



A Western Original

FOR RALPH LAUREN, IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT FASHION. IT'S ABOUT TASTE, HERITAGE — AND THE WEST.



by William C. Reynolds

Ralph Lauren makes you want to be part of his world. It's true. He is the American Dream in a great-looking shirt. In fact, the shirt is as much a part of the Dream as he is. You can see it everywhere, especially in the West.

I sat in a Texas cow-town arena grandstand last year watching rider after rider lope in on one better horse after another. The National Cutting Horse Association Futurity in Ft. Worth brings out the best young cutting horse prospects each year at the end of November. It's a rather exclusive club, defined by participant capability — in training and riding as well as being capable of affording this rather pricey sport. These aren't range horses trotted in to work a few cows. These are finely tuned, superbly world-class athletes, and riding them are sophisticated, savvy riders and trainers who are smart enough to stay out of the way of the continuation of an elegant, age-old dance between horse and cow. It's a sport where the rider tries his or her best to almost disappear. The horse is the real star. With all the action, one doesn't really notice riders or things about them. Their dress is usually rather conservative. Most wear chaps, some don't. Most wear what one would expect at a performance horse event: boots, hats, jeans, and clothes in many cases made by sponsors of the event. Cutting horse people tend to be very loyal in that regard, as sponsors help pay for the big-dollar purses.

Ralph Lauren and wife, Ricky, at home on the range in Colorado.

Watching the event, it's easy to see who sponsors what. There's a boot company. There's a jeans company. There's an airline and a truck. The one striking thing that stands out is the understated, tailored look of most of the shirts worn by riders and trainers alike. Polo. Surprised? You shouldn't be. Many of the riders have raced from work or the airport. Many have simply changed from suits to jeans. What's left in most cases are Polo Ralph Lauren shirts and blouses. Look around the arena and RL seems a silent sponsor. In this world of letting the horses be the heroes, cutting horse riders seem to seek more from their individual competency than glitz. It's a quiet, graceful style. Sounds like Ralph Lauren, doesn't it?

How has Ralph Lauren's style become such an important yet subtle part of so many lives? How did he create a look so broadly American yet so individual? He did it with our help because we were ready for him. In the 1950s, when I was a kid, things seemed to be done a little more formally. A little more the same. Clothing styles were not about being noticed or making an overt statement — especially for men. Jeans were not a daily apparel item for men; rather, it was a narrow, dark-suited world of uniform colors and styles. It was an era of fitting in, not stand-

ing out in a crowd. Even travel was more uniform. Ask yourself when you last saw a kid in a suit and tie on an airplane. A long time ago, right? It was a different era. In 1957, I was one of those kids, 7 years old, sitting on an airplane in a suit. We didn't know about style. None of us did, yet.

In 1957, Ralph was a teenager already thinking about style. He didn't know he would someday have a direct impact on the style of millions of men and women worldwide. He was just looking for something different to wear. Clothes, he thought, could say more about him and his place in the world. Clothes, to his way of thinking, could make a statement, enable him to express himself in a unique light. "Clothes are a first impression." He knew it, and he built on it.

Believe it or not, it was a real assertive move at that time. If everyone in his school was wearing white bucks, he wore saddle shoes. If everyone wore a crewneck sweater, he wore a V-neck. If they wore wool, he wore cashmere. These may seem like little things, especially today, but at the time — a time of forced-march conformity — it was a murmur of change. Change the young 18-year-old might have only dreamed about while looking through the surplus store bin for that perfect pair of olive green fatigues that had just enough "seasoning" to tell a story. Change he could

not yet imagine happening, much less that he would in great part be leading the revolution. Like all those dress shirts carrying his name on all those cowboys riding all those cutting horses so many years later. But that's to come; let's start at the beginning. The West would call soon enough.

In 1939, the Bronx in New York saw the birth of Ralph to parents Frank and Frieda Lifshitz. Ralph was the youngest of three brothers born just after the clouds of the Depression had lifted and the storm clouds of World War II were forming. His father was an artist who loved color and painted houses to support his family; his mother worked hard to raise the kids.

From an early age, young Ralph was like every other kid. He messed around, played ball, and dated girls. But he also got the message that to succeed, really succeed, one must have certain qualities that are unique. By age 12 he was already looking cool, wearing clothes other kids liked. His sense of fashion was emerging. He valued looking good as a way to be more accepted. It made sense. It wasn't that he wanted to be in fashion. Fashion was never the issue. It was the story, the subtext that went along with the clothes. At 19, he would formally change his last name to Lauren at the suggestion of his brother Jerry. Looks were one

I've been wearing cowboy boots and Western clothes a long time. The image isn't fashion, it's rugged. It's part of American culture.

thing he knew, but he would have to back it up with "the goods." He decided to study for a business degree and attended City College in Manhattan. He left without finishing his degree and started working for a couple of glove companies in New York. He later went on to work for a tie manufacturer in Boston, A. Rivetz & Company, selling ties to accounts in Long Island as well as a few specialty menswear stores in New York. While at Rivetz, he got his first break in the fashion press. In the spring of 1964, the hot fashion trade paper, *DNR, Daily News Record*, ran a story about this young assertive tie salesman titled "The Professional Touch." The story featured sketches and descriptions of the "unusual" clothing Ralph was said to have worn on his sales rounds, clothes that were described in the piece as "a season's jump ahead of the market." He would, for example, show up driving an old Morgan wearing an antique aviator jacket and goggles — all to sell ties.

It worked. He was being noticed. He found he didn't like selling the same old conservative tie designs and started designing his own — ties that were wider and more individual looking. It led to a major entrepreneurial move. With a borrowed \$50,000, Lauren founded Polo fashions in 1967. He chose the name Polo because of the story he felt went along with the sport of polo. It spoke of power, style, and intrigue — qualities he could build upon. It was a story, a life he could build upon. It worked.

And it continues to work more than 37 years later. Even with all the business ups and downs inherent in the fashion world, Ralph Lauren continues his success seemingly less concerned about the fashion than about the story that it tells or amplifies. He asserts that those who wear his clothing are already interesting and so are their lives. He uses style to accentuate that which is already interesting and intriguing. A perfect fit. The same goes for his many other collections, including the Ralph Lauren Home Collection. All of the Ralph Lauren collections have been chapters in the big story — the story of the ultimate lifestyle. The way he first told the story — and introduced the mainstream to it — was unique and remarkable and changed the face of advertising. It was the beginning of Polo Ralph Lauren aspirational lifestyle marketing, and it was groundbreaking.

In the fall of 1977, Ralph Lauren's creative team, under his watchful eye and inspiration, created the second of his now famous Polo retail catalogs. In its final pages, one can see the basis for future Polo advertising. It was a moment that merged activity,



The 100-year-old Vance barn in the summer pasture.



Ralph Lauren at the entrance of the Double RL Ranch.

lifestyle, and mystery. The catalog pictured a male model walking a horse through the mountains outside Montreal, Canada. He was wearing a long mouton-collared storm coat over jeans and a dinner jacket, and a cowboy hat that belonged to Ralph. Who was this guy? Where was he going with that horse? Why a dinner jacket? And that hat? It all worked. It all simply looked very cool together. "The hat has some history — it was a prop off a John Wayne movie," said Les Goldberg, who photographed the catalog. The image was an accessible, eclectic, contemporary Western vision that captured a story in one shot.

John Wayne, the image of the cowboy, and the West are all near and dear to Ralph Lauren, in large part because the West itself is a setting for so many great stories, myths, and icons. Ralph Lauren wears a signature cowboy hat, itself a symbol of the West, in many of the ads and promotions he has created over the years. One style of hat in particular, like the one worn by Lauren on the cover of this issue, has been seen before but holds its source a secret. Half the fun of Ralph Lauren's creations — his lifestyle visions — is to imagine being a part of those gorgeous settings, being in the "Lauren lifestyle" sphere of vision. Same goes for that cowboy hat he's wearing. What does it remind you of? Where have you seen it before — a brim curled after much use and grabbing, a pinched crown, sweat stains, and a braided rawhide band?

Remember, Les Goldberg said it was a prop from a John Wayne movie. Next time you put John Wayne's *Hondo* in the DVD player, take a look at the hat he's wearing as the character Hondo Lane. Or watch Steve McQueen's character in the 1960 Western classic *The Magnificent Seven*. Same story, same feeling, same hat — sort of, close enough. Remember, it's not the fashion, it's the story. Seeing that hat takes a part of your memory back, especially if you, like many, are a sucker for great old cowboy hats. But the attachment to McQueen-esque stories and style goes deeper. Think of the McQueen style in 1968's *Bullitt* — great car, classic clothes — and his other film of the same year,



Tepees at the Double RL Ranch.



The Thomas Crown Affair — great style, clothes, cars, planes, and Faye Dunaway. Think of the style of Sam Peckinpah's 1972 rodeo picture *Junior Bonner* — that great white snap-front shirt McQueen wore. A classic. Go to a Polo store today

and you can buy one. Try one on and I dare you not to think of Steve McQueen. More? *Nevada Smith*. Remember McQueen in *Levi's* with rolled-up cuffs and Indian moccasins? Great visual style stories all. Stories that could be built upon.

The West holds another lasting attachment for Ralph Lauren, one that is all about family. Of his five residences, his ranch outside of Ridgeway, Colorado, holds a most special place in his life. Ralph and his wife, Ricky, had looked for a ranch in the West for a number of years and came close to choosing places in Wyoming and Utah. They finally settled on a ranch outside of Ouray County in Colorado, about a half-hour from Telluride, very close to Ridgeway. "The minute we saw it, we fell in love with it," he recalls of the first time he saw the ranch back in 1981. "I am always looking for a 'Wow' factor in things and this place screamed a particular 'Wow!' The place wasn't just some little ranch — it was a knockout. It had a natural extravagance of

beauty that we found irresistible."

The place truly had a quality Ralph and Ricky had been looking for. It offered a landscape one could get lost in and long seasons that could be savored. "Colorado was an escape for us. It had nothing — yet everything — to do with what I did," he says. "It was about nature and being with animals and life under a big sky." The ranch, some 16,000-plus acres, represents a place for the Laurens to simply "be." "The West to me is about purity," Lauren says. "When I watch Western movies or read books on the West, I can see the purity that was there. It had character and age. It makes me want to be there. This place is where I knew I wanted to live."

Today the Double RL Ranch, named for both Ricky and Ralph Lauren, has a lodge, or main house, five guest houses, the Cookhouse, a saloon/theater, and five tepees. The ranch is made up of a series of dispersed dwellings. The Laurens and their three children stay in the lodge, a spacious two-story structure with high, beamed ceilings, huge hearths, and an open, inviting great room. A mile or so away is a guest cabin, which has two bedrooms, a small kitchen, and a sitting room. The cabin overlooks both a brook and the ranch's corrals. Just down the road are the stables and the Cookhouse, which have wooden plank floors, glowing lanterns, and photographs by Edward Curtis and William Henry Jackson. Brimming with authenticity, the Cookhouse is Lauren's pride and joy. Traditional meals include huge breakfasts with eggs, sausage, bacon, biscuits, potatoes, fruit, and muffins. "Dinner on the ranch usually consists of Double RL steaks and potatoes," Lauren smiles, "along with a cold beer or two."

PHOTOGRAPHY: ERIC WILSON

PHOTOGRAPHY: JILLIA W. THORNTON



Porch off the Lodgehouse.

While building the several houses on the property the Laurens used only antique wood, much of it dating from the mid-19th century, which had been bought from dealers or taken from old outbuildings on his own land. The furnishings are equally

"Lauren-esque," and as one would imagine, painstakingly genuine, from the Native American rugs on the floors to the period creaking screen doors. Like all his life works, nothing here is left to chance. Modern necessities, like lighting and plumbing, were made to be gloriously comfortable and efficient yet as unobtrusive as possible. Besides the buildings on the ranch, there are five "guest" tepees that are used during the warmer months. Each was made locally with covers hand-painted by Native artists. They are among his favorites, as they represent the purity he had been seeking. A part of the Double RL story.

"We spend most of our time at the ranch during the month of July," he says. "I try to ride every day. I love riding. Afternoons are sometimes spent walking in the hills with Ricky or taking a drive. I have a few sports cars and a couple of old Ford trucks,



Deck off the Saloon (where lunch is often served).

some Jeeps, and, oh yes, a red Ferrari. I like the diversity."

Occasionally, the Laurens think about making Colorado their full-time residence. "Believe it or not, I don't really like all the formality of the city," he says. "In New York it's always, Who are you sitting next to at the museum dinner? Are you at the right table in a restaurant? Are you being recognized? There aren't any of those kinds of pressures on the ranch. And there are days I think I could run things from here. But then I realize that if I did, it wouldn't be a place to escape to anymore."

Ranchers will tell you that ranching is anything but an escape, and Lauren's romantic positioning of the Double RL belies what actually goes on there. He runs it like a business and is highly involved with the almost thousand head of cattle that produce, naturally, Double RL-brand beef. He is a good neighbor and has hired quality help who run the ranch to make a profit. He and his family are involved with the community and contribute to local schools and the library. He understands the close-knit history of the

area and has wanted to be a fit. A proper Westerner.

"When I was a kid," Lauren remembers, "Westerns were very important to me. I wanted to be a cowboy and ride horses. Back then, I was inspired

by all things Western. John Wayne was always one of my heroes and I was drawn to the American cowboy mystique and the raw integrity of the West. I think the spirit of Western style has a rugged elegance and authenticity that people want to relate to. There's both a sensibility and honesty to the clothing that gives it an enduring appeal. Western clothes are the most distinctively American of all clothing."

For more than 37 years, the West has remained a continuing source of inspiration for Ralph Lauren's designs. It is about tradition and lasting things, and although the Double RL Ranch is

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still a work in progress, there's a real feeling of heritage there. "I have always loved vintage things because of what they said to me, but it wasn't until I spent the time at the ranch that I found my

true inspiration for Western style — the ruggedness, the sensibility. It's not at all about fashion; it's about heritage and taste. That is my world."

Seeing how many people love Ralph Lauren's world, it makes perfect sense. And as a Westerner by passion, he is honored to be a continuing part of that tradition I spoke of earlier, every late November in Ft. Worth, Texas, inside that cow-town arena. All those dress shirts carrying his name on all those cowboys riding all those cutting horses, dancing that timeless dance with the cows. Another ongoing story.



Ralph and Ricky.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GALELIE DE CHAMAROT

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