

# THE FULL NELSON

By Rick & Carolyn Kiesz

*Bob and Jolene Nelson are a team. They've been training horses a long time. They are best friends, fishin' buddies, horse trainers and they've been together 35 years! You just don't run into husband and wife cutting horse training teams every day of the week. We thought you'd enjoy getting to know them better. We also figured that an interview would be a good way to accomplish that. The Nelson's have a unique way of looking at the cutting horse "deal". They have an excellent program for those who want to go out and just have fun or for those who are super-serious about winning, as well as some great ideas for the cutting horse industry, as a whole. We melded these two great photographs together to make a point.*

*At the end of the story we have each photo separately because they are just too good not to let you see them as stand-alone pictures. So pull up a chair and get ready to see what you get with "THE FULL NELSON"!*



# THE FULL NELSON

**How did you two get together?**

**Jolene:** We were both involved in showing at Quarter Horse Shows. I was showing mainly in the Youth Division, but also in all the different events that they would offer. That's how I met Bob, at the Quarter Horse Shows. My folks couldn't afford to buy me a horse, so I went to work for a trainer. We worked horses and I'd show them in the Youth Division and afterward we'd sell them as Youth horses. (I did that from age 16-18.)

**Bob, years ago you used to show a lot of different events, right?**

**Bob:** I used to work for Ned Fleming in Topeka, KS. Then I went to work for Dean Smith in Council Grove, KS when I was in the service . . . and when I got out of the service I continued to work for Dean. Yes, I showed halter, pleasure, reining, and cutting . . . I was actually working for Dean Smith, when I met Jolene. We met in Kansas. Jolene is originally from Hutchison, KS and I'm from Red Bluff, CA. I saw her and thought she was kinda cute and eventually I talked her into marrying me. We've been married for 35 years.

**How long have you been at your current location?**

**Bob:** We've been here at Arrowhead Ranch in Medford, OR for about 12 years. Before that we had our own place in Red Bluff, CA.

**Jolene:** We were in Red Bluff for 14 years.

**Bob:** We were in Red Bluff when David Holmes offered us a deal we just couldn't refuse. So, we sold our place in Red Bluff and moved up here. Before that we worked at the Oxbow Ranch for Dan Lufkin in Prairie City, OR. Before that we were with Duane Pettibone in Pleasant Grove, CA and before that we worked for Skip Brown. Before that we were at Karen Russell's in Hutchison, KS.

**Right now we understand that you are both exclusively in cutting. Since you both**

**are training, are there certain things one of you does, or do you split it up, or do you combine doing everything?**

**Bob:** We both do everything?

**Bob, we understand that you used to show, but that now Jolene shows and you do more of the training thing and you both work with students. Is that right?**

**Bob:** I used to show and be on the road all the time. I had 2 Reserve World Champions, 3 NCHA Futurity Finalists, PCCHA Champions two different years and was the Champion in the Northwest Open Division . . . and had a 1983 World Champion NCHA . . .

**Jolene:** All that was weekend hauling.

**Bob:** Jolene likes to show right now and I like to train 'em. She can be gone at the shows, and we'll still have someone at home training horses. Here is what we do. In a "training week," a horse gets ridden five days a week and that's what we do if you're in our program. If the horse is not being ridden, then he's on "board." We can't really afford that, so one of us is home training. You won't see both of us at a show. If one of us is showing, there's still one of us to ride that horse at home. Either Jolene or myself is training. That is why we set it up that way. We saw things way back when we were at the Oxbow Ranch . . . we'd see horses out with different trainers and we noticed how things went; so we set up our deal a little different. Also, we don't own a horse. The reason we don't is as long as we're training for the public, I think there's a conflict of interest.

**So there's no showing against your good non-pro customers, like some trainers do?**

**Bob:** When we first started out, working at the Oxbow Ranch, Jolene had a chance to become a Non-Pro. She could have been a Non-Pro!

**Jolene**, "I don't know what I was thinking."  
(laughter)

**Bob**: We made a distinct decision NOT to do that. The reason we didn't do that is because she helps me ride. That is why Jolene never was a Non-Pro. She started out as a Pro. The reason for that was because the rule book says if you receive an income, directly or indirectly, from riding or training cutting horses, you cannot be a non-pro. So we never did do that.

**Jolene**: Also, they did not have Amateurs back when we started.

**So we won't see you competing against customers?**

**Bob**: That's exactly why we don't do it that way. We think that's a direct conflict of interest. The other thing we do not do is, we do not take commissions on sales. The reason we don't is because I do not want someone to think that I sold them a horse because I needed a commission. If I was going to take a commission, then I think that it should be done in writing just like in a real estate contract. What I do is, if I hear someone has a horse for sale and someone is looking to buy, I can put those two people together. With no commission, I can give an honest opinion on what I think of the horse. I've seen it where there is too much "hanky panky" on commissions. Now, I don't mind if other people take commissions. That's fine with me and most people take 10%. When I was at the Oxbow Ranch we'd be involved in deals where there were 2 trainers each trying to get a commission. The deal that went on with commissions was so bad that we just don't do it that way.

**What do you think about the Amateur Division continuing on in the NCHA? What's your opinion on that?**

**Bob**: Well, if they're going to maintain the same program that they have they need to keep the Amateur because the Amateur cannot compete with a lot of the Non-Pros. I think that somebody in cutting needs to go ahead and change the way that we look at the way we compete. Now, in roping they have "numbered" ropings. I think they should do the same thing in cutting. Until they do, there's always going to be a conflict. There needs to be a number for the rider and a number on the horse. It's going to have to start at the club level. Somebody's going to have to start it. It could be

done very easily. When they do that, everybody is going to have the same handicap where they're supposed to be and the same on the horses. Right now you have people who have a lot of money and they can spend a lot of money on a great horse and they go out there and kick butt. There are lots of people who aren't that good or who can't afford that and it makes them not want to keep cutting. I think that if we had a numbered system like they do at ropings, and have that in cutting, then when that happens, I think you're going to see cutting "explode"!

It's going to do several things; a #1, #2 or #3 rider will be able to go ahead and compete. He will know what level he's at. Right now what level are you at as an Amateur or as a Non-Pro? You have Non-Pros that are just starting and you have other Non-Pros that have won a million dollars. Putting them all in the same group is not good. They have been looking for an answer to the Non-Pro and Amateur deal for a long time. If they'd go to a numbered system . . . and a guy at a #5 is not doing well, he can appeal and get it down to a #4. If you have a #4 rider and #4 horse, you can compete at a #8 cutting. Now, if they do change it, I think you'll help the business tremendously! A #2 rider can have a #2 horse and he's not going to have to go out and spend a lot of money to go down the road and win. A lot of people don't care to go down the road every weekend, they just want to go out and have fun. But those other people who do want to compete to win and go down the road; they still have the opportunity to do that.

Another thing too, is that it would sell a lot of horses! 'Cause right now, what are you going to do with a #2 horse? Most people, unless it's not just a barn-burner, they aren't going to pay too much for it! But if they did that and you had a #2 horse that was doing really well, they could move it up to a #3 or #4 horse. Then you can really improve the value of the horse. When somebody calls up looking for a horse, they can say it's a #4, or #5 horse or whatever it is. I think when they do that cutting is going to "Boom"! It'll take a shot and go upwards like roping did!

**Jolene**: The weekend cuttings . . .

**Bob**: Yep, the weekend cuttings.

**That numbered system really seemed to make team roping take off, didn't it?**

**Bob:** They had a team roping the other day in Reno and they had 800 teams! It used to be that nobody wanted to go because the same guys were taking all the money! They had 800 teams! The cutters need to wake up and take a look at that. The NCHA isn't going to do it. It will have to get started at a club level. The first futurity that was held was held in the Northwest. The first Derby was put on by the Pacific Coast. Everything that starts, starts back here. I think that if this thing started back here on a club level that it would take off and start and go all the way across the United States so quick and so fast and it would be a tremendous boost to cutting!

I hope that some people will really seriously think about this. I think it should start right here in the Northwest. I've been thinking about that for the last 4 or 5 years, no . . . longer than that, I've been thinking about that for 12 years!

**When you talk about folks you've worked with, I am sure that some were your mentors. Who are your mentors?**

**Bob:** My mentors in life were my grandfather, Dan Lufkin, David Holmes and Ronald Reagan. In the horse world they were Dean Smith, Skip Brown, Shorty Freeman, Don Dodge, Buster Welch, Lindy Burch, Gene Suiter and Bobby Ingersoll, who is a great friend and a great mentor.

**Jolene:** For me it would be, first of all, Karen Russell, who got me started with the horses. She's the one who gave me the biggest start of my life. I'd also say that working with Bob and his ability to pass on what he's learned to me. Then when I got to showing more, Lindy Burch was really a strong person for me . . . for both of us. She built up my showing confidence. Also I'd have to say Shorty Freeman, who gave me the opportunity of riding some of his good horses, which were incredible!

**Who are your customers? Sounds like you deal with all levels.**

**Bob:** We have worked with and helped people who have never ridden before, all the way up. We've helped a lot of trainers and we have also helped a lot of kids. We work with all levels.

**Do you go to local club cuttings as well as NCHA affiliate shows?**

**Bob:** Yes.

**What are the advantages of working together as a husband and wife training team?**

**Bob:** Well, I think the biggest advantage of working as a husband and wife team is . . . well, ah . . . we're able to . . . well, there's advantages and disadvantages . . . (laughing.....)

**Jolene:** One of the advantages is that if a horse doesn't fit me as well, it might fit Bob better. Another advantage is that we can be a sounding board for each other as to what we think looks good or doesn't look good in working with a particular horse.

**Bob:** Another advantage is that if one of us is showing the other one is here working with and training the horses. We are pretty much on the same wave-length most of the time. No two people ride alike, but we work it out pretty good. I'm fairly aggressive and Jolene really works to make 'em pretty solid. If her horse needs to be tuned up I can do that and at the same time if I have one that I need to lay off of a while, she can go ahead and ride it and get it solid. So, I think that's worked out very well for us.

**Jolene:** I always say that Bob is the horse trainer for me. **He's my horse trainer.**

**When giving lessons, does having two different people to choose from work out well in dealing with customers?**

**Bob:** That helps a lot. I'm pretty intense and Jolene is probably more laid-back in the lessons than I am. Whenever I am giving a lesson, I want someone to really reach down inside 'em to really kinda "push" a little bit and Jolene is, for a lot of people, better. Between the two of us, we can find out what level a person wants to be at. Not everyone wants to be pushed. If a person wants to go out and have fun and take their time getting there, then Jolene is really good and has more patience than I do with that.

**Jolene:** Bob doesn't understand people who go out, buy expensive trailers and trucks and nice clothes and say they want to cut, but don't really have the work ethic to focus and keep after it, to win. I don't identify with those folks, but I can understand that there are people who like horses and they like cutting and they just want to have fun and winning is not the main focus.

**So whoever comes to your place to take lessons, kinda gets the best of both worlds?**

**Bob:** Well, they either get Jolene or me! (laughing) Like I said, if I have somebody that's tryin'. . . if someone is really serious, I'm out there workin' with 'em. I'm tellin' 'em exactly what I'm thinkin'! I hate to waste my time and somebody else's money. If they're really serious, then I'm their man! When I'm ridin' my mind is goin' about 300 miles an hour. I'm just telling 'em what I'm thinkin'. I don't cuss at 'em . . . I will yell, so they can hear me, and some of 'em might take that wrong, but . . . I want to make sure that if I'm at one end of the arena and they're at the other; I want to make sure that they understand and hear what I'm sayin'! I've never yelled at somebody because I'm mad at 'em. Just "Get off your ass and get to work!"

**What do you think about the local club?**

**Bob:** I'll tell you what, it is the foundation of everything we have in this sport!

**Besides the number system that you talked about, what do you think that the local clubs can do to make things better? Some trainers don't like to go to club cuttings because the ground may be bad or they have bad cattle and they don't want to work their young horses under those conditions. What can clubs do so more trainers will bring their young horses there?**

**Bob:** I think what they need is more people involved and more help. Clubs need more sponsors, more help, more people getting out and getting involved and more places to go to. The ground is important! The quality of cattle is important, but if you've got people out there putting on shows and trying to learn what's right you can make suggestions and I think they'll learn.

**Do you think it's important for trainers to go to these local cuttings and help so new cutters can see what it's like when it's done right? If you have experienced herd help that can give new people help and encouragement so they get a better run going, won't they improve?**

**Bob:** I definitely agree. I think that a lot of trainers out there today think that all that's out there is aged events and I don't think that's right. We've helped a lot of people get into this business over the years. We've

been training now for a long time, close to 40-some years. It's about education and teaching people. I remember a long time ago we used to go cuttin' in a little place - and they had all these world champions there. I remember when we were in Kansas, some of those quarter horse shows in Kansas had Matlock and Buster, Sonny Perry and all these world champions that would be there. There'd be 30 to 40 horses in the "open." In those big shows, I remember going to Oklahoma City one time when we were there 'til 3 o'clock in the morning and the cutting was still going on, at a Quarter Horse Show. I think that it's kinda nice if you go to an aged event for a customer, but those customers are payin' us to do what they would like to do themselves! It's all just a matter of what level you want to cut at. It's all cutting.

It's about education and getting new people in this business and having them enjoy it! As professionals, that's what we need to encourage. We need to encourage new people and let them ride and teach them how to ride. I remember a long time ago I went to a Bass Fishing Tournament. It was a Pro-Am. I was the amateur and there were 3 days that I was with 3 different pros. That was a real awakening for me because two of the pros could give a shit if I was in the boat, they were fishin' for themselves, but the other guy was tryin' to help me be a part of that team. That was a real big awakening to me about how professional people treat amateurs. I don't care how small the show is. . . or if it's a club cutting or whatever it is, there are good trainers going out there helping and those are the people who are helping this sport!

**Do you know Luke Bakey, in California? He's one of those kinda guys. He is so helpful.**

**Bob:** Yeah, I know Luke real well. He's been a great ambassador for cutting. There's a lot of trainers out there that do that. When I talk about trainers doing negative things, they are in the minority, only a few out there . . . Guys like Luke Bakey, Bobby Ingersoll, Shorty Freeman, Buster and Lindy, those people are professionals and those are the ones who have helped the sport! That's what it is about. It's about helping everybody, not just the people who have money or the ones who have the good horses. I tell you what, we've tried to help everybody.

**We heard about a cutting that had \$5,000 added and you mentioned that those who organized it did not compete. Can you tell us about that?**

**Bob:** Yeah, that was us. We had a cutting a long time ago back at the Oxbow Ranch, Dan Lufkin in Prairie City, OR. Dan is such a neat guy! At that cutting we had it out there in the middle of nowhere. It was Oregon, Northwest, NCHA and Pacific Coast approved. We had \$5,000 added and a lot of people complained because they said that everybody could go to that one show and win the money and end up winning the saddle that year, but that never happened. There were several reasons why that never happened. We invited everybody to that show. We put up the added money. We hired the judges, and we did not show at our own show because you don't invite someone to your house to go ahead and take their money. So that is the reason why we did that. We did not show at our own show. We put it on because we wanted people to come to Oxbow and to show them the hospitality we had there at that place and I think it went over really, really well.

**Do you use cattle, buffalo, mechanical or the string in your training program?**

**Bob:** Well, we use cattle and we have used buffalo. I use the HydraBull. I really like the HydraBull. We have lots of cattle on our ranch and we do teach our horses to work on a flag, but I do not like a flag. The only reason I teach horses to use the flag is if I go to a show and the practice cattle are bad, I'll work a flag. I use the Hydra-Bull. I can get more done with that hydra-bull than any flag. I don't use the flag very much. You really have to have lots of cattle and we've been fortunate to have lots of cattle here.

You know, we have a great sport and we have a lot of great people in this sport, but we are always looking for ways to make it better. I know on the amateur deal there were some hard feelings on that, but again, I go back to the numbered system. I really hope that some of these clubs really take a look at that. I think it is something that can revive this sport and really do good things for cutting and make it an even greater sport, if we go to that numbered system! Everybody wants to compete, but they want to be able to compete on the level they are at. If they can do it that way, so that there is a level playing field, that's all anybody wants, just to have a fair shot . . . The way the system is, tell me, what is a non-pro?

Well, it could be someone who rides 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, has a great source of cattle and a trainer helping them and they are so rich they don't have to work, OR it might be someone who has to work their butt off during the week just to be able to earn enough money to show.

**Bob:** That's my point. With the numbered system you would eliminate all that.

**Right. When this Amateur deal first came out, competing on money won seemed kinda fair, but lots of people said if NCHA does this without any discussion "We're out of it!" What do you think?**

**Bob:** If they do it on money won - here's what will happen. When I first started cutting, there used to be a \$1,500 Novice and a \$300 Novice and \$100 Novice - then they decided to change that and go to the \$3,000 and the \$10,000 and then the \$2,000 limit. I have a customer in the barn who's in the \$500 Novice, okay. He could go out of the \$500 Novice next year. He may be out of it now, I'm not sure. Now he's going to jump to the \$10,000 and there's been people in the \$10,000 for 3 to 4 years, or longer. Then after he gets out of the \$10,000, there's been people in that level for 10 - 11 years. So what's going to happen is he's going to go on his little ol' horse right there and he can't be competitive. He's not looking to go out there and win Fort Worth, all he wants to do is go out and have a little moment of glory and he can't do it because he is not competing on a level playing field. He doesn't have the money to go out and spend \$50,000 and get a good horse. He has a nice horse and he's having fun on his horse. It's about having fun. Everybody has to remember it's about cutting. If everybody thinks they're going to get into cutting and go out there and become multi-millionaires and get rich, forget it! They're doing it like a golfer plays golf or a fisherman goes fishing. Everyone has their own little hobbies.

**Yep, you know amateur golf has a pretty decent system for competing.**

**Bob:** They have a handicap. We have no handicap in our sport.

**The golfers handicap is very similar to the ropers number system.**

**Bob:** Absolutely! It's based on how you play. The golfer's handicap is based on how YOU

play. You can have a 10 handicap and still go out there and be competitive. We don't have that in our sport and that's what hurts our sport.

**Outside of cutting, what do you do for fun?**

**Bob:** I fish. When I was still in Sacramento, I'd guide on the Sacramento River. Everybody thought I'd quit training horses. What I'd do is start at 4 in the morning and fish until 3 in the afternoon and then ride until 11:30 at night. I was raised on a trout farm. I used to fish since the time I was 4 years old. We like to fish for big fish. It is something outside of cutting that we both really like to do. We have a great river right outside our backyard. We have all these great rivers on the coast. I can't think of any other thing that is more fun and more relaxing than going fishing.

**Jolene:** But Bob doesn't really relax when fishing. It's competitive for him!

**Bob:** I get very serious about fishing. Anything that I do I am serious about. I learned how to fish, fly fishing, but I like to catch fish. I've fly fished in Scotland, a lot in

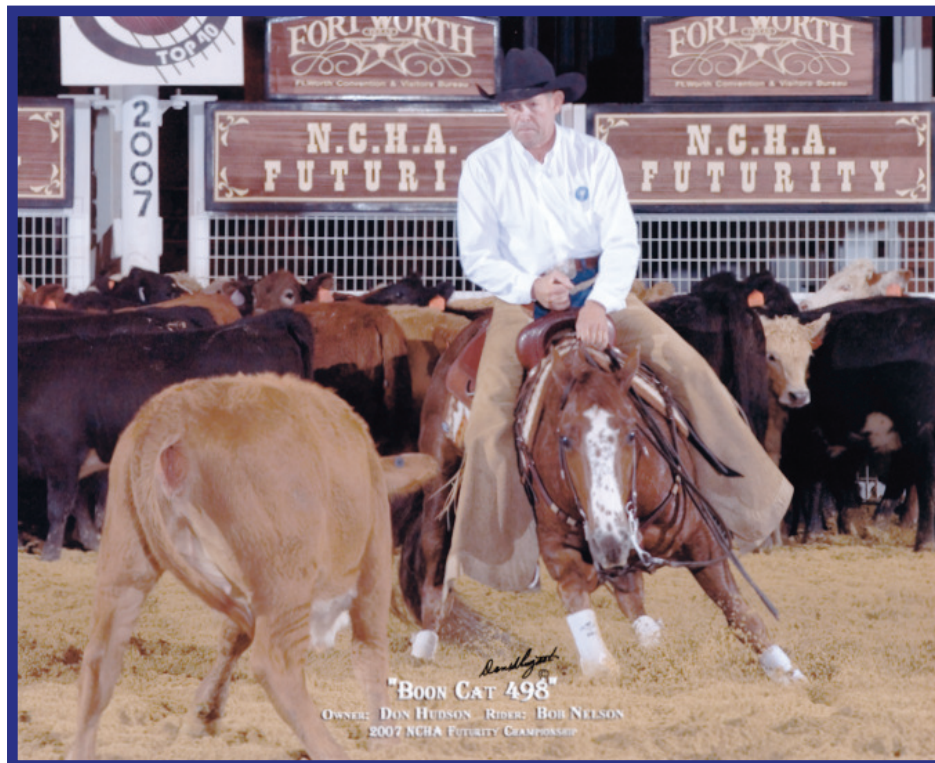
California, and we've been Salmon fishing in Alaska, California, Oregon, Washington and been to Mexico for Marlin, Caman Islands for fish there and Canada for Walleye the last couple of years. I just like to fish.

**One more thing - I figured that most of your customers are from your area, but I read in one of the standings that you had a customer from Texas. Can you talk about that?**

**Jolene:** Yes, I ride for Clyde Willmot. He's been a customer for over 20 years. He owns Little Royal Boon. It's been a long-standing relationship with him and the horses that he is breeding - the grandmother of Little Royal Boon was a horse that we trained for Clyde. We've just had a great relationship with him and consider him a good friend. We are blessed to have trained horses for him for this amount of time.



Little Royal Boon  
Owner: Clyde Wilmott  
Rider: Jolene Nelson



"Boon Cat 498"  
Owner: Don Hudson Rider: Bob Nelson  
2007 NCHA Futurity Champion