Counting to 10

Add first. Then multiply. As ranch sorting numbers grow, the future of cow horse competition gets brighter for everyone.

Article and photos by Betsy Lynch

Eleven cows. Two riders. Sixty seconds. The equation is simple. In ranch sorting, the team with the most cows in the quickest time wins. If you can count to 10, you can play. And "play" is the operative word.

In just three years, promoters Dave Wolfe and Van Gemmill have swelled the ranks of the Ranch Sorting National Championships (RSNC) like the rising tide – from fewer than a thousand sorters in 2007 to nearly 5,000 in 2010.

But big prize money is not the candy that's luring people to the sport. The attraction is more like the scent of freshly baked bread – wholesome and satisfying. It's a recipe that calls for a heaping cup of fun.

Wolfe and Gemmill, along with their team of event producers, clinicians, and volunteers, are inviting more people to the party every day and working hard to satisfy their craving to work cattle. And for many riders, that first minute in a round pen with a small herd of cows is just the kick they're looking for.

(Left) Dave Wolfe of Wellington, Colo., is the president of the Ranch Sorting National Championships. (Right) Oklahoma horseman Van Gemmill recognized the broad appeal of ranch sorting and partnered with Wolfe to launch the RSNC in 2007.

Dave Wolfe coaches a newcomer on positioning her horse to stop, turn and move the cattle before she rides into the sorting pen.

Growing an idea

Ranch sorting is not new, of course. It's based on traditional ranch work when cattle are divvied up by size, weight or gender for weaning, culling, breeding, marketing or pasturing.

The two masterminds behind the fledgling RSNC both came to sorting through their involvement in team penning. Wolfe owned and operated the National Team Penning Championships, the largest team penning organization in the U.S, which he has since sold. Gemmill, a businessman and former racecar driver, is a competitive amateur team penner who also produced events in Ponca City, Okla.

For sporting purposes, sorting has long been included on the team penning roster. However, it has sometimes been viewed as the "red-headed stepchild," according to Gemmill. Many different formats have been used over the years, but eventually the contest evolved into the figure-8-style event that we see today, where cattle are sorted from one round pen into another through a 12-foot opening.

This development was pivotal. For starters, it has given ranch sorting much broader appeal than an open arena format. The cattle are contained. The pace is slower. Both horses and cows are easier to control. The working environment is safe.

"When you're in a big arena running a horse wide open, there just aren't very many people who are comfortable doing that," Gemmill observed. "My wife is one of them. She just didn't want to go that fast anymore. When she saw ranch sorting, she just fell in love with it."

When Gemmill and Wolfe got together, they talked about ranch sorting's growth potential. They agreed that they could "mushroom the sport into something much bigger." They formed the Ranch Sorting National Championships in February 2007 and forged ahead. Last summer, their personal optimism was rewarded with nearly 3,800 teams competing at the RSNC finals in Ardmore, Okla. – up from 3,300 teams in 2009.

That's just the beginning, they predict. They point to team roping, with approximately 40,000 USTRC members and currently the largest single-event Western discipline, as an initial benchmark they'd like to reach. But because ranch sorting is easier from a technical perspective, they ambitiously hope one day to surpass roping for the top spot. They're currently promoting ranch sorting as "The No. 1 Equine Family Sport," because mom, dad and the kids can all do it. Grandparents, too.

Consider Ann Schwartzkopf from Atwood, Colo. She attended her first ranch sorting clinic in 2009. She and her husband run cattle, but until she started sorting, she had never competed in any sports.

"I have worked cattle, but pushing them from one field to another or down the road is different than sorting them off by numbers," she said. "I'm not quite a novice, but I'm still in the beginning ranks. My husband is more competitive than I am. I'm just in it to do it with my

grandkids. Grandma has to learn how to do it better," she added with a smile. Her equine partner is her 18-year-old ranch gelding.

Grass-roots enthusiasm

What both Gemmill and Wolfe seem to keenly understand is that organizations such as RSNC grow from the bottom up, not from the top down. So, like any well-structured multilevel marketing program, they're using a grass-roots approach to build a solid and enthusiastic base for ranch sorting. RSNC gives first-time participants a free membership to RSNC, and every member who brings someone new to an event gets their membership renewed for free, too.

Equally important, organizers don't waste any time getting people into the sorting pen. Last spring at Colorado State University's Equine Center, Wolfe and his compatriots spent a full day educating newcomers in back-to-back two-hour clinics. What's more, they had them competing the very same night. One hundred forty-seven people showed up – almost all first-timers. The neophytes sorted six head of cattle for a jackpotted $15 entry fee. It was a great hook.

Sure, some of the riders were green, and the horsemanship wasn't always pretty. But enthusiasm was high. And Wolfe's team of clinicians and coaches were on hand to talk riders through their runs, encouraging them to soften their hands, slow down and concentrate on finding their cattle. The next day, a sanctioned sorting was held so people could come back and see how it's done by the more experienced set.

Critics might contend that this fast-track approach puts the cart before the horse. Yet longtime horseman Gene DeGroot, who often helps at such clinics, disagrees.

"This is not something you just talk about," he said. "Until you've actually done it, you haven't learned anything."

DeGroot grew up on a ranch and says he could ride before he could walk. He understands that being on horseback is a lot more fun – whether you're a novice or not.

"When someone says, we should have people work cattle on foot first, I tell them that if God wanted us to tennis-shoe express everything, he would have given us four legs instead of two," he laughed.

Like anything to do with horses, finesse in ranch sorting comes with time and practice. Organizers know their first goal is to give people a tantalizing taste of it so they'll want to come back for more. It tickles them to see new participants so pumped.

"The neatest thing about this is that if someone can ride, they can do it," DeGroot observed. "They don't have to own a high-powered horse. They don't have to be real technical. They can just come and be a cowgirl or cowboy for the day. That's what I see attracting people."

Cattle considerations

Even as the demand for authentic ranch work declines, horse sports help keep Western traditions alive. But cows are an expensive component of the cowboy culture. And the high cost of livestock has limited participation by many middle-class horse owners in cattle events.

One RSNC goal has been to keep sorting affordable. Entry fees and clinic costs are generally under $50, even at the national finals. Organizers also de-emphasize the need for expensive horses, tack and apparel, although people naturally aspire to better horses and equipment as their dedication to the sport grows.

But it must also be profitable for the event producers, notes Wolfe, who hosts a number of sortings at his own ranch near Wellington, Colo.

"I pushed the team penning as hard as I could for many years," Wolfe acknowledged. "My biggest hurdle was finding producers for the events. The interest was there by the contestants, but it was hard to find producers who were willing to take the risk because of the overhead."

Currently, the RSNC has more than 100 producers who, last year,

Ranch sorting is as simple as counting to 10, so it appeals to kids and grandparents – and all ages between.

Most sorters agree that the hot seat is working the gate. It takes a bold but responsive horse to turn back the bovine tide. (Below) When the flag is up, it means the cattle are ready. The team will have 60 seconds to sort the herd.

Joyce Kelley and her 21-year-old Arabian-cross gelding made the switch from endurance riding to ranch sorting two year ago. RSNC is open to all breeds, but traditional stock horses are in the majority.

hosted 270 sortings.

"It's day and night for this ranch sorting," Wolfe noted. "I can get on the phone and call someone in every state and find someone who is willing to put on a ranch sorting."

One reason is it takes far fewer cattle to hold a ranch sorting than it does to put on a team penning or a cutting. Ten teams can sort one set of 11 cows. The bunch is numbered 0 through 9 and one cow is left blank. Each number is called once during the set. The spare – or "trash cow" – is there so that the last numbered cow must be separated from it. That's more challenging than simply running the last cow out of the pen.

What's more, the cattle can be regrouped, renumbered and used more than once. At a cutting, the formula is generally two to three head of fresh cattle for each contestant – and let's face it, no one wants to cut a rerun if they can help it.

In sorting, the opposite is true. Since the herd isn't settled after they've been run into the pen, a fresh set can pose its own set of challenges. Cows that have been in the pen before and moved through the gate a time or two may be a hair more cooperative.

Also, most stockmen are not averse to having their cows worked at a sorting. Compared to a large team penning arena, a 50- to 60-foot round pen is a pretty controlled environment. Riders generally don't break out of a trot, and each team has just 60 seconds to sort. (In a handicapped class, some teams may have up to 76 seconds to work, but more on that later.) In any event, time limits keep livestock from being stressed.

Growing circle of friends

Despite the competitive nature of sorting, contestants need not feel stressed either.

"There are a few keys to our success," Wolfe explained. "Number one is the focus on fun. Number two is that we want everyone to feel welcome. And the only way we can ensure that everyone feels welcome is to provide an opportunity for anybody to ride with anybody."

Using a draw system, all the contestants are randomly partnered for at least one ride in each division. Someone can come to a sorting solo, and he or she will be paired with another rider.

"This gives you an opportunity to automatically be a partner without even asking," Wolfe said. "It creates new friends."

Contestants can sort up to five times (paying an entry fee for each ride) and choose up to four of their partners. However, they must reserve one ride for the draw. So even if you're brand-new to sorting, you won't remain a stranger for long.

Wolfe admits that not everyone is enamored with the idea of riding

Ranch sorting success depends upon communication and teamwork. Every contestant will be paired with at least one "draw partner," so be prepared to make new friends at RSNC events.

Aaron Ralston (mounted) hosts *The Ride* on RFD TV. He taped a special segment at the ranch sorting clinic held at Colorado State University in Fort Collins last spring.

with a stranger. Some have complained that if they can't choose their partner, they're just throwing their entry money away. But the data doesn't bear this out.

At the national finals in 2009, Wolfe said they tracked 3,300 rides and found that of the people who won money, the greater percentage did better with their draw partners than with their chosen partners.

One college student lamented that she had surpassed her dad in the rankings by riding with other partners. She's hoping he wins more money this year so he can advance to the next level.

"By tracking the winnings, we've proved over and over that you have just about as good of luck with your draw team as the person you think is your best possible partner," Wolfe confirmed. "What's more, you can make good friends with that partner who you may have never known."

The bottom line from an association standpoint is that each person has an important role in helping to grow the sport. "We want all of our members to be willing to lend a hand in welcoming newcomers and aiding in their success," he said.

Steppingstone

Wolfe and Gemmill also hope that managers of other performance horse organizations perceive ranch sorting as a complementary program, a means of gaining skills and confidence on cattle. At some point, many riders will be ready to challenge themselves with other cattle events. Reining and cow horse trainer Aaron Ralston, who hosts *The Ride* on RFD-TV, has embraced ranch sorting for just this reason. He's using it to teach his clients rudimentary cow work; they'll advance from there.

Gemmill points to another upside: Ranch sorting is creating a middle market for the $2,500 to $7,500 cow-bred horse. While new sorters may start with the

mount they ride down the trail, they quickly see the advantage in having a horse with an aptitude for handling cattle. Although a horse might not be a star in cutting, reining or reined cowhorse competititon, it might be perfectly suited to the sorting pen.

Fairness factors

Sorting itself relies on simple addition, but the organizers have applied some higher math formulas to keeping the contests fair. Gemmill enthusiastically explains their use of a "bell curve" and how the upper and lower 15th percentiles determine which riders move up and down the ratings ladder. In laymen's speak, RSNC has nine levels. Beginners are Ones. High-level competitors are Nines. The system is similar to those used in roping and team penning to rank contestants.

However, when riders first come to an event, they're asked to complete a survey. The information helps event organizers rate them based on their horsemanship experience.

Just because you've never sorted doesn't mean you'll be ranked with the Ones. Someone who has competed in just about anything on horseback – cutting, roping, reining, pleasure, barrel racing or even dressage – probably doesn't belong in a division designed to nurture novice riders.

The same can be said for someone who cowboys for a living or grew up on a ranch. Such riders might start out as Threes or Fours. They'll then be re-evaluated based on their earnings ratio.

Gemmill also points out that people who start as Ones move up as soon as they earn their third paycheck. Twos are promoted to Threes once they've won $1,000. After that, it's a bit more complicated. The rating depends on money earned compared to money spent in relation to other riders within that same division. That's where the bell curve comes in. The number of times a person actually competes also plays into the equation. Once or twice a year, the ratings are reviewed. Sorters may be promoted, demoted or remain right where they are.

Rider rankings are also used to handicap teams in the open sorts. Teams with lower numbers get extra seconds. Here's how that works: Teammates' rating numbers are added together and then subtracted from 18 seconds. The remainder is how many bonus seconds the team gets. For example, if both riders are ranked as ones, the team would get 16 extra seconds [18 – 2 = 16]. A team comprised of two sixes, would get 66 seconds to sort [18 – 12 = 6 extra seconds]. Two nines get the standard 60 seconds. It doesn't exactly level the playing field, admits Gemmill, but every second counts.

Precision sport

Ranch sorting competitors love that the clock is an unbiased judge – no worries that your horse is still wearing his winter coat or that your hat is a 10X not a 100X. There's nothing subjective about the outcome: cows + time = results.

And although the event is ruled by the clock, ranch sorting is indeed a precision sport. It takes skill to cut individual cattle and move them through the gate in the correct order. It takes a tough and determined gate horse to stop and turn back a bevy of bovine that have been flushed off the fence. If even one cow crosses the threshold out of sequence, you're done. Cattle are the great equalizer.

Wolfe laughed out loud when asked whether the top-rated riders usually get all 10 head across the line in under 60 seconds. "Usually?" he said, repeating the question with a grin. "No."

That, of course, is one of the frustrating and wonderful things about cattle events. Every time a team rides into that pen, it's a brand-new game.

If you'd like to learn more about the sport, log onto www.ranchsorting.com, or contact the RSNC by calling 970-897-2901 or e-mailing info@rsnc.us. ★