

Shooting Horses are Made, Not Born

ALAN EGGLESTON'S DOUBLE E RANCH - MAKERS OF FINE SHOOTING HORSES

By Ken Amorosano



Photos by Lucinda Wood

Tres Hombre - Shooting Horses in Training at the Double E in Gila, New Mexico

Tucked back into the rolling hills several miles outside the small town of Gila, New Mexico, lays a picturesque horse and cattle ranch known as the Double E. Surrounded by the rugged Gila National Forrest, the facility is nestled in a pristine valley of Cottonwoods straddling Bear Creek and surrounded by steep rises and rock formations right out of a John Wayne Western. With its year round source of fresh mountain water, the Double E is

the ideal place to make shooting horses—and that task is left to cattle rancher, horse trainer and dude ranch boss, Alan Eggleston.

Alan and wife Debbie's Double E includes a 30,000-acre working cattle ranch and a vigorous guest operation that attracts visitors from around the globe. For the retired commercial airline pilot whose roots lay near the blue Pacific of Venice, California, a dream-come-true has earned him the

reputation as one of the top producers of mounted shooting horses in the world.

But it all didn't start with horses. In fact it wasn't until he got out of the Navy, flying the four-engine turbo prop P-3, that Alan got deeply involved in horses. He and Debbie settled into a small ranch in Colorado, northeast of Colorado Springs in the Payton/Kiowa area. They had some horses, mostly Arabs, and cows, but before long they began looking for a larger ranch to fur-

ther expand their operation.

"We always liked New Mexico and began our search there," recalls Alan. "My great, great uncle and great grandmother had a ranch in the boot heel area near Hachita in the late 1800's and I have always had a fondness for the state." The Eggleston's found the ranch of their dreams in the southern part of the state, not too far from Silver City, so they up-rooted from Colorado and began building their future.

At first the Eggleston's used the ranch for their horse and cattle operation, but after a three-year drought they expanded into guest operations and began developing the ranch to accommodate groups and individuals. "The guest operation took off like crazy," says Alan. "It went way beyond our expectations." The Double E added log cabins, riding facilities and many more horses. When one guest wanted to take a horse home, their horse sale business began.

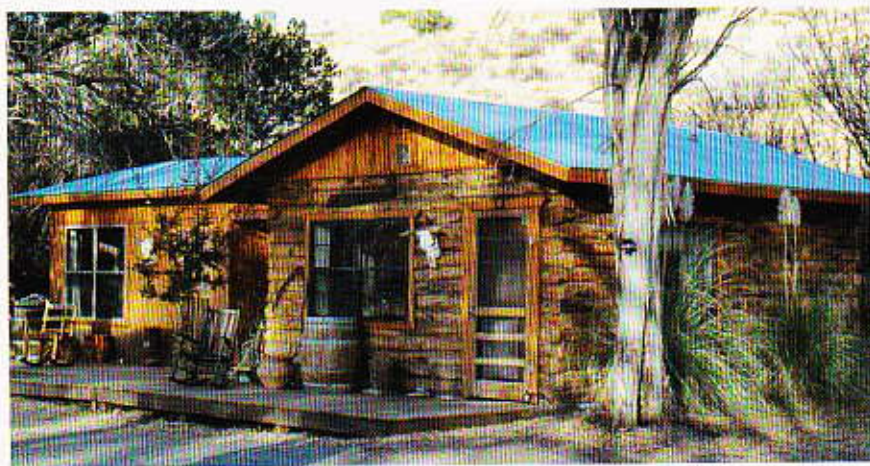
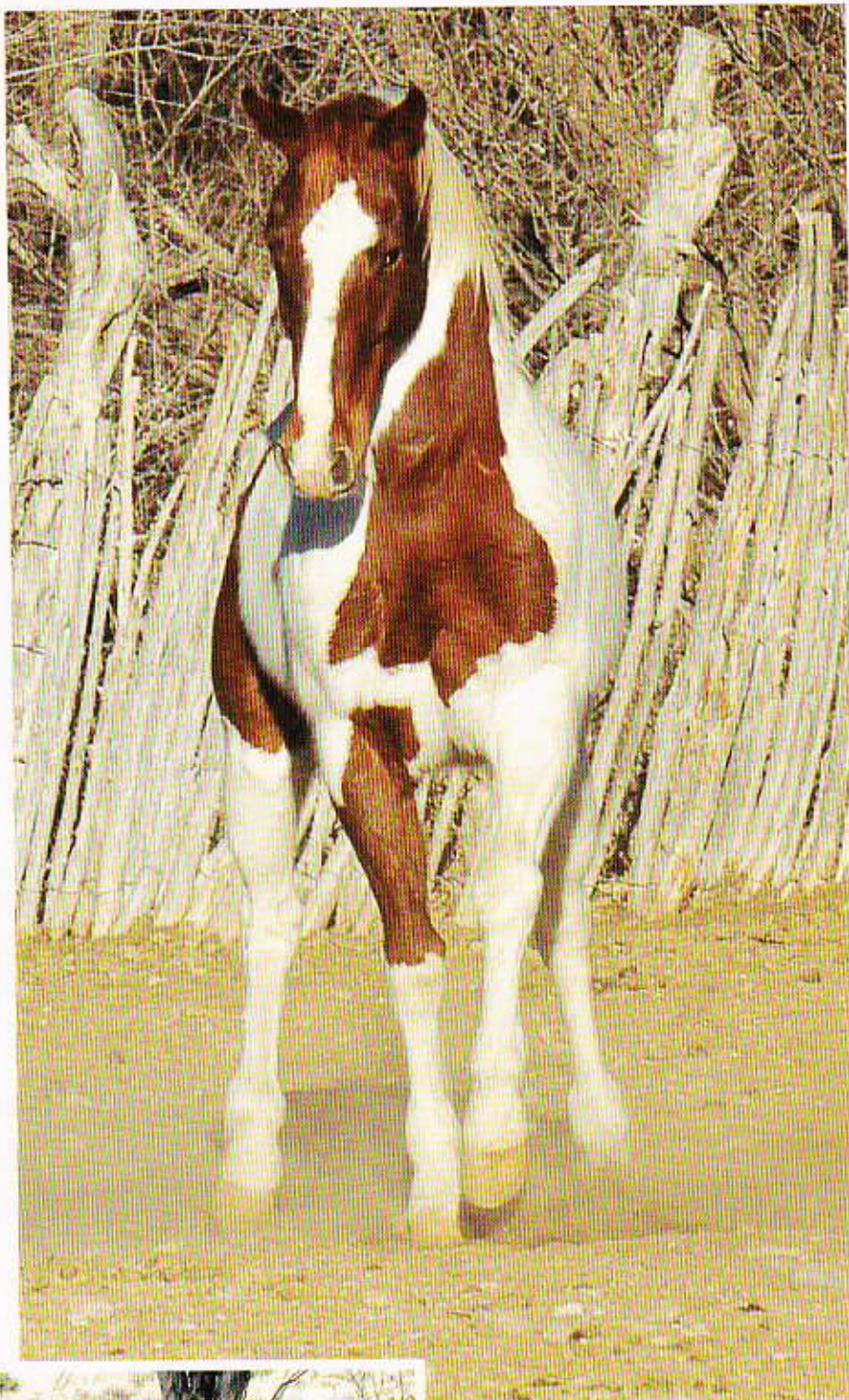
It wasn't until their third year at the Double E that Alan first discovered mounted shooting. Good friend and saddle maker James Sturgeon brought Alan to see his first match and Alan liked it so much he was a competitor at the next one he attended.

"When mounted shooting came along we started developing the shooting horse business," recalls Alan. "People knew we sold horses and requests for shooting horses were more and more."

So where does one start to make shooting horses?

"In the beginning, we were looking for any horses we could shoot off of," says Alan. "Kind of fast horses. There was lots of experimentation in the beginning...what you could and could not do to come up with training techniques."

"Getting a horse used to gunfire is not the hardest part," states Alan. "Most horses



The Double E Ranch brings in stock from around the southwest and trains them to become smooth mounted shooting horses. Some horses are better for entry level competitors than others. Guests at the Double E stay in comfy log cabins like the one pictured left.

can become accustomed relatively easily. The hardest thing is getting them used to all the patterns...lead changes, roll backs, rating...this takes the most time...a lot of time."

The training methods Eggleston uses starts with the same he has used for his ranch, roping, and cow horses. They then develop into techniques similar to the reining horse—side passing, rollbacks, back-ups and the like. He says everything that comes out of reining will be used for the mounted shooting horse.

When it comes to the type of horse he is looking for, the American Quarter Horse takes it hands down. "Today's Quarter Horse is the ideal horse...an AQHA dream," says Alan. "Quick turns, acceleration, sharp turns, speed up, slow down, everything that fits the American Quarter Horse makes it perfect for this sport."

Eggleston also notes the temperament of the Quarter Horse lends itself much more to shooting than other horses.

What are you looking for in a horse?

"I look for their shape, their conformation and their athleticism," says Alan. "I personally ride each one to find out whether they're smooth, handling, light or heavy on



Alan uses the round pen to help train shooting horses

the bit. If it's light and athletic you can do a lot of things with that horse."

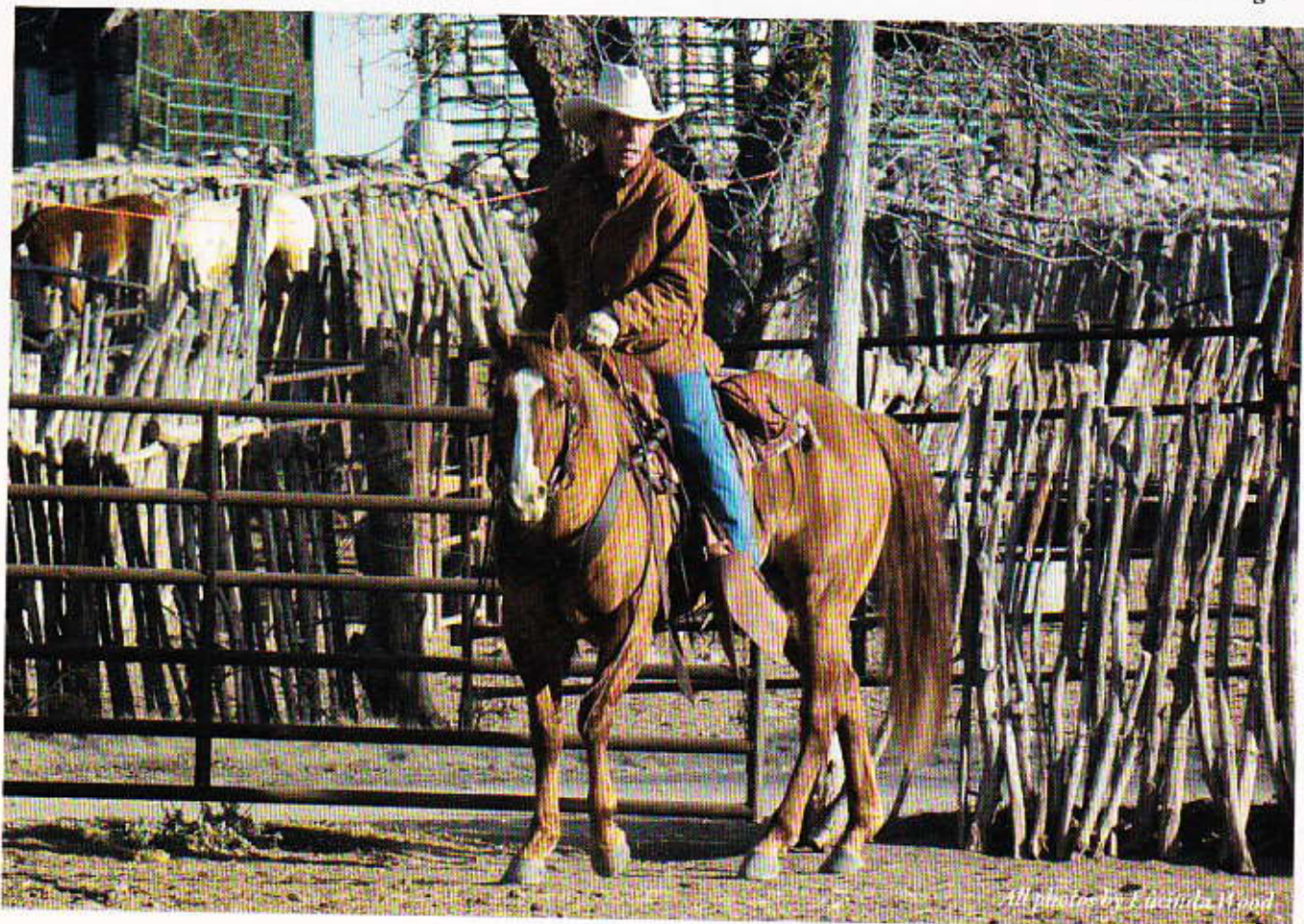
Gunfire?

"Some horses do not like gunfire. If you have a horse that jumps all over the place we don't bother any more. It takes way too long and sometimes they just never get used to the gunfire."

Where do you get your horses?

"We find horses all over -- Mexico, New Mexico," says Alan. "We stay away from horses younger than five. Six and seven year-olds make better prospects because they need that maturity to handle what you are trying to do."

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Mare or Gelding?

"Doesn't matter, but most people are looking for geldings".

How long does it take you to turn a good ranch horse into a mounted shooting horse?

"One year for a five year-old. Some older horses have turned into good basic mounted shooting horse in as little as two months but we plan on six months to a year to get a basic shooting horse that will be consistent."

What are your top five training methods?

"First we take them to the arena to see how they react to gunfire. If they're jumpy they go to dude string. If they handle it well we start."

"We always start with the basics – lead changes, side passes all the basics."

"Next we clean up what they already know – open gates, side pass, back up. We take them out on the ranch to work cows and get their legs toughened up out in the rough country – develop muscle tone and get them in shape."

"Next we work on competition patterns while dry firing. We run them through the patterns to see how they handle them, see what special work is needed. Cow horses

tend to go to the left and lack a right lead. We work on right circles to develop the right lead and we always warm up these horses in right circles."

"Finally we start shooting off them, all the while working on the basics."

Alan has different goals for different horses. "Depending on their athletic ability, we will develop horses for different levels of riders. Slower horses are more appropriate for the level one and two riders while horses that are faster will be developed for advanced riders and competitors. The key word however is smooth."

"There have been times were I had to turn down selling a horse because the horse was too advanced for the rider," says Alan. "I say – 'take this slower horse' – you don't need the world class speed – take it up to a level 3. You will not have a problem selling that horse for the same or more when you're ready to move up."

At any given shoot around the country you will find various levels of Double E shooting horses. The Double E has been producing mounted shooting horses for over 5 years.

Alan likes to advise new shooters. "If you are new to mounted shooting and are looking for a horse that will get you started go buy a beginning shooting horse, because he will run smooth and this sport is about



Debbie & Alan Eggleston

smooth and consistent. Then you have a better idea of the type of horse you will want later on."

What about the future of mounted shooting and mounted shooting horses?

"The sport has reached that professional level. Competition at the top level will get tougher and tougher. Shooting horses will also become more competitive. There are always faster ways to run courses and today's shooting horses are as competitive as those in any other discipline."

At any give time, the Double E has shooting horse at different levels of training. To find out more about the Double E and Alan Eggleston's shooting horses, visit www.ranchgeldings.com.

