly bring their horse to a stop.

“No run is perfect, but you have to maintain control of the cow,” he said. “If you get out of position — say you’re late in the turn, then ride stronger to regain control of the cow — continue to show confidence and let the judge decide if that was a miss. Not often are there perfect runs. If you have a little bobble, don’t think it’s a big bobble and don’t panic.”

### 3. Quit with Confidence

Confidence throughout the run is necessary to show the judge you’re there to pilot the horse and to show; however, a confident quit is another matter.

“I find that people who are not confident do make hot quits,” Wood said, referring to the penalty levied when a rider lifts their hand before a cow turns away or stops moving. “They’re scared that they won’t be able to hold the cow or it will not turn away. Have confidence you can work a cow five minutes or five seconds.”

Part of a confident quit involves the rider showing they’re making a calculated decision, but still aware of the cow’s actions. How they signal and punctuate a quit reflects on a judge’s sheet.

“You don’t want to jerk up and have a rushed quit. When you quit, it needs to look like you’re in control and you’re confident this is the point to quit,” Wood explained. “It’s a common problem I see riders have, that as soon as they say, ‘Quit,’ they take their eye off the cow.

“The cow is still out there. The horse is still hooked. Keep watching the cow as you pull up and back a step or finalize the quit. Don’t be abrupt.”

How a rider quits leads into Wood’s fourth point, which is showmanship.

### 4. Showmanship

Showmanship is about time management. Another part of showmanship is confidence. It starts from when the rider and horse walk into the arena and doesn’t end until the pair walks out.

Showmanship is riding through any issue in a run and not letting the judge know.

“Don’t make sudden, abrupt moves when you cut a cow, work a cow or quit a cow,” Wood said. “I call those panic moves — but don’t panic. A cutter will jerk their hand and you can see the panic in their eyes. Work on staying calm.”

In Wood’s barn, a rider that drops their head in defeat or shakes it during a run is in for a talking-to. That is Wood’s biggest pet peeve. In the show pen, his clients need to exude confidence to the judge.

“Showmanship is essentially maintaining control. Even though you’ve had a bobble, ride the entire run,” he said. “If you may have had a hot quit or a miss, smile and continue to cut. You don’t know what the judge sees and how it looked from the front. Keep your run together and don’t give bad or negative posture.

“Don’t get discouraged; work on showmanship for the next run. Even if you don’t win that time, you learn to present a good overall picture. When a rider thinks through all their positions, maintains control and thinks through the quit, that shows the judge they’re there to compete. That is showmanship.”

### 5. Do Your Best

Forcing a run to look better than the cow’s actions are allowing a horse to work causes problems. A weekend rider who might show in two or three classes a day cannot win them all, Wood reminded. He would rather his students focus on doing the job right every time.

“If your goal is to mark a 74 or a 75, it can cause a problem. You can’t force a 75. You do your job, and if the cows work, your score will follow,” he said. “The key is to go in, do your job the best you can do it, and hope your horse does his job and that the score falls in line.”

Consistency will create success. Part of doing your best as a rider means understanding what doesn’t look the best. For that, Wood encourages all riders to seek help from a coach.

“Everybody can use an outside opin-



Maintaining a calm demeanor, focusing on position and showing the horse to the best of a rider’s ability is how to make a good impression on a judge.



## About Mike Wood

**National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA)** trainer Mike Wood of Scottsdale, Arizona, has more than \$2.1 million in earnings, according to Equi-Stat. The trainer focuses on cutting now, but during his time with Al Dunning and when he first started his own business in 2001, he trained reiners and reined cow horses, as well.

In late 2019, This Isa Third carried Wood to the trainer's fifth NCHA World title in the \$5,000 Novice division. Additionally, Wood won the 2019 NCHA World Finals \$25,000 Novice Show Championship aboard TRs Best Player.

ion. Golfers have a swing coach," he said. "Everybody has a coach. That is a good thing. Even if someone can't tell you how to fix it, someone needs to tell you where the run was lacking in an area. I try to watch videos with clients and do a little coaching."

Winning is fun, and showing a good horse is fun. The way to a winning cutting run, especially on the any-age circuit, is through consistently making the right choices in the show pen.

"Try, every run, to do your job the best you can do," Wood said. "The more consistent you get in doing your job, the more the score will reflect that and you'll get in the winner's circle." ★