

Houlihan Colt Starting

A unique Buck Brannaman clinic goes beyond putting the first few rides on young horses.

Story by Mary McCashin • Photography by Nicole Poyo

August 1, 2017



A young horse gets accustomed to Cahill Ellenwood during the Houlihan Ranch Colt Starting clinic in Sheridan, Wyoming.

Red dust clouds swirl above a country road just outside of Sheridan, Wyoming, as a steady line of trucks and cars make their way to the third annual Houlihan Ranch Colt Starting Clinic. It's not your average colt starting. Houlihan Ranch is home to Buck and Mary Brannaman, and the event is organized by their daughter Reata.

Teenagers, senior citizens, owners, participants and auditors surround the 150 foot, cedar lined round corral as Buck Brannaman makes his way into the pen on his sorrel gelding, "Eddie." Soon, green colts are matched with clinic participants and introduced to basic ground work exercises. In the next four days, these colts will learn to accept a saddle and rider and respond to leg pressure and a snaffle bit. On the last day they will venture into the hills of the Brannamans' ranch.

To some this may seem like an incredibly daunting task, but Brannaman knows the talent and ability his participants possess. One of these participants is Wes Ferrazzi of Emigrant, Montana. Ferrazzi grew up around horses and wanted to make his living riding and training them.

"I read everything I could," he says. "I used to rent videos and make copies of them, unfortunately I was stealing them, but anything to get the knowledge."

Ferrazzi was raised in Minnesota, but to be closer to a horsemanship and roping culture he slowly made his way to Montana, where he worked on a ranch for five years. It was at this ranch that he met Buck Brannaman, who visited the ranch yearly to teach one of his multi-day clinics.

"I really admired him in the beginning, and I didn't really know why, but I knew he had something good going on."

The 2017 Houlihan Colt Starting was Ferrazzi's third time being invited to start colts under Brannaman's watchful eye.

"The caliber of people you're riding with is just unreal," he says. "You can do a lot more and Buck isn't as worried. It's really relaxing, we all look out for one another and make sure we don't get hurt."



Using his flag, Buck Brannaman helps Alicia Byberg-Landman turn her 3-year-old mare to the right.

Having a very flashy, touchy mare to start in the morning and a grulla gelding in the afternoon, Ferrazzi quickly became a spectator favorite and drew a significant amount of praise from Brannaman for the change in his horses in four days. But for Ferrazzi, it's always about the continual education and process of becoming a better horseman.

“In the moment it's how things feel, not so much waiting to be told what to do,” he says. “And I learn so much from watching not only what Buck does, but what other people are doing. For the people that really want to know what can be done, they need to come to this. It's totally different to watch it than to hear about it. This event is set up to be a notch above and to be better than a regular clinic. Buck expects more of us, and I believe in rising to meet that.”

Another spectator favorite at the clinic was Michael Sparling, who met Brannaman at a clinic in North Carolina nearly 10 years ago. Sparling was training horses, but wanted to improve his skills.

This year, his third to be invited to the colt starting clinic, Sparling started a five-year-old mustang named Maka.

“Maka a bit stand-offish, but had a quiet nature,” Sparling says. “Beneath that quiet, though, was the mustang instinct to flee. When he hit his limit, he would check out mentally and physically. He was big and had experience cutting out, so I had to interrupt that pattern. As soon as I was able to convince him to stay, he changed. There were many things we did over the course of four days that he didn’t understand, but he was now trying to figure them out. He was thinking, not just reacting. That was the big change.”

Sparling also credits the group setting for helping ease Maka at times.

“I always enjoy starting colts in a group like this,” he says. “It’s something you don’t get to do every day, and it makes progress easier. The colts go with the flow and support one another. And we get to help one another out those first few rides.”

Sparling makes his home in River Falls, Wisconsin, teaching and riding horses for the public. He hopes to be invited back to the clinic for many more years.

“I’m grateful to Buck for everything he has taught me and appreciate every time I get to ride with him,” he says. “[The clinic] is a unique experience, with the focus being on colts all day for four days. It is really impressive what you can get done in a few days without pushing or rushing. I’ve had several people tell me that watching the colt classes tied it all together for them. [By attending the clinic] you’ll meet some great people. You get to watch Buck flag colts, which I always enjoy. Seriously, there is so much to take in. You won’t be disappointed.”



On the fourth and final day, Brannaman takes clinic participants and their young horses to the hills and open country of Houlihan Ranch.

Alicia Byberg-Landman, who has been attending Brannaman clinics for 20 years, agrees that the clinic offers a unique experience.

“There is something to learn from each person in there,” she says. “I think the youngest one starting a colt was 8 years old, and the oldest might have been near 70. It’s pretty neat to be in the same arena with kids that are bendable, fear-less and just starting out, as well as the ones that have a bit more age on them but have a ton of wisdom and experience.”

At the clinic, Byberg-Landman started a 3-year-old Thoroughbred-Rhineland mare. At the end of the four days, they had learned a lot from one another.

“Things got pretty fast for a bit while getting her comfortable with a rope in motion,” she says. “If there is one thing I’m not afraid to do, it’s ask for help. I asked Nathan Grenier [one of Brannaman’s apprentices] for a little help. Seeing how he adjusted to fit where the horse was for that moment was another ‘ah-ha’ moment for me. I am glad Lucy had that spot in there because it will help me with many others in the future. When you have 4 days to get things work-ing, you find where your inadequacies are and that is what keeps me wanting more.”

Byberg-Landman, who runs a successful business just outside Nashville, Tennessee, says the clinic gives both parti-cipants and spectators an opportunity to not only absorb more about horsemanship, but also to learn more about themselves.

“I have heard people say they aren’t interested in colt starting, but I think it’s something everyone that is involved with horses should see,” she says. “Not everyone will start colts in their life, but if you can watch the process it sure will help you with riding your own horse at home.”

Dates have not yet been released for the 2018 Houlihan Colt Starting, but Ferrazzi, Sparling, and Byberg-Landman certainly look forward to returning.

Mary McCashin is a freelance writer based in North Carolina. View more images from the event at www.nicolepoyo.com/houlihan-ranch-colt-start

Tags: [Horsemanship](#) [colt starting](#) [Buck Brannaman](#) [Houlihan](#)