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Outside in the car park mud sluices pure liquid and ankle high. Overhead it's a cloudless pale blue, the snow has almost melted; already thoughts of spring shows and early rodeo competitions trot briskly across dreaming minds. As a reality check it is January, and the horses being unloaded from trailers are supremely wooly; next week will probably be minus 40 again but the dreams remain.

This is a practice outing in trickriding for some of the youngsters who are training with Jerri Duce Phillips. Jerri – and her sister Joy – began their successful trickriding acts at ages nine and seven respectively. Coined “The Flying Duces” because of their high-speed horses, they performed acrobatic stunts across Canada and the United States (including the World’s Fair, Expo 67, the Calgary Stampede, opening ceremonies at the ’88 Winter Olympics as well as traveling to England, Scotland and every major pro rodeo in North America). Jerri’s website (www.trickriding.com) promises individual attention, instruction and all within a safe and controlled environment.

Her husband Lee, a two-time Canadian steer wrestling Champion, also helps out; today he is ‘ponying’ the trick combinations of girl and horse – which means he rides his bay cow trained horse while keeping a rein hold on the trick rider’s horse, keeping the pace steady until the moves are practiced and sure.

Jerri’s expertise extends, too, to barrel racing (nine times Canadian Champion on three different horses), and ‘wrangling’ for film productions as well as starring in “The World of Horses - The Trick Horse” where she worked with another young student, Niki Caemmart. Niki (www.cowgirlinup.com) is pretty much an example of where trick riding professionally can take you. Now eight years on the road, these days this glamorous rider spends winters down in Texas rodeoing and has, like Jerri, worked in film stunt work as well as pyrotechnics coordinator. As a trick rider, she’s been chosen seven consecutive years as a Calgary Stampede Trick Rider and has appeared the same number of times at the Canadian Finals Rodeo.

“I pretty much know the second or third time I ride a horse, if he’s going to be someone I can trust,” she says.

Amber and Krista Graham whose mother Colleen hails from Cochrane, also mention trust as a key component in their horses. These two sisters, as close as two siblings can be, are largely self-taught. “They had,” laughs their mother,

“four lessons and they just practiced and practiced, then went to their first rodeos at Spiritwood and Prince Albert to do shows there all on their own.”

“At Lloydminster,” explains Colleen, “the Pro-Chuckwagon finals the audience was well over 5,000 and the girls’ show there was on the track, not the arena, so we had to train the horses specially for that.”

The horses run a pattern, explains Jerri, they gallop left handed down one side of the arena, around the corners and then down the other, with the horse finishing at a standstill in the corner. “It’s a safety issue,” she gestures, “if something goes wrong, we want that horse to learn to stop in that corner every time; if I had to go and grab him, have to chase after him, that’s where he might run away and where you could end up with serious damage.”

“I look,” she says, “for a horse whose basically quiet, who doesn’t mind the rider moving around and isn’t scared of that. I’d want him to be flashy looking, sensible, stout and who’s capable of running fast; most of these tricks ride better at speed.”

By stout, she explains, she means that the horse has to be able to compensate for a rider’s hauling over to one side, hanging down, or leaning far back, and to stay well balanced on the corners. The taller the rider, she emphasizes, the more difficult they’ll find it to keep their centre of balance; girls, she adds, find some of the vaults (touching the feet to one side and then vaulting over the horse’s back to the other, at full throttle) hard work.

“They don’t generally have,” she comments, “that upper body strength. Fitness anyway for this kind of riding is essential, plus I add in push-ups and chin-ups, getting them to pull their own weight up.”

“Saddles alone,” Jerri remarks, “can weigh around 40 or 50 pounds.” On her website custom-made numbers roll out at \$5,000; Amber Graham bought hers from Nevada at \$3000 for a basic trick riding saddle that needed substantial extras adding on. “The foot straps were leather,” comments her mother, “and they snapped during one trick where luckily she managed to swing up onto the saddle without injury. Now, we’ve substituted double nylon webbing instead.”

Rodeos and shows pay performance fees at contract rates; trick riders these days are big draws, spectacular, flashy, daring. “It’s exciting, frightening,” grins Jocelyn Potter who’s 17, and from her face you can read just plain addiction. Totally understandable.

THE END