



Dollie Horst on RMHA registered/certified mare MMR's Cover Girl aka "Annie" at a Cowboy Dressage Clinic in Colorado. Photograph by [Richard Horst](#).

Did you know that Cowboy Dressage welcomes naturally gaited horses? Among the people I've met through cyber space since launching [NaturallyGaited.com](#) is Dollie Horst who just returned from the 2015 Cowboy Dressage World Finals with her naturally gaited Rocky Mountain mare, Annie. I asked Dollie if she would share her story with us about how she became involved with gaited horses and the path which led her to Gaited Cowboy Dressage. I think you'll love what she has to say about Cowboy Dressage, its training philosophy, and the people who have taken the Cowboy Dressage "handshake" to live out its lifestyle. —Jennifer Klitzke

Gaited Cowboy Dressage: My Journey Begins

By Dollie Horst, Guest Writer

My introduction to naturally gaited horses came five years ago when my husband and I were offered a management position at **Mountain Magic Ranch**, a private Rocky Mountain Gaited Horse ranch in Three Forks, Montana.

Before that, non-gaited horses like thoroughbreds, AQHAs, APHAs, and BLM mustangs filled my riding background—mostly for trail riding, packing, reining, and working with cows. Like most non-gaited horse people, I thought gaited horses were just, let's say, *different*. But with my new job working with mountain gaited horses and my love for anything "horse," I kept an open mind and willingness to learn.

Meeting the Mountain Gaited Horses

My husband and I have done a lot of mountain riding and pack trips. We immediately saw the value gaited mountain horses brought to "the hills." These horses can cover country like no other breed we had worked with, and

their cool temperaments are exactly what you need when you're 33 miles into the wilderness.

When I began training the **Rocky Mountain** and **Kentucky Mountain** gaited breeds, their exceptional learning capacity really stood out. Overall, they have been the most willing, level headed, intelligent horses I have ever worked with. Not only do they learn twice as fast as the non-gaited breeds I've trained, but they seem to retain their schooling with less repetition.

Since gaited horses were new to me coming into this job, I held true to my training philosophy that "a horse is a horse first." Whether gaited or non-gaited, my goals were the same: develop a soft, supple, relaxed partnership which is based on trust and mutual understanding. After that, I began to recognize the natural four-beat gait, and then train, develop, and certify the gait in the young horses and the horses newly started under saddle. I have found that most people who are interested in the gaited mountain breeds are looking for smooth, soft, willing trail partners.

Introduction to Cowboy Dressage

I don't ride in a fancy saddle, just a well fitting one. I don't use a special bit, just a snaffle or bitless bridle. I like to ride on a loose rein or light contact. I love to lope the gaited horses I ride. I respect the time it takes to build a solid foundation and master a maneuver before progressing to a more challenging one. I strive for the ultimate partnership and develop a seamless communication between me and my horse as if we become one in the same. While I love this method of training gaited horses to be trail partners, something seemed missing. I longed for a show venue which aligned with my training philosophies and would showcase the philosophies and would showcase the multiple talents of gaited mountain horses. Little did I know that what I had longed for had already been coined "soft feel" by Eitan Beth-Halachmy, the founder of **Cowboy Dressage**.

Then in June 2015, I learned of a Cowboy Dressage clinic taught by **Dr. Jenni Grimmitt, DVM** and held at **Sleeping Willow Ranch** in Stevensville, MT. What I knew of

Cowboy Dressage piqued my curiosity, so my husband and I made the 3-1/2 hour drive to audit. Little did I know, this decision would become life-changing.

Listening to Dr. Grimmert explain the Cowboy Dressage principles and philosophy, I couldn't stop nodding and smiling. Cowboy Dressage is not just a riding discipline or competition; it is a way of life. Cowboy Dressage is a commitment in how we treat our horses, and how we treat each other—everyday, anywhere—regardless if anyone is around or not. It is a commitment to the development of the horse as an individual, at a speed the horse can grasp. Cowboy Dressage transcends training exercises; it is the fundamental relationships between you, your horse, and others.

Membership in Cowboy Dressage is represented in a virtual “handshake” instead of paying joiner’s fees. The **Cowboy Dressage Handshake** is your word to pledge to “try” to:

- become the person others can trust with your handshake and your word.
- exemplify the Cowboy Dressage way of life and find the courage to chase your dreams.
- not allow defeat when faced with setbacks in your life and your horsemanship.



From Left to Right: Dr. Jenni Grimmert DVM, Dollie Horst, Trish Knight enjoying the comradery and friendship that is Cowboy Dressage. Photograph by **Richard Horst**.

- treat all horses and people with integrity and kindness.
- look for the “try” in your horses and always reward them.
- look for the “try” in people as you travel down your horsemanship path.

When you pledge this handshake, you become a member of the Cowboy Dressage World and you ride together with others who have also done the same, including its founders Debbie and Eitan Beth-Halachmy, Lyn Moe and Garn Walker.

I had finally found what I had been

yearning for! The girls at Sleeping Willow Ranch must have noticed, because they graciously let me ride their horses just so that I could participate in the clinic. I will never forget their kind gesture. *Seriously, who lends their horse to someone they had just met, so that they could ride, not just audit a clinic?!* People who have pledged the Cowboy Dressage Handshake—that’s who! Thanks to Shannon, Debbie, and Dr. Grimmert, I left the clinic that day completely engulfed in Cowboy Dressage and couldn’t wait to share it with my gaited four-legged friends!

Returning home I began applying what I had learned at the clinic with my registered/certified Rocky Mountain mare, MMR’s Cover Girl (aka, Annie). She had been started under saddle in May, and what better foundation could there be for a green horse then one of “soft feel”? On top of that, Annie has a great mind and confirmation for Cowboy Dressage as well.

In September and October, I brought Annie to two different **Cowboy Dressage of Colorado** clinics taught by the Cowboy Dressage founder himself, my new friend Eitan Beth-Halachmy. Eitan was happy to see a gaited horse at the clinics and welcomed us wholeheartedly, as did the other non-gaited riders!



May 9, 2015 Annie’s first ride, Dollie Horst aboard. Val Geissler snubbing on his BLM mustang “Smoke.” Photograph by **Richard Horst**.



Dollie Horst and Annie pictured with Cowboy Dressage Founder, Eitan Beth-Halachmy. Photograph by **Richard Horst**.

At the clinics, Annie and I learned the ‘ins-and-outs’ of riding the Cowboy Dressage tests; as well as exercises we could do to improve our communication and relationship in order to thrive in any riding discipline. Eitan is an incredible teacher and someone I feel so grateful to work with. His vast knowledge is delivered humbly through wit, humor, and a go-getter mentality that is empowering. He makes everyone feel

equal, and what he recognizes most, is not the ability, but the “try.”

Annie and I have reached new levels of trust and partnership. Cowboy Dressage has helped me develop a better seat as a means of communication with my horse, and soft contact helps Annie understand more clearly what I am asking of her. She is pliable and bendable to my slightest cues. Her movement and transitions are more fluid and understood. Her gaits are more balanced and rhythmic, with the ability to shorten and lengthen her strides without changing speed. Her natural four beat (intermediate) gait, is smooth and accomplished through light, soft contact. Annie knows what is expected of her and where she needs to be.

Through Cowboy Dressage, Annie and I have learned and accomplished so much in such a short period of time, as have the other gaited mountain horses I work with. In fact, gaited horses

thrive with this concept of “soft feel,” and I strongly believe have the most to gain from Cowboy Dressage!

Cowboy Dressage Shows

Not only did I travel to three Cowboy Dressage clinics in 2015; Annie and I competed at three Cowboy Dressage shows. Two shows were held in Colorado where Annie and I won the Amateur Gaited divisions.

The third, and most recent show was the 2015 Cowboy Dressage World Finals in Rancho Murieta, California, which drew over 900 entries. At first I hesitated to compete at the World Finals. I wondered if I was ready or if I was good enough, but Cowboy Dressage has helped me put aside those demons and give it a “try.” One of the most valuable lessons I have learned in my horsemanship and life this year is that accomplishment begins with the decision to “try.” That we did. At the Cowboy Dressage World



Dollie Horst on RMHA registered/certified mare MMR’s Cover Girl aka “Annie” at a Cowboy Dressage Show in Brighton, CO. Photograph by **Richard Horst**.



Dollie Horst riding RMHA registered/certified mare MMR's Cover Girl aka "Annie" on the first day of the Amateur Gaited Classes - Cowboy Dressage World Finals 2015 in Rancho Murieta, CA. Photograph by [Richard Horst](#).

Finals, Annie and I won the *Reserve Highpoint Champion* in the Amateur Gaited Division.

As a participant at these events, I believe Cowboy Dressage is here to stay, and it is growing at an incredible rate—gaited, non-gaited, all breeds, all associations, all ages and people from all over the world of all walks of life. It is truly an inclusive group of liked-minded, kind, and supportive people who are in it for the horses, one another, and the betterment of horsemanship in general.

The Cowboy Dressage World Finals particularly, was unlike anything I had ever experienced in the horse show world. Not once did I meet someone in passing who didn't say, "hello" or "how are you" or "nice ride." Nowhere did I see harsh equipment or rough riding. Never did I see anyone "taking it out" on his or her horse at the barn, warm up arenas, and show areas alike. In fact, the show even had an official to make sure each horse was treated fairly and humanely. What I did see was a commitment to kindness toward one another, the slow, endless journey

that is horsemanship and especially toward the love for horses – with patting, rubbing, hugging, smiling, and endless "talking" to their four-legged friends everywhere you looked.

Annie and I have a long way to go, but we have started our Cowboy Dressage journey to which I am fully committed. For me, there is no other way than to "try." Thank you Eitan, and thank you everyone committed to the **Cowboy Dressage** lifestyle. ♦

I hope you enjoyed reading Dollie Horst's story about how she became involved with gaited horses and the path which led her to Gaited Cowboy Dressage. If you have a naturally gaited horse you've developed a special relationship with and ride gaited dressage or versatility, and would like to share your story on [NaturallyGated.com](#), please contact me by completing [contact form](#) at [NaturallyGated.com](#).

—Jennifer Klitzke



Dollie Horst thanking little Annie for a job well done after showing the second day at the Cowboy Dressage World Finals 2015 in Rancho Murieta, CA....This is what it is all about. Photograph by [Richard Horst](#).