

Get Ready for the Fair

THE MIND BEFORE THE FEET: A CONVERSATION WITH CHRIS COX

When you speak with Chris Cox, you aren't just talking to a horse trainer. You're talking to a man who has spent a lifetime translating the silent language of the horse into a dialect that humans can actually understand. As the Midwest Horse Fair approaches—an event Cox describes as “renowned” and a staple of his limited travel schedule—he sat down with Emily Kitching of Eclectic Horseman to discuss the evolution of his craft, the grueling reality of physical recovery, and why the “search” is often more important than the “find.”

A FAMILY AFFAIR AND A GLOBAL REACH

Chris Cox is, by his own admission, a man of diversification. Whether he's at his ranch in Wyoming or his home base in Texas, the horse is the thread that stitches his world together. But look closer, and you'll see it isn't a solo act. His wife and children are deeply embedded in the business, from the daily rides at the barn to the Lead Changes foundation they started a decade ago.

“I've encompassed and embodied my family in the business,” Chris says, noting with a hint of fatherly pride that his kids have recently taken over the youth clinics. “We don't take in outside horses anymore; we just ride our own. We have way too many horses and a few cows, and it's been inspiring to have people come to the ranch so I don't have to travel as much.”

For those heading to the Midwest Horse Fair in Madison, Wisconsin, Chris represents a rare opportunity to see a master at work. He only does a couple of major events a year now, focusing instead on high-level instruction and personal horsemanship.

THE GIFT OF THE STRUGGLE

One of the most revealing moments of the interview touched on Chris's personal history with dyslexia. Rather than viewing it as a hurdle, he sees it as the foundation of his empathy as a teacher.

“I believe with dyslexia, it's actually a gift,” Chris explains. “Some of the best horses I've ever had were the ones that struggled at the beginning. But when they got it, they kept it.”

This philosophy extends to his human students. Chris has



spent the last several years focusing more on his communication skills than his own riding. He understands that everyone learns differently—some through sight, some through feel, and some through a “different angle” of explanation.

“When you struggle at the beginning, you tend to try harder, you tend to search more. With all those experiences, you've gone down different thought processes and different techniques. Then you say, “I understand it.”

TRAINING THE MIND, NOT JUST THE BODY

If there is a “Cox Doctrine,” it is this: horsemanship is about the mind; horse training is about the body. Chris is quick to point out that many horses are simply “reacting” to pressure rather than “responding” to a request. To him, a horse that reacts is just putting up with the human. A horse that responds has had its thought process aligned with the rider's.

“I'm less about the mouth and more about the body and feet today,” he says. “The rein is the first cue, but it's not the mouth. It's the rein through the neck, through the shoulders, to the feet. The mouth only comes into play if the neck doesn't work.”

This shift in perspective is what Chris calls the “advanced stage” of horsemanship. It's the difference between a mechanical turnaround and a horse that thinks its way through a turn.

THE “FULL STOP”: RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

Perhaps the most harrowing part of Chris's recent journey has nothing to do with a difficult colt. In November, Chris underwent a massive, 10-hour back surgery to replace his lumbar discs with artificial ones. It was his fifth back surgery, and the stakes couldn't have been higher.



"I was told I'd never be able to ride again," Chris reveals. The surgery was so complex that it required an anterior approach—meaning surgeons went through his abdomen to reach his spine. They discovered a herniated disc had actually punctured his spinal cord, leaking fluid into his system.

But true to form, Chris isn't looking for sympathy. Just four months later, he's back in the saddle. "Yesterday was the first day I rode at the ranch," he said. "I'm a little sore in the muscles you don't use when you don't ride, but it felt good."

This brush with a permanent "grounding" has only sharpened his focus. It's a reminder to "not sweat the small stuff" and to appreciate the lifestyle he's built.

TEACHING THE NEXT GENERATION

Chris's eyes are firmly on the future, which looks like his children. His daughter, who he describes as an "honor roll student and excellent communicator," and his son are now the primary instructors for the youth clinics.

"A kid has more of a tendency to grasp ahold of something if kids are teaching kids," Chris notes. "They're not as nervous; they feel a little more comfortable."

When asked what defines success for him these days, Chris

doesn't point to a trophy room or a win in the cutting arena. Success is much simpler: safety and substance.

"Success is when they stay safe, they leave, and they take home things that benefit them and mend their horse," he says. "I've carried a big ego for a long time, and once I learned to let that go, I became a better person and a better horseman."

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE MIDWEST HORSE FAIR

For those attending Chris's sessions in Wisconsin, don't expect a rigid, "factory-style" demonstration. Chris doesn't believe in schedules when it comes to living beings.

"If people ask for a schedule—what are we going to do that day?—I say, 'I don't train a horse that way, and I don't train people that way.' It's not a factory. What I think you need is what I'm going to work on."

Chris remains the messenger, bringing a blend of faith, family, and hard-earned wisdom to the arena. Whether you're a rancher, recreational rider, or retiree looking for a better connection with your horse, his message is clear: train yourself first, and the horse will follow.

For more information visit www.chris-cox.com.

ABOUT MIDWEST HORSE FAIR

Since 1979, with a goal to serve as America's epicenter for the equine community, the Midwest Horse Fair strives to provide the ultimate experience for equine enthusiasts and the public through exposition, education, and entertainment. As the largest three-day horse fair in the U.S., it caters to both Western and English riders. The Midwest Horse Fair is owned by the Wisconsin Horse Council, a nonprofit organization that promotes the equine industry in the state of Wisconsin. Proceeds from the fair benefit the Wisconsin Horse Council for grants and scholarships, trail improvements, leadership programs, and communication to help future growth and development of the equine industry. The 2026 fair is scheduled to take place April 17-19 at the Alliant Energy Center in Madison, Wisconsin. For more information: MidwestHorseFair.com.

