One Ride at a Time

The arena lights in Spanish Fork, Utah, shone brighter than usual for Eva Wathen in the fall of 2025, early in her second year on the Utah State rodeo team. She sat deep in the saddle on her barrel horse, Wyatt, with the reins relaxed in her hands. She worked to quiet the familiar voice in her head that demanded perfection. Throughout most of her college rodeo career at Utah State University, Wathen had ridden cautiously, gripping for control, afraid of making mistakes. She believed that if she could manage every stride, the perfect run would follow.

Minutes earlier, her coach, Hillary Bair, had challenged her directly: “Your horse is capable. You are, too. Stop riding him like he’s a colt. Stop riding conservatively.”

Those words struck hard. Wathen had always thought control was essential—tight reins, precise cues, and no room for error. But in that moment, something changed. She whispered a prayer, not for a win, but for clarity. With faith in God and in Wyatt, she chose to let go.

When the gate opened, she no longer focused on perfection. She stopped worrying that her horse couldn't do it, because deep down, she always knew he could. As the gate opened, Wathen urged Wyatt forward without hesitation. He turned sharply around the first barrel, then the second and third. The run wasn’t perfect; it was messy but genuine. For the first time in a long while, Wathen felt free. She had trusted her horse instead of trying to micromanage him, and Wyatt had delivered.

“It was kind of messy,” she said later with a laugh. “But it has been my most memorable run by far.”

That afternoon in Spanish Fork came early in Wathen’s second year on the Utah State rodeo team, but its impact has stretched far beyond a single run. Six months later, the lesson still shapes how she trains, competes, and handles setbacks. It marked the moment she realized the illusion many riders chase — the belief that they can control every factor in a sport where a 1,200-pound animal is half the equation. In rodeo, as in many parts of life, progress rarely comes from forcing outcomes. True performance, she learned, comes from patience, trusting the process, and building something steadier: partnership, confidence, and consistency earned over time.

Wathen didn’t grow up in a rodeo family. No one in her household owned horses. She began taking riding lessons at age seven, drawn to horses in a way she still can’t fully explain. Through 4-H, she learned the basics of care and competition, soaking up knowledge from mentors who taught her how to listen to the horse beneath her.

Her trainer, Dylan Heishman, focused on the technical details that separate good from great. But progress wasn't always straightforward. "It's a process," Wathen said. "Sometimes you take one step forward and two steps back. You never know what is going to happen day to day."

The lesson became clear through the horses that shaped her into a rider who trusts herself, adjusts when things don't go as planned, and continues to work through each challenge.

Wyatt was the horse that taught her how to ride. A 16-hand free-running project horse, he revealed every flaw in her riding early on. If Wathen tensed up, overrode him, or made even a small mistake during a run, she could certainly feel it, and he made sure she noticed. He didn't let her hide from what she still needed to improve as a rider. Working with him pushed her out of her comfort zone and forced her to become a better rider, one honest ride at a time. Their connection didn't fully develop until her senior year of high school, built through repetition and humility. "Hard work does pay off," she said. "But only if you're willing to stick with it during the times when it doesn't feel that way."

Another horse, Typsy, came into Wathen's life in eighth grade. She was a cutting-bred mare with plenty of cow sense and just as much attitude. When things clicked, Wathen could swing her leg over, nod her head, and trust Typsy to get the job done, but it didn't always come easy. At the gate, Typsy would react and refuse to settle, turning each run into a challenge before it even began. After months of frustration, Wathen later learned that ulcers were a major cause of the issues. Just as they began to find their rhythm, her freshman year of college brought another setback. Typsy tore a ligament and was sidelined for months, leaving Wathen wondering when or if the momentum they had worked for would return.

College rodeo increased the pressure. Large arenas offered one chance per run, with teammates watching from the sidelines. Wathen often felt out of sync, ready when her horse wasn't or solid on the horse, but second-guessing herself. Injuries, box problems, and countless practices pushed her to confront the limits of control. She couldn't dictate every stride. Eventually, she stopped trying. Instead, she focused on what she could control: preparation, consistency, and mindset.

By the time Spanish Fork came around, the foundation was laid. All that remained was trust.

Wathen's breakthrough resonates throughout the arena. Many riders come in believing that control equals success. The wiser ones learn that forcing a horse only creates resistance. Real wins come from partnerships built one ride at a time.

For Kadence Martin, that insight began at a young age and grew deeper through nearly a decade with her main horse, Twix. She received him as a two-year-old; he's now 11. What spectators see today is a calm, confident horse backing smoothly into the box. What they don't see is the years of intentional and patient work with Twix.

When starting a young horse, Martin begins slowly. Groundwork comes first to soften them and build trust before she ever asks for speed. The first rides center on movement and feel. Roping

doesn't come until later, after tracking dummy sleds, working slow calves, and patiently teaching the horse how and when to stop.

Not every horse learns the same way. Some get anxious in the box, some dislike the sled, and others stress when the chute pops open. The same method doesn't work for all. Martin has learned to adjust the way she asks for something without changing what she is asking for.

"You can't make a 1,200-pound animal do what they don't want to do," she says. "It never works out."

She learned this the hard way with one of her first breakaway horses, a slow chestnut horse that refused to babysit her. Instead of easy wins, he demanded better timing and intention. At the time, it frustrated her. In hindsight, he made her a stronger athlete.

Even after winning state titles, Martin faces mental slumps and seasons that don't click, especially with younger horses that require starting over. Success isn't about repeating last year's formula. It's the unseen discipline: raking arenas before practice, working through invisible progress in winter months, and choosing patience when frustration tempts her to force things.

While some riders learn the value of trust during competition, Meaghan Porritt found it through a gradual change in perspective. Growing up in Idaho, she competed in breakaway roping and barrel racing throughout high school, but her earliest rides were on a stubborn pony named Molly. As a nervous rider, she tried to control every step by pulling on the reins and bracing for mistakes. This tension made things harder.

Her mindset shifted when her grandparents bought her a young horse, and she started learning from horseman Jack Foresberg. One idea stuck with her and changed how she approached riding. "The more you use your reins, the less they use their brains," Porritt said. This reframed her role in the saddle. Instead of forcing a response, she focused on teaching the horse to think. This shift allowed confidence to take the place of fear and partnership to replace control.

Even now, Porritt uses that philosophy each time she works with horses for fun. She focuses on groundwork, exercises like counterbending to improve flexibility, and finishing each ride on a positive note, even when progress seems small. The goal is to build understanding rather than rush results. As a schoolteacher, she sees the same principle outside the arena. Horses, like students, respond to patience and guidance much better than to force. Small successes build confidence, and confidence encourages growth.

For Porritt, the shift in mindset she learned in the saddle continues to shape how she approaches both horses and people, with patience, consistency, and trust.

Patty Green grew up around horses and can't remember a time without them. Her understanding evolved from simply riding to something deeper. "People say you break a horse," she said. "But you don't break them. You build trust and respect."

To her, that difference alters everything.

For Green, training is about communication, not domination. The goal—a soft stop, a clean turn, lightness in the bridle—remains the same, but the approach shifts with each horse's personality. Sensitive horses need a light ask; bolder ones may need clearer boundaries. Rush the process, and trust crumbles. Rebuilding it takes much longer than creating it.

She once let frustration guide her responses, pushing harder when things went wrong. Now she steps back, dismounts if necessary, and treats problems like a math equation: retrace steps, identify what was missed, and strengthen the foundation. Frustration only deepens confusion. Patience and consistency make the right thing easy and the wrong thing understandable without instilling fear.

In the end, none of these women measures success by how tightly they can control a run. Wathen discovered in Spanish Fork that trusting Wyatt mattered more than riding perfectly. Martin respects the power of her horses, realizing the best moments happen when both choose to work together. Porritt carries that lesson beyond competition, believing patience and guidance create lasting confidence. Green views training as a partnership that starts from the ground up instead of breaking spirits.

The crowd sees the eighteen seconds of speed around the barrels, or the two-second loop thrown in breakaway roping. What they miss is the true story. The slow circles in empty arenas, the windy days when progress feels lacking, and the conscious decision to regroup instead of reacting in anger. Rodeo may look like a sport of raw power and domination, but its foundation is quieter and more enduring.

You can't force a connection with a horse. You can't rush trust. You can only build it through humility, repetition, and respect, one ride at a time.