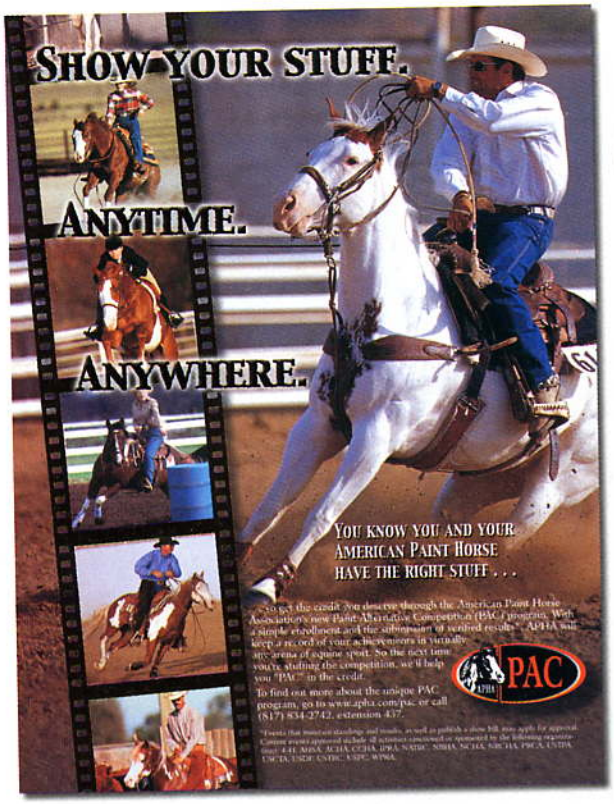

LINDA ALLAN

Eye-catchers: *Good-looking Paints make for great advertisements. At left, Watkins rode Docs Capilynx in this popular ad for APHA's PAC program. Above, Watkins uses this image of him and "Lad" on his business cards.*

"In 1988, when I went to a match roping in Oakdale (California), I barely had enough money to get home on if I didn't win. The roping paid the winners $5,000 per man.

"I roped with a guy named Donny Hardin. We both needed the money so bad we didn't even look at each other, we didn't say a word.

"We just backed into the box, nodded and went for it. When we won, I felt like that $5,000 cash was a million bucks."

That was one of the highlights of Watkins' career, which began to prosper. After roping off Mouse, he bought Iron Eyes Cody, a 1980 bay tobiano gelding.

" 'Cody' was a really nice mover," Watkins said.

Then, in 1992, he saw Zig, who helped push the heeler's career into high gear.

But first he had to buy him. Thank heavens for his mother-in-law's Christmas bazaar.

When Dusty and Sherrie heard how much Zig cost, they knew they couldn't afford him. At $3,500, the price of the green- broke 4-year-old was just too high.

Zigs A Tuned Drum was sired by Dixie War Drum and is out of Tunes Classy Lass, a P S Tune mare.

But when the price was dropped to $1,500, the couple rushed over to Sherrie's parents' house where her mother was having a Christmas bazaar.

"My mom gave Dusty all of the money she had earned, and we bought him," Sherrie said.

Why Paints?

The Watkinses planned to train the gelding for a couple of months and then sell him. But after making a sale video and working Zig on cattle, Dusty decided to keep him.

It was one of the best decisions Watkins made.

Although Zig's previous owners had planned to make him a jumper, in six months the gelding went from going over logs to being Watkins' number one heeling horse.

"Zig always works and makes very few mistakes," Watkins said. "When he was 4 years old, I could back him in the box and he worked like a seasoned horse."

At 15-2 hands, Zig is large for a heeling horse. His bold black-and-white pattern also makes him easy to see in the arena.

When Watkins first started roping off Paints, other competitors asked him why he liked such colorful horses.

"I told them, 'Everyone likes them and they bring a lot of business,' " Watkins said.

"Paints hold their value well and seem to bring more money than solid horses. People also admire their presence and beauty."

In 1993, the Watkinses added Drums Classy Lad, Zig's full brother, to their barn. He, too, became an excellent heeling horse.

Although Zig and Lad look very similar, "Lad" is a little temperamental.

"When we bought him, he was 7 years old, unbroke and had been turned out on 500 acres. Sometimes he reminds us of that," Sherrie said. "But he is very sweet and loves people."

The flashy Paints have been instrumental in helping Watkins get sponsors. People remember Dusty and his loud-colored horses, and they also recall the products the team represents.

Allen Bach, an NFR World Champion team roper who is co-owner of Heel-O-Matic and Cactus Rope, approached Watkins at a rodeo and asked him to endorse the two products. After Watkins tried them and liked them, he accepted.

"Dusty was very honored by this and still works for Allen Bach today," Sherrie said.

Watkins has also made a name for himself as a seller of quality roping horses, especially on the West Coast.