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Battle In The Saddle

The Right Sort

More than 600 contestants, 6,000 teams contend for a piece of a \$298,649 payout at Ranch Sorting National Championships.

By Robin Fowler



(Top - bottom) The Performance Arena at State Fair Park in Oklahoma City was packed with sorters for the finals at Battle In The Saddle; Neither Blew Hall, daughter of Jim and Jennifer Hall, nor her pony seem intimidated by the cattle at the Ranch Sorting National Championships. Perhaps that's because the Halls run 1,500 head of cattle in Nuyaka, Okla.; Sorting is a rapidly growing sport in which participants of all ages and abilities can compete together, making it a popular option for families. —Photos by JimDavisPhoto.com

When the Merial Ranch Sorting National Championships moved to Oklahoma City for six days of competition at the Battle In The Saddle, it was pretty much a revelation to all concerned – from the cutters, ropers, barrel racers, mounted shooters and ranch horse competitors who stopped by to check out the sport, to the sorters who shared State Fair Park with nationally known trainers and contestants from other disciplines.

“We started this five years ago and it has literally exploded,” said Dave Wolfe, who founded RSNIC after sorting emerged from team penning. “It does involve more finesse, so the horseman likes it. It is less stressful on cattle, so the cattleman likes it. Economically, it is less expensive to put on, so the producer likes it.

“And obviously, the contestants love it.”

When it was all said and sorted at the Battle In The Saddle, top contestants shared in a whopping

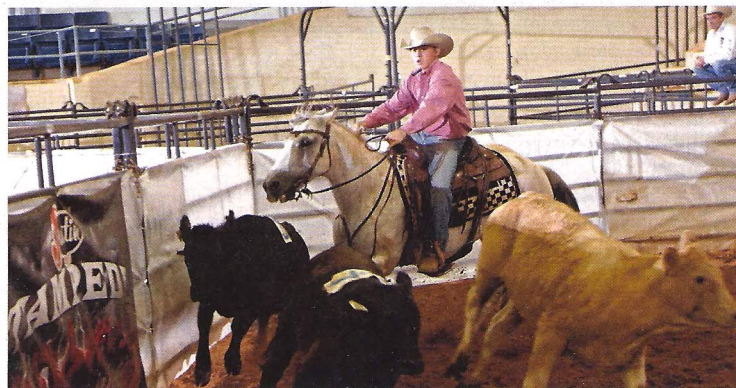
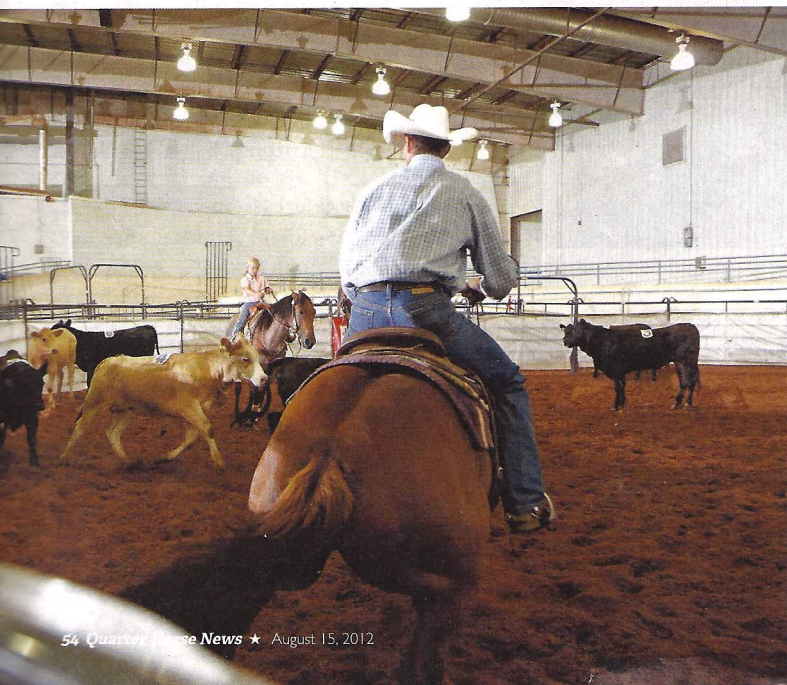
payout of \$298,649 plus prizes.

The competition involves two 50-foot to 60-foot round pens joined by a 12-foot to 16-foot opening. Eleven cattle are in one pen, with 10 of them tagged with a number ranging from 0 to 9. An announcer calls out a number, and the two-person team must move the cattle to the other pen in sequential order, beginning with the number announced, in the allotted time. The team with the most cattle sorted in the least amount of time is the winner.

In addition, a handicapping system rates each participant, and the ratings are combined to determine the division in which the team competes. Contestants often compete up to 10 times but never more than once with the same team member per division. “That keeps it friendly,” said Wolfe, president of RSNIC. The association is headquartered in Wellington, Colo., near Fort Collins.

At the Battle In The Saddle, 638 contestants from 30 states competed on 6,058 teams in divisions

The AQHA youth sorting class drew 92 teams at the Battle In The Saddle in Oklahoma City. —Photo by JimDavisPhoto.com

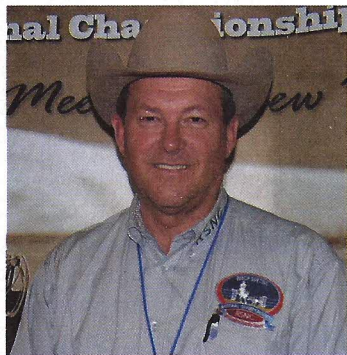


appropriate for everyone from “a novice rider on a novice horse who has never participated in cow horse activities” to the professional trainer.

“With our rating system, grandparents can ride with their grandkids. And affordability is huge,” Wolfe said.

At the average weekend show, the cost generally is less than \$25 per team, he said. At a show such as the National Championship, the cost doubles but still is less than \$50. “So for \$250, you can ride all day,” said Wolfe of the weekend shows.

The association schedules about 400 shows a year, with events in 44 states. Texas and Oklahoma



Dave Wolfe, a judge for AQHA and APHA, founded the Ranch Sorting National Championships five years ago. Today there are 16,000 members across the country. —Photo by Robin Fowler

have the most members, “but the East Coast is exploding right now,” he said.

The association currently boasts 16,000 members with numbers growing by almost 50 percent a year. By the Championship show next July, Wolfe expects the association to have 24,000 members.

About 75 percent of new members have never been involved in equine sports, according to the RSNC website, www.rsnc.us. But the math is easy: Of the 8,000 new members expected this year, 25 percent of them – or 2,000 people – are either moving over from other equine sports or adding sorting to their radar. Membership is free the first year, and any year

thereafter to anyone who brings in a new member. The annual fee is \$50 to members not recruiting new members.

The association is also attracting trainers to the ranks, said Wolfe, a judge in both the American Quarter Horse Association and the American Paint Horse Association. “The market is so huge for ranch sorting horses right now,” he said.

Jackpots offer about a 60 percent payback. Another attraction is that people new to the sport need not have to pay for special equipment or show clothing. That’s because there are few rules.

“I wanted to put something together with as few rules as possible,” he said.

“We encourage the cowboy image,” Wolfe said, but contestants can wear short-sleeve shirts as long as they are Western. They can wear cowboy hats or go bare-headed, but baseball caps are not allowed.

There also are no requirements regarding equipment. But contestants can be disqualified if a bit causes bleeding or if the horse appears otherwise injured, he said, pausing to scrutinize a horse that appeared to have pulled up lame in one of the pens.

The association has welcomed the involvement with Battle In The Saddle and hopes to return next year. The show brought attention to the sport of sorting, he said, and with contestants coming from both coasts, Oklahoma offers a central location.

“Contestants love it here. We had to work around all the other activities but we’re happy to do it,” he said, grinning when it was suggested that even larger crowds might put them in the facility’s major arenas in the future. The recent show was conducted in the Performance Arena and practice arenas in the barns, but not in the main coliseum arena.

Did Wolfe ever expect the association he started to get this big?

“Yes,” he said, “and I think it’s going to get a whole lot bigger. But we’ve got to keep it family-friendly. People are so excited about it right now. People are just bubbling.” ★

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