

CHOREOGRAPHING FREESTYLE REINING

by Linda Seger

Freestyle reining is one of the most exciting new classes in the world of horses. Although many riders want to do it, it's not unusual for them to be a little afraid or anxious. But if you like to dance, if you can sing a little, if you can ride a horse and do the reining maneuvers, you can do freestyle. But how do you plan? How do you think through your number? How do you choose the music,?

Choosing the Music:

The most important part of freestyle will be your choice of music. If you choose music that has variety, that suggests the different maneuvers, your music will lead you into the choreography and will inspire you and motivate you and energize you to do a good job and to enjoy yourself. Most freestyle riders choose music that doesn't have enough variety, and the freestyle then becomes repetitive and less interesting to the audience. Many freestyle riders will choose a song that they happen to like but may, or may not, be workable for a good freestyle routine. Most songs are built on the structure of a verse which is usually four lines long followed by a chorus, which is often two lines long. For instance, let's look at this simple song, "Home on the Range." The verse is:

Oh, give me a home where the Buffalo roam,
Where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
and the skies are not cloudy all day.

Chorus:

Home, home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word, and the skies are not cloudy all day.

You can imagine if you had to do 4 minutes for a freestyle, this song would get very boring. The song is slow so it doesn't give you the energy that you need. But I'm going to use it as an example to give you some ideas about what to do with a song.

If you wanted to ride to this song, you might listen to several different singers and look for the most energetic and fastest arrangement. Secondly, try to find an arrangement where there is an instrumental section in the song, as well as the singing. Sometimes there are instrumentals between the verse and chorus or sometimes there's an instrumental section after several verses. This instrumental section is called the "bridge," and it simply separates one section of the song from another section. Sometimes the instrumental section is faster and is a good place to do a spin on your horse.

If you don't choose a song, one of the best choices is a medley meaning several different songs, perhaps from a musical. For instance, several years ago I choreographed my trainer Randy Dooley to the music from the movie, *Shrek*, for the Dodge Invitational. *Shrek* has a lot of variety and a lot of fun to it. We put the donkey voice into the freestyle piece and then used fast songs and a slower one. I have done freestyle to medleys from *Fiddler on the Roof*, from *Singing in the Rain*, and from *Cats*, and I helped choreograph Hannah to the music from *Brave* and created a medley from that. Look at movie music, whether you go back to some of the very famous older musicals or whether you look at the animated musicals that have come out almost every year. You can even do a medley of Western songs, John Wayne movie music, or combine it with two or three pieces of music that all seem to fit together. Watch ice skaters and dancers and see what music they use. At the Ice Skating Nationals this year, one of the girls skated to James Bond music, focusing on Gold Finger and a few other James Bond songs. This number could have worked for freestyle reining. Maybe you like classical or jazz or ballet music or rock. Popular songs can be good for freestyle, but you have to be careful of the repetition.

You can cut music on a computer if you have the right program, choosing three songs and making them into one 4-minute performance. Or you can go to an audio-visual specialist at a college and ask if they would help you cut it. You'll have to pay something, but it is not necessarily expensive. I work with Tom Sanny who used to teach at the Colorado College in Colorado Springs, or you can ask me to help.

Planning the Choreography:

Once you have found a piece of music or are deciding between several pieces of music, listen over and over again. Begin jotting notes on maneuvers that might fit certain parts of the music. For instance, you might hear an instrumental section that sounds like a spin. You'll notice that fast sections often fit well with the circle. Then you could do a lead change into a slower circle when the chorus begins.

You want to listen for music that builds and then has a sudden stop which would fit your sliding stops. Of course, you need to find three of them so you're listening for three different parts of the music that would fit your slides. You then might hear a place where the music slows down and might imply a backup. And you might hear music that comes to a sudden stop and then starts again which implies a rollback. You might listen to this music five or ten times before you choose one piece of music over another. You want to ride *with the music* and *to the music*. You want to plan your maneuvers so when the music stops, you *and* your horse stop and when the music starts again, you *and* your horse start. This, of course, takes some practice because you have to know the music well enough that you know what is coming. You know that there's going to be a stop and you know you only have a second or two before the music starts again and you have to get ready to move directly into the next maneuver.

Timing the Choreography:

It is difficult to know exactly how much space you will need to do certain kinds of maneuvers, particularly because your practice arena is usually a different size than the arena where you'll perform. This demands practice, and you will usually need somebody to help you work out the timing of different maneuvers. However, timing is more a matter of simple arithmetic than almost anything else. To figure out how to time your maneuvers, watch yourself on video doing a reining pattern in the arena where you'll ride your freestyle. You probably have ridden there before and hopefully you purchased the video of your ride! Time how long it takes you and your horse to do four spins to the right, and then time your four spins to the left. Chances are, it will be somewhere around of 7 to 10 seconds. Time how long it takes for you to do a large circle and how long it takes for you to do a small circle.

In a big arena like Denver, it generally will take around 16 to 18 seconds for a rider to do the big circle and around 10 to 12 seconds to do a small one, knowing, of course, that you do have some leeway in the size of your big circle and your small circle. As long as one is bigger and faster and the other is smaller and slower, you don't have to always cover the entire half of the arena for a fast circle. Instead, ride to the music.

If you listen to *Home on the Range*, you might discover that the verse takes approximately 18 to 20 seconds to sing and the chorus takes about 12 to 15 seconds to sing. The verse could be a big circle and the chorus could be a small one. The obvious place to change leads occurs between verse and chorus on the first note of the chorus. There might be an instrumental before the chorus, perhaps of about 8 seconds, which could be your spin. So you might do your big circle and do a stop, go into the spin and then you start another circle such as you have in pattern five.

Then time how long it takes for you to do a rundown in the arena, watching a video of you running a pattern. In a big arena like Denver, it might take around 8 to 10 seconds and in a smaller one you might only need 4 or 5 seconds. Remember, you can finish in any place in that arena as long as you have some speed for your rundown and then room for a good sliding stop. If you need more time, you can always start a circle to use up some seconds and then come around and do a run down the diagonal. Naturally, you don't want to end your piece running into the fence nor do you want to end your piece where you finish the maneuver and the music is still going, or the music stops and you're still doing your maneuver.

Then, think about other maneuvers you can add for variety to your choreography-- a side pass, a spiral, a zigzag down the arena, lead changes on a straight line, and even the variety that comes with a walk and trot.

Rehearsing your Freestyle:

Most freestyles are under-rehearsed. The rider has not spent enough time with the music to know the music well and to anticipate exactly where to change maneuvers. Practice riding in time with the music by having the music playing at times when you're simply riding, even if not practicing freestyle, so you can start

hearing the rhythms and you can gallop, lope, and trot with the rhythm of the music. It's truly beautiful to see horses' feet hit the ground with the beat of the music. Although you might think that's very difficult, you already know how to control the pace of your horse between fast and slow, so all you need to do is to simply exert slightly more control of the horse so that he is going at the speed of the music. You can have somebody who has a good sense of music watch you and they can suggest you go a touch slower or faster so the horses feet are right with the music. It's fun to ride to music anyway, and it won't take you long to begin to feel those rhythms.

You can also rehearse your piece by doing it in sections. That way, you're not always going straight through the music and the horse isn't memorizing it and anticipating it. For instance, when you make your CD of the music, make two of them for the performance; (naturally, always have a backup.) But then make another CD and divide that CD into 4 to 6 sections. Maybe section 1 is the first verse. Then create a new track so section 2 is the chorus. Section 3 might be starting a circle and then doing a rundown into the sliding stop. So you've cut the whole piece into tracks so that if you have trouble with the sliding stop in the music, you can just rehearse that section a few times and not have to start from the beginning of the song. Maybe you then can rehearse the circle separately and do the circles with the music, and then stop your horse and rest. Or you simply rehearse your spin, or maybe you put the spin together with the circle and so that section of the music track is all together. This is something that an audiovisual person can do for you if you don't have the computer program to do it. You can always ask me for help, and I'll take it to my editor to fix the CD for you.

You also rehearse by listening to the music and visualizing yourself riding with music. Keep memorizing where you are in the arena with the music, and where you are with each section of the music. Listen for changes in the music where you'll change your maneuver. Practice so you change on the exact note.

Timing Your Circles:

If you're doing a circle on a verse, you'll be halfway around the circle at the half-way point of the verse. For example, if you're riding to *Home on the Range*, the

half-way point is "*the antelope play.*" The you'll be finishing your circle in the center on the "*cloudy all day.*"

Timing Your Lead Change:

In *Home on the Range*, you might change leads at the beginning of the chorus on the word, "Home." You have about three strides of the horse in the center of the arena where you can place your lead change and still get a good score.. So you begin timing that lead change when you're riding the big circle. If you're on the words, "antelope play," and you're only a quarter of the way around the circle, then you'll need to speed up. If you're at "antelope play" at three-quarters around the circle, you'll need to slow your horse down. With a little bit of practice, you will do a beautiful lead change that is also musical because you are differentiating the different parts of the piece of music by changing your maneuver when the music changes.

Give Yourself Time:

You will almost always need a second or two to move from your slide to your rollback to your lope, or from your spin to starting your next maneuver. There is a great deal of music that will have a few extra notes before the verse begins or the chorus begins or the next phrase begins. Sometimes when I have worked with my editor to cut music, I have asked him to extend the sound of a note for another second or two. Sometimes he even puts a pause if it sounds right. But be aware that if you want to ride *with* the music, rather than simply riding and having music in the background, you want to find music that will give you those small moments to breathe for yourself and your horse. It will make a huge difference in the look of your performance.

Creating the Costumes:

Most youth have a lot of fun decorating their horse and creating a costume for themselves. They will have a mother or sister that's creative or perhaps an uncle or father who comes up with some wonderful costumes. Of course, you can find some costumes online and order them or have someone copy them from the photo. When choosing costumes, make sure you ride your horse with the costume a number of times before you perform. If there is anything unusual about the costume that the horse might be afraid of, desensitize the horse several weeks ahead of time.

Perhaps you're going to put a top hat on his head or create a long costume where the material might bother him. If you're wearing a costume that is going to flow over the back of the horse, make sure that you wear that costume in practice so that the costume will stay where you want it to stay. Otherwise, you might discover that the train of your beautiful dress or tunic suddenly ends up on the left side of the horse, dragging on the ground and he's ready to step on it. Sometimes you can practice by making a costume out of inexpensive cotton muslin. Simply wear it for practice for a few weeks and then wear the actual costume as you get closer to the performance. That way you don't have to wear the costume all the time and get it dirty. If you wear a headdress, make sure you practice with it and that you have pinned it and discovered how to make sure it's going to stay exactly where you want it to stay when you gallop.

Don't be afraid to be outrageous with your costume or a little over-the-top. This is entertainment, and it is supposed to be entertaining on all levels. We're supposed to see good horseback riding with good technique on the maneuvers. We're supposed to see a costume that we find interesting and want to watch for 4 minutes, and we want to see choreography that shows you are dancing with your horse.

I intend to give the Choreography Award every year at the Colorado State Fair as I've done for the past 3 years. But I am also available to help either with music or choreography, and if you aren't far away, I'll be happy to come out to the ranch to help you practice it. I love doing this, and if I work with the choreography on any competing rider, then I'll have somebody else judge the freestyle performance, but I'll still give the \$100.00 cash prize.

Working with me is no guarantee of winning, but sometimes it helps to give you a better performance. I gave suggestions on choreography over the phone to Jessica Dooley, who won the championship at the Dodge Invitational this year. When I performed freestyle, my artistic scores were always higher than my technical scores. My goal is to see all of you score high on both.

Most of all, do a freestyle that you will enjoy riding and that will make you smile. Remember, this is a performance and when you get comfortable enough, you might find that you can do it smiling all the way through, which will pull the

audience into your performance. You probably have watched the Dodge Invitational Freestyle and if so, you will notice that some riders are more fun to watch, and they get the audience clapping. You don't have to "milk it," which is a theater term for *pushing* the audience to make them clap, but you can have the kind of fun and the kind of rhythm in your freestyle that makes them *want* to clap with you, and certainly wants to make them clap at the end. Above all, have fun!

Linda Seger grew up with music and drama, and has worked in the film industry for the last 30 years. She loves to create choreography, and she is available to help. Her e-mail is lsseger@aol.com. Begin thinking of your next freestyle at least several months before the next competition. Ride freestyle as often as you can, because riding to music will help all of your riding. But certainly if you are going to do a freestyle in September at the Youth Freestyle exhibition in Pueblo, start thinking of that freestyle in the spring--April or May of this year.