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The Gift from  
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by Loren Entz



ROSS HECOX

Events such as stock horse and ranch sorting offer the appeal of a family-friendly atmosphere.



# Just Press “PLAY”

The Western horse industry offers more options than ever for riders who want to compete and have fun in the process. What is fueling the rise in amateur-driven events, and what does it mean for competitors and would-be exhibitors?

By SUSAN MORRISON

**J**UST A FEW YEARS AGO, ranch sorting was something of a backyard sport. Small practice and jackpot events started springing up around the country, and Dave Wolfe took notice.

When Wolfe formed Ranch Sorting National Championships in Wellington, Colorado, in 2007, he expected it to grow, and it did. Its first national finals attracted 900 teams. But it didn't stop. This summer, Wolfe expects upwards of 5,000 teams at the finals. In just four years, membership has rapidly climbed to more than 13,000.

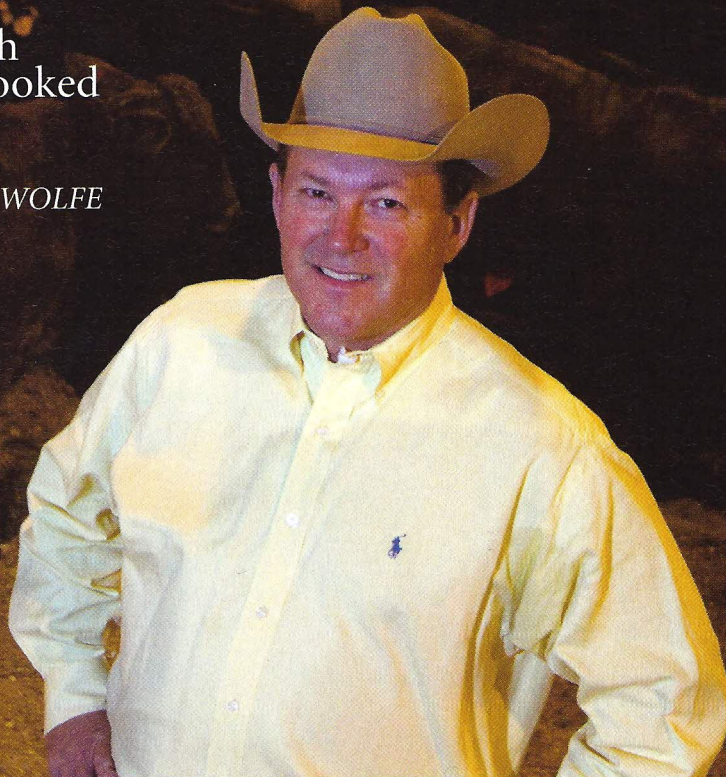
The event's future looks even stronger, Wolfe says. In fact, he anticipates that ranch sorting could overtake team roping as one of the Western industry's most popular events.

"It's a great introduction to cow horse activities," Wolfe says. "You don't have to have a trainer. You can have your own horse, ride him when you want, and go on the weekend and have fun."

“When we started the association, we wanted to emphasize fun and affordability. I think both of those things get overlooked sometimes in the equine industry.”

—DAVE WOLFE

Dave Wolfe sees no end to the potential of ranch sorting, one of the fastest-growing events in the horse industry. “It’s a way to let your hair down and have a little fun,” he says. “And it’s you against the cattle and the clock. It’s not a judged event. People like that part of it.”



Ranch sorting is just one of the events that seem to be changing the way people show horses. Cowboy mounted shooting, stock horse or ranch versatility competition, competitive trail—all are relatively new events that offer both accomplished and new riders a chance to have fun with their horses. Even the breed and event associations have joined the movement, encouraging new exhibitors with leveling programs to promote competition on equal footing and entry-level shows to encourage novice riders.

The shift is driven by several factors, according to Wolfe and others who are involved in the organization and promotion of events geared toward newcomers and those in search of a change—namely, something enjoyable and financially feasible to do with horses.

#### GETTING STARTED

Wolfe has spent most of his life around horses, and more than 20 years as a judge for the American Quarter Horse Association and American Paint Horse Association. He’s seen many changes in the industry, but thinks the growth of ranch sorting is a sign that horse owners are searching for new ways to be more involved.

“When we started the association, we wanted to emphasize fun and affordability,” he says. “I think both of those things get overlooked sometimes in the equine industry. Everybody is after the money and the prestige. We wanted to make sure that everyone who rode with us had fun and the family could afford the event.”

Another appealing aspect of sorting is that, although competition is fierce at the top levels, it’s beginner-friendly. Two riders must sort a numbered set of cattle in numerical order from one round pen to another, and when starting out in the sport, it’s acceptable to go slow.

“We have a rating system where there’s an introductory level for a brand new beginner who’s never sorted,” Wolfe says. “As soon as that person wins three checks, they are automatically moved out of that beginner spot, which keeps it fresh for other beginners. That decreases the intimidation factor in getting involved in the sport.

“Sorting is in a controlled area, so it’s great for introductions to cattle work. That’s a big plus in introducing new people. You can go in there at a walk or trot and be successful, and there’s

no other cow horse activity that is that way. Everything else is in a [larger] open arena.”

Wolfe and others involved in growing associations say that instructional clinics boost attendance and give newcomers confidence in participating. RSNC has offered clinics with horsemen such as Aaron Ralston and Ken McNabb, and they have been well received. Contestants at American Stock Horse Association and Stock Horse of Texas events—which include reining, stock horse pleasure, trail and cow work—have long had the benefit of a clinic prior to each show. B.F. Yeates, who was instrumental in the development of both associations, says the addition of clinics was essential to grow the events.

“There’s no question that the more you can get help and get confidence, the better off you are,” Yeates says. “Education is exciting. Growth is exciting, and it comes from people trying to get better.”

The clinics also help people understand the judging system, he says.

“Our positive scoring system has made a lot of difference,” says Yeates, also an AQHA judge and an original organizer of the American Quarter Horse Youth Association. “We post the

scores, and contestants have feedback after their run. Too many of our [judging] systems are pretty tight. If you do this or that, you're disqualified. People get discouraged if they disqualify and don't get a score. We've developed a system where it's hard to disqualify. People can look at their scores and then go to a clinic and say, 'I've been getting a low score here the last two times. Watch me and tell me what I'm doing wrong.' It goes back to education. It's powerful."

In fact, Yeates says, after a few years of offering clinics at SHOT events, directors considered discontinuing them.

"We thought we had it covered and we would just start having the shows," he says. "People wanted those clinics. So we have never even thought of cutting them out since then. We don't schedule a show without a clinic ahead of it. The secret to your success is good clinicians. It's critical to growth. You have to find somebody who can teach and help people improve."

Although he laughingly calls the clinics "group therapy," Yeates says in all seriousness that another advantage is affordability.

"It keeps it affordable, opposed to a one-on-one lesson, which gets to be pretty expensive," he says. "If you're impatient and you want to learn right now, you may go and take private lessons. But in that public forum [at clinics], participants learn a lot from the instructor and from each other. I can point to a lot of people that I've followed over the years, and their whole education [in horsemanship] has been through these clinics. The horses have been trained by the owners, and the owner has gotten help at the clinics. It's a little slower process, but it still works."

#### JOINING IN

Most horse owners say that one of the best things about horses is meeting like-minded people and talking about, well, horses. Although starting to compete in a new event can be a bit intimidating, many of the newer organizations are making the transition friendlier.

The stock horse clinics Yeates mentions are instructional, but they also are good ways for new contestants to get acquainted.

"People enjoy spending a day together before they show," he says. "They'll tell

you that they like the fellowship. It's a social activity as well as a clinic."

Wolfe has made it a point to encourage camaraderie among ranch sorting contestants, too.

"We have an automatic draw in every class, so every rider has the opportunity to draw up with someone else at the show," he says. "That gives you a great chance to meet new people that you might not have met otherwise. If you ride with that person and have some luck and win, then the next time you might choose them as a sorting partner, when ordinarily you might never have ridden with them. It opens the door."

"A lot of times at horse shows, people come in little groups, ride with their friends and go home. I think the automatic draw is really important and is making a big difference in our association."

Ralston, who has presented clinics in locations as varied as Maine, New York and Arkansas, says the education aspect is "extremely important."

"I think a lot of people are hesitant to participate in some events because they don't have the knowledge," he says. "The

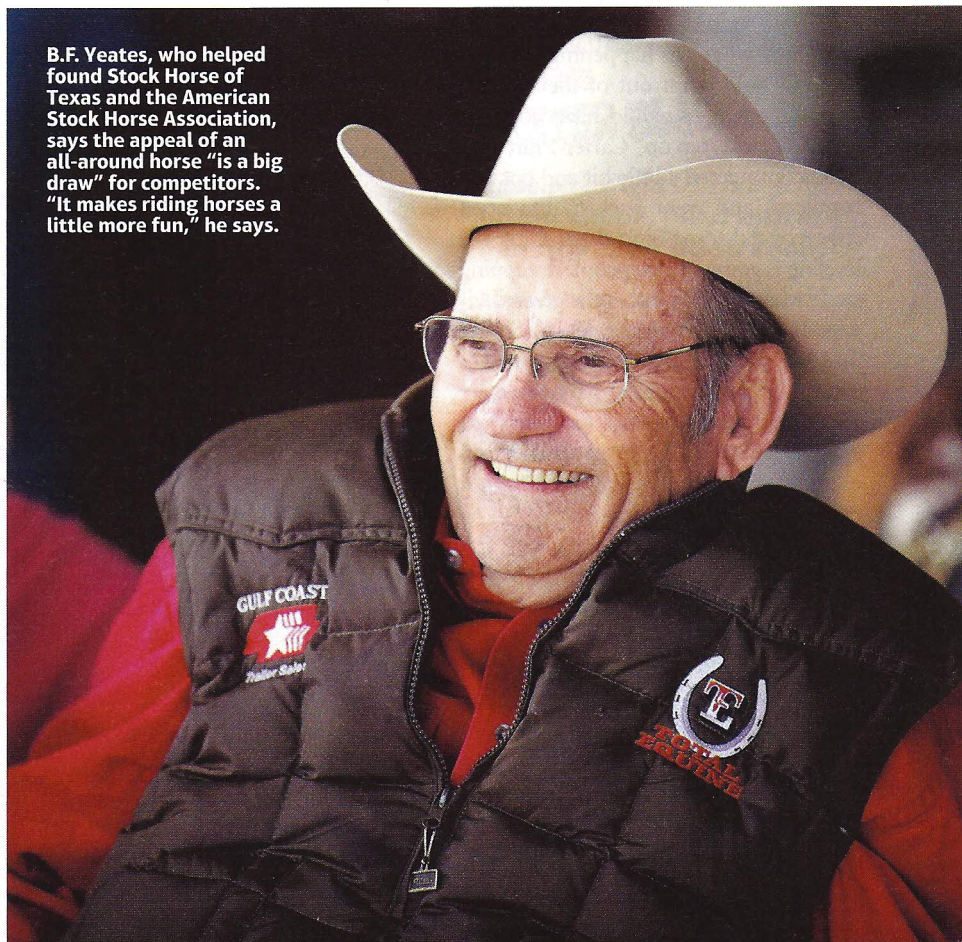
welcoming aspect of the clinics opens the door and rolls out the red carpet for people, and lets them know they're welcome. They give people the knowledge they need, so they're not afraid of being ignorant when they show up at the competition. These clinics are a big reason why ranch sorting and stock horse competitions are growing so fast."

Finding entry points into the showing world seems to be key to the growth of amateur events. Two years ago, the National Reining Horse Association introduced its Green Reiner program, where horse ownership is not required, entry fees are low, awards are given at several achievement levels, and only an associate membership is required, offering substantial savings over a regular membership. AQHA—the world's largest breed registry and based in Amarillo, Texas—is also taking steps to make sure its shows appeal to newcomers.

"Every sport has a handicapping system, and with our new leveling program we're going to be no different," says Patti Carter-Pratt, executive director of shows for AQHA.

The leveling system provides members

**B.F. Yeates, who helped found Stock Horse of Texas and the American Stock Horse Association, says the appeal of an all-around horse "is a big draw" for competitors. "It makes riding horses a little more fun," he says.**





Patti Carter-Pratt, AQHA's executive director of shows, says the rookie class that will be offered this year and the leveling program that begins in 2013 put the association "on the right track" toward providing more introductory opportunities for members to show.

with a ranking based on either the points they or their horse have earned. Although AQHA previously had a novice division, exhibitors who earned 10 points or more would be out of that division. The leveling program provides additional steps for those who are new to showing.

"I think what was happening was that people would point out of their novice division and then would have nowhere to go as a next step up," Carter-Pratt says. "They floundered a little bit and got discouraged, and went back to the open shows or did something else. I think the leveling is going to give people a stepping stone when they get out of the green division or when their horses do. It will give them the intermediate level and a place to step up where they don't have to worry about competing against the open exhibitors unless they choose to. They can enter up, but an open exhibitor cannot enter down."

Ralston, who has shown to an AQHA world championship, says some people might view breed shows as intimidating, but the leveling program will provide newcomers with an easy way to get involved where they're comfortable.

"I think it's phenomenal," he says. "There will be so many different divisions that it's a lot less intimidating when you know you can go in and compete against somebody that just started riding, that

has the same level of ability that you have, that has the same type of horse you have. There's a place for everybody to fit in."

The leveling plan was approved last July and will go into effect in 2013, although there will be "test" shows this year. It involves three levels: Rookie, based on the exhibitor and horse's points combined; Novice, based on the exhibitor's experience; and Green, based on

the horse's experience. The Intermediate level, which was initiated in 2011 at the association's three world championship shows, is based on the exhibitor's experience, and the Progressive level is based on the horse's experience. Both will be fully implemented in 2013.

The Rookie system was tested at 10 AQHA-approved shows in 2011, and will be implemented this year. Rookie classes will be offered in open, amateur and youth divisions.

"Our pilot rookie shows were really

successful," Carter-Pratt says. "We got really positive feedback. We think it will be a good introductory place for people to come in and show. Now we're going to have leveling test shows to make sure we have the tools to give to the show managers, and so people will understand the concept and embrace it and participate."

AQHA also has formed alliances with event-specific associations, including RSNC and the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association, to encourage people to participate with those associations and also get AQHA points. Dual-approved shows are becoming more commonplace.

Carter-Pratt says the success of AQHA shows, and particularly making them more inviting to newcomers, rests largely on show managers.

"We are really supporting the show managers and encouraging the concept of them having all-day fees, where they have one fee structure that includes the stalls and all of the entries for that show," she says. "I think that the horse shows where the managers are thinking outside of the box and changing with the economic times are doing really well."

AQHA also is focusing on education for show managers, which Carter-Pratt says is essential because it trickles down to new exhibitors.

**"A lot of people are hesitant to participate in some events because they don't have the knowledge. Clinics are a big reason why ranch sorting and stock horse competitions are growing so fast."**

—AARON RALSTON

"We want to have our show managers educated and be able to give them good direction so they can help members and be encouraging," she says. "They're key, because the show secretary or show manager is sometimes the first taste of AQHA a newcomer gets. We need to make sure they're user-friendly and welcoming."

#### NO LIMITS

The nation's economy may still be faltering, but judging from the growth of horse activities in recent years, it appears

likely that owners aren't going to give up their passion for competition anytime soon. Yeates sees the current atmosphere as a positive for the industry as a whole, not just for those who are seeking and finding new ways to participate.

"I think it's good for the horse industry," he says. "I don't think you're taking away from the specialties. I don't see the cutting horse business or the reining horse business getting any smaller. It is an enlargement of the total picture. A lot of these people fell through the cracks. They've been in this [showing] at some time or another, and played a bit, and it didn't work for them, and nobody was there to pick them up and bring them on. Those people just had their horses at the house and weren't doing anything with them."

Now, he says, the success of more-affordable events where people feel welcome is giving those folks a new place to participate.

"The horse industry is a growth industry," Yeates says. "It has no top on it. It ought to be everybody's goal to try to encourage somebody to get a horse and do something with it, get involved. There's no limit to where it can go. It's just how much we want to promote it, and how many ideas we can come up with that will reach out to another set of

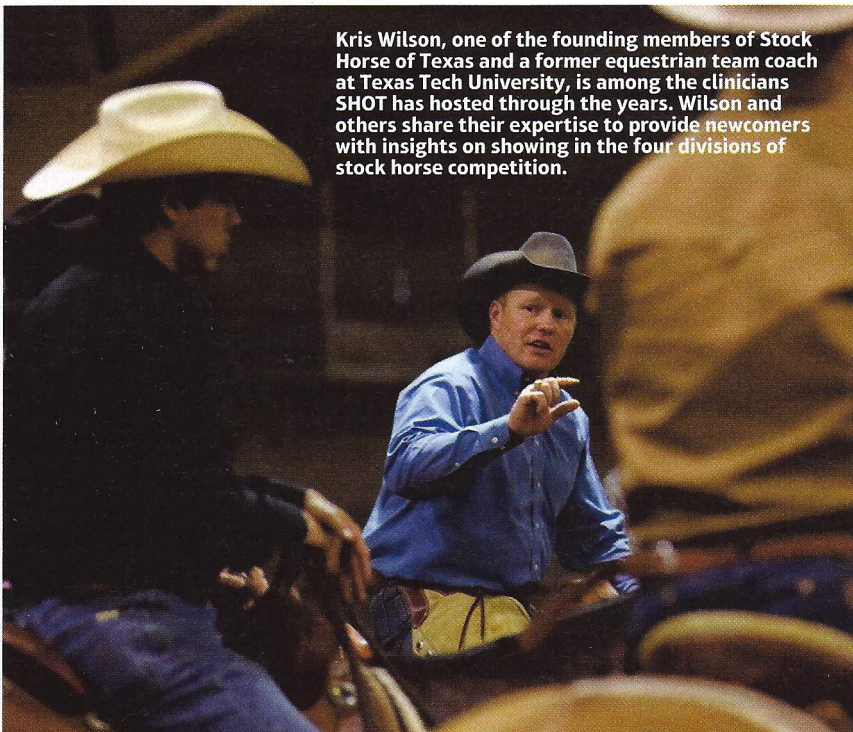
people and get them playing the game."

Ralston, too, sees unlimited potential for events like ranch sorting and stock horse competition.

"While the economy is struggling, ranch sorting and other events will continue to skyrocket," he says. "You'll not only see people getting into horse events for the first time, but you'll see people from more-expensive, time-consuming events become involved. It's going to grow from the top down and the bottom up, as far as new participants."

And while major futurities and world championship shows continue to draw exhibitors, the grassroots of the horse industry will still be found at other events every weekend around the country, he adds.

"For so long, the focus has been at the top of the pyramid. That's where the money is and where the attention is," Ralston says. "Now that people are becoming more and more educated and they're beginning to be more involved themselves, the middle and the bottom of the pyramid of participants—the owners and amateurs and beginners—are doing more. That's the drive of the horse industry. That's what keeps trainers busy, that's what keeps clinicians busy, and that's what's going to keep all of our associations growing." 🐾



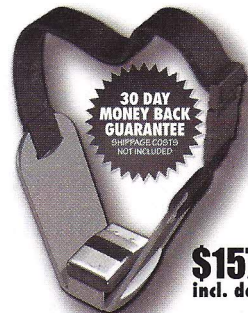
Kris Wilson, one of the founding members of Stock Horse of Texas and a former equestrian team coach at Texas Tech University, is among the clinicians SHOT has hosted through the years. Wilson and others share their expertise to provide newcomers with insights on showing in the four divisions of stock horse competition.

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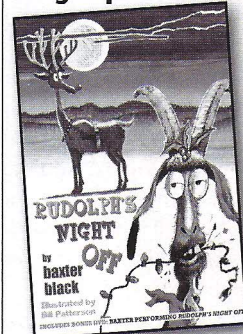
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