

Training horses and humans: Ranching expert relocates to DeWitt County



Story by [Sonny Long](#)

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Van Hargis approached the palomino carefully. The horse eyed him closely, then slowly lowered his head to let Hargis gently stroke it.

The last time Hargis tried that, only minutes before, the horse ran.

"Horses are so honest. They live in the moment. That's great stuff for humans to learn from them," said the 49-year-old horse trainer who recently relocated to DeWitt County from East Texas.

VaLi Performance Horses, on the Thomaston ranch owned by Lisa Martin, is now the home-base for Hargis' training facility.

"It was just time for a change," said Hargis. "I met Lisa about 12 years ago and she offered me the opportunity to come to South Texas."

Hargis had been operating from his Sulphur Springs ranch since 1992, but his exposure to horses came much earlier.

"I was about 4 when my step-dad put me on a horse," he said. "I am very thankful for that."

Hargis was still young when he first got paid for training a horse.

"At the ripe-old age of 12, I trained my first horse for money," Hargis said. "I rode it all summer long and the woman paid me \$300. I thought it was the greatest thing to get paid for what I had so much fun doing."

Hargis' early horse sense also came from being a member of 4-H, he said.

"4-H set the standard on the importance of fundamentals," he said. "You can apply basic fundamentals to any area, any expertise."

After attending college in Commerce, Hargis went into sales.

"It didn't take me long to come back to the horse business and figure out I had an aptitude to teach people," he said.

From an early age, Hargis had been competing in rodeos in almost all the timed events except barrel racing, but he was later drawn to another event that emerged on the horseman circuit - ranch horse versatility.

"I wanted to prove my horses beyond timed events," he said. "Ranch horse versatility proves that one horse and one rider can do multiple things, which quite frankly is what a good horseman should be able to do."

His interest in the event eventually resulted in a three-part instructional DVD on ranch horse versatility in 2004.

"Ranch horse versatility was ideal for me," he said. "It pays tribute to the old cowboy roots, the old ranch roots."

Hargis took his competitive experience to a larger stage in 2005 and 2006 as he competed in the international competition, Road to the Horse.

Three internationally known elite horse trainers and clinicians choose a horse from a pen of 10 and are pitted against each other in a variety of competitions, according to the event's website.

"It was an honor to be chosen to take part in the Road to the Horse for two consecutive years," Hargis said. "It was a great experience and a great educational opportunity."

Hargis said he and his horse received six standing ovations at the 2005 event, including when he announced to the audience his decision near the end of the competition not to lope the horse as was required.

"If it loped, I thought it might get spooked and buck. "It was a difficult horse and although we were in a position to win, I didn't want to push her too far and sacrifice the strides we had already made," he said.

It's that kind of dynamic with a horse that Hargis emphasizes as he travels the country speaking at horse fairs and clinics.

"It's not just about horse training, but studying horses at a different level to convey what they are trying to teach us. And help people understand horses better," Hargis said.

"If people understand horses better, then they understand that horses don't have any grudges against us or not being mean or stubborn, they are just being horses.

"Once we understand how horses click, they become easier to train. We begin to look at ourselves more closely and change our behavior and action and as a result get positive action from our horse," he said.

Other than traveling to events to teach, Hargis takes on a limited number of clients. His client lists include both men and women ranging in age from 7 to 63.

One of the toughest parts, Hargis said, is teaching people about their relationship with the horse.

"Horses make great companions, but they are not meant to be companions," he said. "First and foremost, it's a horse."

Hargis said establishing yourself as the "leader of the herd" is vital.

"Who's going to be the leader in this relationship?" Hargis asks his clients and students.

"I strongly recommend the human be the leader. You can be a good quiet, passive leader. It doesn't mean we aren't assertive, but balance it, and horses respect that," he said.

Hargis understands that he is not only training horses, but training people.

"The most important thing - enjoy your horse and the lessons they have to teach us," he said. "They are great teachers because they are so honest with us."

- To learn more about horse trainer Van Hargis or to contact him, visit www.vanhargis.com.