



SPORTS SPOTLIGHT

# *The Ultimate* FreeStyle Challenge

BY ELLI POSPISCHIL  
3-STAR PARELLI PROFESSIONAL  
& HORSE DEVELOPMENT SPECIALIST

## The Sport Of Cutting: The Ultimate FreeStyle Challenge.

Before I invite you to join me on this journey into the subject of FreeStyle, allow me to introduce myself: my name is Elli Pospischil, or "Elli-Parelli" as they call me.

I am originally from Switzerland and came to the US to study at the Parelli Campus. Having fulfilled all the prerequisites, I joined the Mastery Program and climbed the ladder to where I got to be Pat's Protégé. Nowadays, I am proud to say that

I am a 3-Star Parelli Professional, Horse Development Specialist, and Pat Parelli's Performance Barn Manager.

Before that, I was a ski instructor in St. Moritz teaching guests from all over the world and in all different levels of skiing in the beautiful Swiss Alps.

Prior to that, I was a professional snowboarder, traveling the world from Japan to Canada and Norway to New Zealand to compete in halfpipe and boardercross. So, that's very freestyle!

I attended school for somewhere close to 16 years, trying to please my parents and to fulfill expectations of society. I liked going to school, except for days when there was an exam scheduled. Which is interesting, isn't a competition much like a live exam?

I have always craved the excitement of competition, putting myself out there and testing my skills and



knowledge. With my horse in Switzerland, I competed in show jumping and as a teenager I played basketball in the junior league as well as in the second highest league with the ladies' team. Isn't it amazing how your perspective changes, once you have a mindset of "I choose..."?!

So, as you can see, my life has been very much a freestyle experience.

I was a good student in school, in most subjects anyways. Languages were something that came easy to me, scientific subjects such as math, physics, chemistry or biology, not so much. In my opinion, languages leave much more room for creativity than the strict rules of

algebra or the laws of physics allow. I am fascinated by languages and speak five-and-a-half myself, not counting Latin. I take that as another example of my great passion for anything freestyle.

When asked why I chose the sport of cutting (a western discipline where the rider separates a calf out of a herd of approximately 30 cattle and tries to keep it separated from the herd), I say "cutting chose me"!

Today's discipline of cutting is the ultimate FreeStyle challenge and has evolved from the very real need of separating individual cows from a herd on a ranch. To this day, cowboys separate cattle from the herd in



Eastern Nationals

order to doctor them or relocate them. It is much gentler and less stressful to do this horseback than it is to do it with an ATV or a drone for example.

There is no such thing in Switzerland, where I grew up. In the past couple of years, I had the chance to study directly with Pat Parelli who is very passionate about Western Performance and all events that involve cows. The first time I ever got to ride a cutting horse was enough to get me hooked! It's such a thrill and therefore extremely addictive!

"Oh dear, oh dear... Can I go again!?" were my words then; quite frankly, sometimes it still feels that way. That is how this Swiss Miss was turned into a cowgirl.

Let's take a look at cutting through the eyes of Parelli: all Seven Games make up the sport of cutting. As I walk through the



herd, I play the Friendly Game with the cattle. Also, when I stop working one cow, I put the hand that I had on the saddle horn down onto my horse's neck and give him a little rub to let him know "game over, we are done".

Porcupine Game is what I do with my legs and reins as I guide my horse through the herd. I play the Driving Game by driving some of the cattle away from the herd. The Yo-Yo Game is played often, as my horse has to be like a hover craft and be able to go forwards and rock backwards and run and stop at all times.

Of the Circling Game, it is mostly the allow, also known as the neutral part, that I am using. Whenever possible, I allow my horse to do his job and try to stay as neutral as possible on his back so I don't get in his way.

I go Sideways a lot in order to be in the best possible position to separate the calf. Then, when my horse turns with the cow, it actually is a Squeeze Game! And when my horse is going back and forth across the arena with the cow, we are playing Stick To Me with the cow. See, it's simple, but not easy! It's the same Seven Games we play with the horses on the ground, just taken to another level!

The show pen is buzzing with energy and there are so many brains involved in it: my own brain, my horse's, my helpers', the whole herd of cattle and the one calf you've cut out. This is the most fascinating part about cutting.



When I explain cutting to a show jumper or fellow horse lover, I like to put it this way: imagine you are jumping a course and the jumps were to move in random directions at random speeds...

Cutting is a very humbling sport, even the very best of us lose a cow or pick up big penalty points. It is very much like a roller coaster with its highest highs and lowest lows. There is not a whole lot of consistency in this sport thanks to the random element of the cattle.

As I go to select my calf, I typically have one hand on the horn and the reins in the other hand. As soon as there is only one calf left in front of my horse and me, I have to drop my rein-hand down onto the neck. From that moment on, I am no longer allowed to use the reins. It is now my horse's

responsibility to hold the cow and keep it from returning to the herd.

It takes a great amount of teamwork between my horse and me to get this task accomplished. I might ask my horse to speed up a little bit here or there. My horse is in charge of the turning and the stopping though. FreeStyle in its finest form! The only way it gets more FreeStyle is during the rare and even more exciting "Bridleless Cutting" classes – just for fun, or for a good cause.

Cutting is also the sport of generations because in one day it is very likely to have youth riders compete alongside their parents and even their grandparents! I learned that the hard way: many of those youth riders aren't merely kids who ride horses, they are world champions,

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experts at reading cattle and have many more years of experience than I do. To them it's just a game; their ambition doesn't get in the way as much as it does for us grown-ups!

Competing is one way to preserve real horsemanship: Team Parelli puts themselves out there to lead by example by putting the relationship first, without sacrificing our principles so that at the end of the day, we can put our arm over the horse's neck and ask, "was it as good for you as it was for me?" Team Parelli wants to make a difference, to prove that you can accomplish high goals with the horse's dignity in tact, by using communication, understanding and psychology and therefore ultimately preserve real horsemanship.

In order to support that, Pat's vision is to find other horse lovers like me, that are talented, ambitious, dedicated and loyal enough to be on Team Parelli – whether it's English or Western, driving or racing or any of the many other equine disciplines... Is that you?

At the end of 2013, I had just returned from a sabbatical in the show jumping world, Pat sent his son, Caton, and I to a cutting while he was out of town for a Parelli event. Here I was, after not having ridden a cutting horse in over a year and with the little experience I have had before that, at a cutting without Pat and with full responsibility for Caton!

We did well though, so well that Pat was inspired to set out on a journey to qualify us for the World Finals in 2014. Only the Top 15 in the World Ranking get to go to the World Finals. On 35 weekends, we were at cuttings all over the country, from Florida



to Nebraska and Georgia to Utah.

A typical challenge I had to overcome on that journey was to draw towards the end of the class, if not very last. I would be warming up my horse and trying my best to keep my butterflies in formation, as I heard all the previous riders' scores being announced after each competitor. It took a mental effort not to let that little voice inside my head take over with thoughts like: "there is no way we can beat that score!"

The wise words a fellow cutter, who sadly passed away, used to send me down to the herd with, were: "You've got this! You're just 2.5 minutes closer to a possible victory!" So, in towards the herd I went, repeating the mantra in my head and whispering to my horse: "We've got this!"

Often times we did "have it." I not only qualified for the World Finals, I was lucky enough to also advance to the finals at the Eastern National Championships in Jackson, MS and finish 11th at the Quarter Horse Congress in Columbus, OH. At the World Finals held in Ft. Worth, Texas, I finished in 6th place in the overall ranking of the year in my division.

In addition to the World Finals Top 15 buckle, I am also the proud owner of two other buckles that my horse and I have won in the cutting pen. Those are expensive buckles – in non-monetary terms. It would be so much cheaper to just go buy one at the nearest tack store. Then again, that buckle wouldn't reflect all the hard work,



Medal – QH Congress, 2014

early mornings, late nights (often times, the cutting shows start at 8am and run until way past midnight), lost cattle, hot quits, sweat and tears that it took to earn them. On days when things didn't quite work out as I had hoped they would, Caton would offer me comfort by saying: "Don't worry Elli, there's always another cutting...!"

And there will be! My dream is to continue to push myself to be the best me I can be and to get better and better at this ultimate FreeStyle challenge, the sport of cutting, where you and your horse really have to be a team and have a strong mental, emotional, and physical connection.

I am looking forward to meeting you in the future and to hear about what you and your horse are passionate about and how I can help you be the best you you can be!

If you would like to get in touch with me, please email me at [wowfactory@parelli.com](mailto:wowfactory@parelli.com) 🐾