

THE BUFFALO HORSE

Great care was taken by the Blackfoot in selecting and training a buffalo hunting horse. This animal was the man's primary charger, ridden only in hunting, to war, and on dress occasions. Informants named five qualities sought in a buffalo runner: (1) enduring speed (the ability to retain speed over a distance of several miles); (2) intelligence (the ability to respond instantly to commands or to act properly on its own initiative); (3) agility (ability to move quickly alongside a buffalo, to avoid contact with the larger animal, and to keep clear of its horns); (4) sure-footedness (ability to run swiftly over uneven ground without stumbling); and (5) courage (lack of fear of buffalo). Usually a man selected the horse he wished to train as a buffalo hunter on the basis of its demonstrated swiftness and alertness. A 4-year-old was preferred, but a man who owned few horses might select a horse a year younger. The horse's courage could be determined only through experience in chasing buffalo. Some horses never overcame their fear of those large, shaggy beasts, and could not be trained as hunters. It took patient practice and use of the whip to train a horse to run close beside a buffalo.² The courageous horse, through experience, learned to follow the buffalo, move in close and "do its work" with little urging from its owner, so that the latter could concentrate upon making his kill. A well-trained buffalo horse would turn as the rider shifted his weight to one side, or in response to pressure from the rider's knee. Most buffalo runners were males, although some mares made good hunting horses.

Many Blackfoot men regarded their buffalo horses as priceless possessions. They would not trade them or give them away. In trade a buffalo runner of known ability would bring several common riding

233-234). It is most probable that this seasonal hunting-cultivating rhythm of the horticultural tribes of the Plains antedated their acquisition of horses. Before 1700 Nicholas Perrot (Blair, 1912, vol. 1, p. 119) reported that the tribes of the northern Prairies set out on buffalo-hunting expeditions each autumn after they had harvested their crops, returned to their villages in March to plant "the grain," then embarked on a hunting trip. The De Gannes Memoir (Pease and Werner, 1934 b, p. 339-344) described the same seasonal rhythm among the horticultural Illinois in 1688.

The Mandan of the Upper Missouri were more sedentary, not because they did not observe the same seasonal rhythm, but because buffalo were numerous near their winter villages making prolonged hunting trips at that season unnecessary (Maximilian, 1906, vol. 23, p. 345).

² In writing of the Coronado expedition to the Plains in 1541, Castenada noted, "there was not one of the horses that did not take fright when he saw them (buffalo) first" (Winship, 1896, p. 542). Yet M'Gillivray (1929, p. 29) wrote of the Indian-trained buffalo horse of the North Saskatchewan in 1794, "he delights in the pleasure of the chase, and is so animated at the sight of a Band of animals that he can scarcely be restrained from pursuing them." During Captain Clark's journey down the Yellowstone in the fall of 1805, the loose horses driven by Sergeant Pryor sighted a herd of buffalo, and "having been trained by the Indians to hunt, immediately set off in pursuit of them, and surrounded the herd with almost as much skill as their riders could have done" (Coues, 1893, vol. 3, p. 1148).

horses or transport animals. Only a race horse of tested speed would have greater value than a well-trained buffalo horse.³

Buffalo runners of the Blackfoot were given special care. Three Calf recalled that his father, who owned several buffalo horses, would not permit boys to catch, ride, or play with any of them. After a chase a buffalo horse was taken to a stream, water was thrown on it, and it was rubbed down. Some men made a practice of throwing water on their buffalo horses every morning and evening to toughen them and prepare them for hard winters. Before setting out on a chase the hunter's wife carefully prepared his mount for him. She met him on his return, took his horse from him and cared for it.⁴

METHODS OF BUFFALO HUNTING ON HORSEBACK

Two general methods of hunting buffalo on horseback were employed by the Blackfoot; the surround, and the chase (referred to in some accounts as "running buffalo").

The surround method employed a considerable number of horsemen to encircle a herd of buffalo, start them milling in a circle, and shoot down the frightened and confused animals as they rode around them. Wissler (1910, p. 37) reported Blackfoot use of the surround. The classic description and illustration of this method are from the hand of George Catlin (Catlin, 1841, vol. 1, pp. 199-201, and pl. 79). His original painting of a Hidatsa surround is in the United States National Museum (No. 386,394).⁵

The chase was a straightaway rush by mounted men, each hunter singling out an animal from the herd, riding alongside it and killing it at close quarters, then moving on to another animal and killing it in like manner. The Blackfoot seem to have virtually abandoned the surround in favor of the chase around the middle of the 19th century. During the last two decades of buffalo hunting (i. e. in the youth of my older informants) the chase alone was employed as a method of

³ In 1806 Henry wrote that among the Hidatsa "first-rate horses, such as are trained for war, or noted for running, can hardly be had for any quantity of goods. The only article that will induce them to part with a horse of this kind is a white buffalo hide" (Henry and Thompson, 1897, vol. 1, p. 353). Marcy (1937, pp. 156, 158) found the Comanche refused to part with their buffalo horses. Frank Bosin told me the Kiowa rarely would trade a buffalo horse. He stressed the point that such horses were necessary to their livelihood and pointed out that horses not specially trained for buffalo hunting were incapable of that activity.

⁴ This seems to have been common Plains Indian practice. It was reported of the Crow as early as 1805 (Larocque, 1910, p. 59), of the Hidatsa-Mandan (Boller, 1868, p. 232), Osage (Tixier, 1940, p. 170), and Comanche (Marcy, 1937, p. 157). Assiniboin women rubbed down the returning buffalo horse with sage before it was allowed to graze (Long, 1942, p. 171).

⁵ As early as 1750, Father Vivier briefly described the Pawnee surround on horseback. "They hunt on horseback with arrows and spears; they surround a herd of cattle, and but few escape" (Jesuit Relations, vol. 69, p. 227). Wissler reported the use of the surround by the Mandan, Arikara, Arapaho, Omaha, and Cheyenne also (Wissler, 1910, p. 50). He said it was employed by "the southern tribes generally."

killing buffalo from horseback. The tendency toward the abandonment of the surround may have been plainswide. Certainly the best contemporary descriptions of that method are found in writings of the period ante-1850.⁶

The chase had definite advantages over the surround. It was certainly less dangerous. It made it easier for the hunter to single out a buffalo for the kill and to get an unobstructed shot at that animal. It could also be practiced by any number of hunters, from a single rider to the able male population of a large village. Apparently the chase was practiced at an early date in the northwestern Plains. Anthony Hendry, while visiting the "Archithinue" (probably Gros Ventres) village of 200 lodges, entered in his diary under the date October 16, 1754, "with the Leader's permission, I rode a hunting with twenty of his young men. They killed 8 Buffalo, excellent sport. They are so expert that with one or two arrows they will drop a Buffalo. As for me I had sufficient employ to manage my horse" (Hendry, 1907, p. 350). This earliest description of buffalo hunting on horseback by northwestern Plains Indians suggests the employment of the chase. Since my Blackfoot informants stated that it frequently required three or more arrows to kill a buffalo in their time, we may judge that the "Archithinue" were very skilled in killing buffalo from horseback at that early date. By the period of the 1830's the chase seems to have been the preferred method of buffalo hunting throughout the Plains.⁷

A detailed description of the chase, the favored Blackfoot method of hunting buffalo in the youth of my informants, follows.

THE BUFFALO CHASE ON HORSEBACK

PREPARATIONS

Before a chase the principal chief (of a tribal summer camp) or the chief (of a band camp) invited all the chiefs or leading men of his village to his lodge to discuss plans for the hunt. Often this meeting took place the night before a large hunt. Then the chief (through his announcer) told the people to catch their buffalo horses and extra pack animals to be used to bring in the meat. If the camp was a tribal one, the chief at that time proclaimed that the prohibition against individual hunting was in force. I gained the impression that this regulation was less common in the smaller band camps. Women who were

⁶ Dunbar, writing of Pawnee culture of the period of the 1830's, stated, "The Pawnees seldom resorted to a surround, attacking from all sides at once. This method was more tedious and dangerous, and was regarded as less huntsmanlike" (than the chase) (Dunbar, 1880, p. 330).

⁷ With the exception of the single surround mentioned, all of George Catlin's numerous paintings of Indian buffalo hunts on horseback by tribes of both the northern and southern Plains depict the chase. Contemporary descriptions of Plains Indian employment of the chase are legion.

not to accompany the hunters to aid in butchering and packing meat back to camp were left in camp. Sometimes they were instructed to move camp while the hunt was in progress.

EQUIPMENT

In leaving camp for the hunt each hunter rode a common horse (to be later used for packing meat, if his horses were few) and led his buffalo horse in order to save its strength for the chase.⁸ Women and boys followed with the pack animals.

Although some Blackfoot preferred to ride bareback in hunting buffalo, many used the pad saddle. Weasel Tail said he always rode a pad saddle when hunting buffalo because it added little weight to his mount while providing him with a firm seat with feet braced in the stirrups to permit a steadier aim. A few hunters rode "prairie chicken snare saddles."

Generally hunters wore leggings, a breechcloth and moccasins, and a shirt with short sleeves which would not get in their way or become bloodied in butchering. These were either skin or old cloth garments without any decoration. Old clothes were desirable for the bloody business of killing and especially of butchering.

Before the introduction of the breechloader among the Blackfoot in 1870, firearms were rarely employed in the buffalo chase. It was too difficult to reload a muzzle-loading musket on a fast-moving horse to make its use practical. Most men would have had to stop their horses each time they reloaded, thus losing ground on the running herd. Kurz (1937, p. 195) described the use of muzzle-loaders by white hunters attached to Fort Union in 1851, who were skilled in reloading on the run. However, the very great majority of Blackfoot Indian hunters preferred the bow and arrow for the buffalo chase. This bow was short, often not more than 3 feet in length, so as to be easily managed on horseback. It was of ash, chokecherry or sarvis berry. The quiver, slung at the rider's back, contained 20 to 30 iron-headed arrows. The stone-headed arrow went out of use among the Blackfoot long before the time of my informants. Some men preferred to use a short, metal-headed, ash-poled lance. However, the use of the lance in buffalo hunting was on the wane among the Blackfoot even before the introduction of breech-loading rifles. Lazy Boy, my eldest Piegan informant, could not recall ever having seen the lance carried by a buffalo hunter of his tribe. Even as early as 1833, Maximilian (1906, vol. 23, p. 119) remarked, "I saw few

⁸ This seems to have been a common Plains Indian practice, reported for the Cheyenne (Hamilton, 1905, p. 28), Plains Cree (Mandelbaum, 1940, p. 191), Plains Ojibwa (Skinner, 1914, p. 494), and Hidatsa-Mandan (Boller, 1868, p. 77).

lances among the Blackfeet."⁹ As soon as Blackfoot Indians could acquire breechloading firearms they discarded the bow and arrow as a buffalo-hunting weapon. However, the new guns were expensive, and poor people of necessity continued to employ the bow and arrow. Among all the buffalo-hunting tribes the bow and arrow seems to have been the favorite hunting weapon in use before ca. 1870.

THE APPROACH

Through scouts the location of the buffalo herd which was to be the object of attack became well known in advance. The hunting party moved cautiously, trying to keep out of sight of the buffalo, and always approaching from down wind of the herd to prevent them from catching human scent. If the terrain permitted, the approach was from behind a hill or from the mouth of a coulee where the hunters could be concealed from sight of the buffalo until they were nearly upon them. When the hunting party got as close to the buffalo as they could approach without alarming their prey the hunters dismounted, mounted their buffalo horses, and left their common riding animals in the hands of the women and boys who remained with the pack animals in concealment. The leader of the hunters lined them up to give them all an equal chance.¹⁰ At a signal from him, they whipped their buffalo runners into a run, each hunter being eager to be the first to make a kill. Sometimes they approached the game in two groups according to preconceived plan, some of the men riding along the right of the herd, others (including the lancers and left-handed bowmen) riding on the left. This approach may have been understood by some writers as an employment of the surround. Actually it was not. It was running the buffalo by two parallel groups of hunters.¹¹

THE RUN

(PL. 14)

No time could be lost once the buffalo became aware of the approaching hunters and started to run in the opposite direction. Healthy cows could run faster than bulls. In a small running herd the cows generally took the lead, followed by the bulls, which were in turn trailed by the calves. Except in the summer season when bulls were prime, Blackfoot hunters, confident of the speed and ability of their

⁹ The former use of the lance in buffalo hunting has been reported for the Nez Percé (Spinden, 1908, p. 213), Cheyenne (Grinnell, 1923, vol. 1, p. 263), Osage (Tixier, 1940, p. 192), and Kansa (Farnham, 1906, p. 85).

¹⁰ This practice of lining up the hunters to give them an equal opportunity has been reported as common among the Plains Cree (Mandelbaum, 1940, p. 191), Osage (Tixier, 1940, p. 191), Pawnee (Dunbar, 1880, vol. 5, p. 330).

¹¹ Hamilton (1905, pp. 28-30) witnessed the employment of this approach in two divisions of hunters by the Cheyenne in the 1840's.

horses, generally by-passed the running bulls to get to the cows. Unless he was left-handed, the Bowman approached the buffalo he had singled out for slaughter from the right side, brought his horse close alongside, fixed an arrow to his bow and aimed at the fatal spot, which Hornaday (1889, p. 471) described as "from 12 to 18 inches in circumference, and lies immediately back of the foreleg with its lowest point on a line with the elbow." The arrow was shot without sighting, generally with the bow held a little off vertical, the top tilted to the right. However, each hunter used the position easiest for him. Informants insisted that all Blackfoot hunters did not learn to shoot in the same way, nor did they all employ the same method of arrow release. As the arrow left the bow the trained buffalo horse swerved away from its quarry, running in close again to permit additional shots if required.

Informants were familiar with the common stories of men who had shot arrows completely through buffalo. Weasel Tail claimed he had twice done this in killing young cows. Nevertheless, they stated that it usually required three or more arrows to bring down a running cow. The quiver was carried on the back with the opening behind the hunter's left shoulder (if he was right-handed), so he could easily and quickly take another arrow from it with his right hand, fit it to the bow held in his left hand, and shoot rapidly.

On the run the hunter carried the long end of his bridle rope coiled and tucked under his belt (fig. 11), so that should he be thrown but not hurt or badly shaken up, he could grab the free end of this line as it paid out and retrieve his horse, possibly in time to mount and continue the chase (p. 76).

Blackfoot lancers usually approached buffalo from the left side.¹² They delivered their blows in powerful overhand chops.

The run usually continued until the herd outdistanced the pursuing hunters.

NUMBER OF BUFFALO KILLED IN A SINGLE CHASE

Testimony of my Blackfoot informants supported the generalization of Tixier (1940, p. 191), written more than a century ago, that in the buffalo chase the "best beast belongs to the best horse, and for this reason they say on the prairie 'My horse has killed many buffalo.'" Boller (1868, p. 232) told of an expert Hidatsa hunter, The Last Stone, of whom it was said, "He could kill on any kind of horse," a high tribute to his ability as a marksman to bring down his game at a long distance. However, the very great majority of the Blackfoot, and of the Hidatsa as well, relied upon the speed and courage of their mounts to bring them close beside the buffalo before shooting.

¹² Osage lancers also killed buffalo from the left side of that animal (Tixier, 1940, p. 192).

Four or five buffalo cows were the most informants could recall having been killed on a single chase by the best Blackfoot marksman with the best horse under him. Most hunters rarely killed more than one or two buffalo at a chase. Men with inferior buffalo horses had to be satisfied with killing the slower running bulls. The owner of a poorly trained or short-winded horse could not hope to kill any buffalo via the chase.¹³

BOYS' HUNTING OF BUFFALO CALVES

Boys 10 years of age or older gained their first experience in buffalo hunting on the fair weather hunts from spring through fall. After the men started a herd and rode after it the boys, on 1- or 2-year-old colts, followed after the calves left in the wake of the running herd. They imitated the actions of their elders, riding in close and shooting the calves with bows and arrows. In this way they gained skill and confidence so that in their middle teens they could begin hunting adult buffalo.¹⁴ Nearly all my elderly, male Blackfoot informants had chased buffalo calves. Only the oldest of them had had opportunities to kill adult buffalo before these animals were exterminated from the Blackfoot Country.

Three Calf said that as a boy he helped hunters pack meat to camp and was also given the task of cleaning buffalo intestines. Boys were not taken on winter hunts on horseback.

HUNTING ACCIDENTS

Accidents were not infrequent in hunting buffalo. Horses stumbled on uneven ground, stepped in badger holes, or were gored by wounded bulls. Riders were thrown and injured or killed. Lazy Boy recalled that Lame Bull, the Piegan head chief at the time of the 1855 treaty, was killed while running buffalo 3 years later. Amid the dust of the chase Lame Bull's horse did not move adroitly enough to avoid an old bull that attacked him. The horse fell on Lame Bull breaking his neck and crushing his ribs. Generally the less intelligent and well-trained the horse, the greater was the chance of serious accident in the chase.¹⁵

¹³ Contemporary statements regarding other tribes give similar maximum figures. Tixler (1940, p. 193) among the Osage found that "a good horse can overtake three or four cows in one hunt." Boller (1868, p. 227) noted that among the Mandan-Hidatsa "the more expert hunters will kill from three to five cows in a chase."

¹⁴ Grinnell (1923, vol. 1, p. 118) reported Cheyenne boys' practice of hunting buffalo calves. He wrote that "if on his first chase a boy killed a calf, his father was greatly pleased, and if a well-to-do man, he might present a good horse to some poor man, and in addition might give a feast and invite poor people to come and eat with him."

¹⁵ Writers on the Cheyenne (Hamilton, 1905, p. 29), Hidatsa-Mandan (Boller, 1868, p. 234), and Pawnee (Dunbar, 1880, p. 331) have mentioned the frequency and seriousness of accidents that occurred among those tribes while running buffalo.