The King of Ranches

The most famous ranch on earth scores the AQHA Best Remuda Award.

Article by
Richard Chamberlain
Photos by Bee Silva
Work starts early on the King Ranch. It’s still dark at half past six on a mid-September morning on the Laureles division of the historic sprawling spread in South Texas. A dozen cowboys are saddling horses, each and every one a descendant of Old Sorrel, the legendary stallion that made King Ranch horses a foundation pillar of the modern American Quarter Horse.

These are nice horses, well-bred and well-conformed, cowy by nature, trained and ridden by cowboys who know what they are doing. Most of the horses this morning are between the ages of 4 and 6 – the oldest is 8 – and, with one exception, are all seasoned experts in their job.

It’ll be a little while before they get to the job. The cowboys are saddling up at the Laureles headquarters, which is a drive of 20 minutes or so from the front gate. Then it will be another half hour by trailer through pasture to the Portales Verdes pens, where Santa Gertrudis cows and their babies will be gathered, sorted, cut out, loaded and trucked to new pastures.

The one exception this morning is PGS Only Boon, a 2-year-old filly by The Boon and out of the Play Gun mare PG Tight Panties. With an O-ring snaffle in her mouth and a young cowboy in the saddle, the bay filly is eager but green, sweating like a racehorse in the subtropical heat and humidity, but jumping at every chance to turn a cow, cut a steer, block a heifer. Absorbing her lessons as she goes – “Oh, this is what you mean. Got it!!!” – the filly can scarcely control her craving for the task, answering her rider with enthusiastic interest and try.

That is, until the cowboy has to reset her saddle. Dead stop. Ricky Guerra steps off, drops the reins and adjusts the latigo and cinch. The filly Guerra calls “Powder” stands still, not moving a muscle, waiting patiently until he throws his leg over her. Back to work.

Powder, one might say, has the makings of a 200 percent horse. “She’s 90 percent muscle and 110 percent heart,” Ricky says, wiping his brow. “I love her.”

So does Henrietta “Henny” Armstrong, who helped start the filly a year ago.

“I loved riding her,” says Henny. “That filly is so cool, so much fun to ride, tried so hard to do anything you asked.”

Which was pretty much what Henny expected. A great-great-great-granddaughter of ranch founder Richard King and his wife, the former Henrietta Chamberlain, Henny grew up on her father’s ranch in Florida, where she worked cattle and rode hunters, jumpers and polo ponies. She came to the King Ranch a couple of years ago as an intern and stayed on to work fulltime on the horse crew, along with Remudero Lee Roy Montalvo and Horse Manager James Clement III, who
Divided into the Santa Gertrudis, Laureles, Norias and Encino divisions, King Ranch sprawls across 825,000 acres of South Texas, the wide-open land between the Rio Grande and Nueces rivers that on early maps was designated as Wild Horse Desert. One of the earliest settlers was Richard King, a riverboat captain who had come to Texas in 1847 during the Mexican/American War to pilot steamboats on the Rio Grande for the U.S. Army. In 1853, Capt. King bought his first parcel of 15,500 acres on Santa Gertrudis Creek to establish what would become one of the largest ranches in the world, and with little doubt, the most famous. The King Ranch today also has farming operations (cotton, grain, sugarcane, sweet corn, almonds, pistachios and turf grass) in California and Florida that bring the total to some 915,000 acres.

The South Texas operations graze more than 26,000 cattle and more than 200 American Quarter Horses.

It takes special horses to earn the AQHA award under any conditions. It takes extra-special individuals to earn it in South Texas. This is hard country, tenacious and unyielding, a mesquite-, huisache- and prickly pear-covered land where virtually every living thing – plant or animal – has an aggressive defense posture, biting, clawing, stinging, sticking,
pricking or kicking. It takes tough cattle to weather it, tough horses to handle it and tough cowboys to work it.

“The No. 1 purpose of the King Ranch horse program is to provide our 35 cowboys with the best horses in the world for their daily work,” says Ranch Manager Dave Delaney. “Every horse is on the payroll.”

The person charged with running the horse division is manager James Clement III, 35, who is a great-great-great-grandson of Richard King and with wife Paige is expecting a next-generation son in February.

“There are a lot of other things we would like to do with our horse program, too, but we must always focus first and foremost on that fact,” James says. “What do our cowboys need? What do they want? Producing a horse that can stand up to this work, this heat, this climate, this country, is King Ranch’s No. 1 goal.”

That No. 1 goal is one of the reasons that King Ranch horses are not shod. They go barefoot.

“We breed for cow sense, hardiness, endurance and soundness,” James says. “That includes good feet. We might have to put shoes on a horse in certain situations, like in the feedlot, but if a horse needs shoes on the ranch, the ranch doesn’t need him.”

Avoiding the Cut

KING RANCH CURRENTLY STANDS FOUR STALLIONS. In addition to The Boon, there are the 17-year-old brown Kineños Moon (Ritas Sweet Badger-Lil Badgers Moon by Peppy San Badger); 16-year-old sorrel Marsala Red (Play Red-Marsala Dulce by CJ Sugar); and 5-year-old brown El Rey Hidas (Taquito Sugar-Hidas Pep by Haidas Little Pep). The Boon is an 11-year-old red roan by Peptoboonsmal and out of the High Brow Cat mare Boon San Kitty, an NCHA horse of the year.

The Boon spends 10-11 months of the year on the Four Sixes Ranch at Guthrie, Texas, where he is bred AI. The other three are taken to the Sixes for a month or two to collect and freeze their semen but are turned out February 14 to spend the breeding season with the ranch’s 45 mares, which are divided into four bands of manadas for pasture breeding.

The ranch also breeds to one or two outside stallions each year, with a mare this year in foal to the High Brow Cat stallion Bet Hesa Cat.

In line with longtime King Ranch protocol, every horse on the ranch has to prove itself first as a cow horse before being allowed to breed.

“Yes sir,” James says. “All of the studs are used on the ranch first, and we assess them there before we make the decision on whether we’re going to make them a breeding sire. The first 2-year-olds of ‘Boon’ are out with cowboys now and they love them, and ‘El Rey’ is in the final process of evaluation. We’ve confirmed
five mares in foal to him this year and next year, the babies will drop, so we’ve still got a couple years to see if the El Rey babies are going to make the right type of ranch horses. And now we’re also looking at another stud prospect, Coronel Del Rancho.”

A 3-year-old sorrel, Coronel Del Rancho is by Not Ruf At All, a paternal grandson of Shining Spark who traces both top and bottom to Peppy San Badger, aka “Little Peppy.” Coronel Del Rancho goes topside to Colonel Freckles and on bottom to Mr San Peppy. Coronel Del Rancho is in training with Ben Baldus, who formerly trained for the Waggoner Ranch.

All this takes a while, so colts are not gelded before the beginning of their 2-year-old year and perhaps much later.

“Anything that has a shot as a stud, we keep intact and we keep riding them through their 2-year-old year, so they get tested in this country and on cattle,” James says. “We might send them off to an outside trainer to assess them, too, so it’s not just our biases about bloodlines and who their mamas were. We get input from people outside the program – Dr. Heird from Texas A&M, Dr. Blodgett from the Sixes, Dr. Ben Espy, a cousin who is our veterinarian out of San Antonio.”

Making the Grade

“Every time we put hands on a colt, he’s being assessed,” James says. “From the halter-breaking on, it’s just a running grading system.”

King Ranch horses are expected to make the grade.

“We want a foal that has natural curiosity and enthusiasm, that wants to be alert and pay attention all the time,” he says. “We look for a lot of life in their face and in their mannerisms early on. We like a horse to be about 15 hands at maturity, and we like the kind that fall into a lot of the cutting prospect ideas: light on their front end, an athlete with balance. We’re looking for outstanding individuals that conform to the things that our cowboys need and want.”

After they are halter-broke, colts are branded on their left butt cheek for the sire, on the right butt for the dam’s sire and on the left thigh with the Running W. The fillies get a number brand on the right side of their neck, too, which corresponds with the number of fillies each stud has each year. The ranch formerly used lip tattoos, but now implants each with a microchip under the mane.

When the colts are long yearlings, kid saddles are put on them to acclimate them to saddling. And then comes the horse crew’s favorite time of year.

“When the colts get big enough, right around when they turn 2, we put the ranch saddles on and start stepping on them,” he says. “Our crew – Henny, Lee Roy and I – start most of the colts. The three of us step on them late in their yearling year between Thanksgiving and Christmas, or early into their 2-year-old year, around January and February. It all depends on each horse and how it’s taking it.”

The crew prefers to put up to the first 30 or so rides on a colt, and then some showing some extreme athleticism might go to outside trainers such as Jeff Williams, Jesse Lennox, Hunter Meinzer, Josh King or Gary Bellanfant.

“The colt might make a cutting horse, but they’ll always make a good ranch horse,” James says. “At any rate, we take our time with them. When one has the basic stuff down – not reacting to saddling, not bucking, not spooking from a rope – he’ll go to a cowboy, and as long as they get along, that colt stays with that cowboy from then on.”

But the colt is still in school. Graduation depends on grades.

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the colt, that’s what we need to study,” James says. “You can get into pedigree and conformation, but if the horse cannot stand up to daily work, that’s the biggest negative a horse can have. That outweighs everything else we’re talking about. That does not happen very often.”

**Form to Function**

**There is no barbed wire on the King Ranch. The last section of “bob wire” that can gouge hide and can injure horses was replaced last year with Red Brand’s King Ranch Field Fence, a heavy-duty net of 9-gauge galvanized wire. It’s a matter of function coming first at King Ranch, whether bred into its horses or built into its facilities. The ranch isn’t fancy: no arched entrances, palatial barns or elaborate artistry to impress onlookers. While aesthetically pleasing and carefully maintained, everything was designed by stockmen who first and foremost were building stout and steady for the functional efficiency of handling livestock.**

That same concern with form to function is a primary reason that every horse bred and foaled on the King Ranch today is descended from Old Sorrel, most through Mr San Peppy and his most successful son, Peppy San Badger. Bred by George Clegg of Alice, Texas, Old Sorrel was a son of the Peter McCue stallion Hickory Bill and was foaled in 1915 out of a Thoroughbred mare from Kentucky. The chestnut colt was purchased by Bob and Caesar Kleberg while still on his mother and was trailed along behind his dam to the ranch, where the Kineños referred to him as “El Alazán” (“The Sorrel”) and later as “El Alazán Viejo” (“The Old Sorrel”).

Bob Kleberg often said that Old Sorrel was the best cow horse the ranch ever had. The stallion was ridden by the Klebgers until they were satisfied that he could do it all, in particular with temperament, intelligence, cow sense, endurance, good feet and a good mouth. A master breeder and geneticist, Bob then set about perpetuating the stallion’s best qualities through careful line breeding, relentless testing and selection, and rigorous culling.

In 1940, when AQHA was registering its first horses, King Ranch had eight sons and grandsons of Old Sorrel that were being bred to daughters and granddaughters of Old Sorrel. About 300 mares were in the breeding program and another 500 of both sexes were still being tested and culled in an elimination process supervised by Bob, who a few years earlier used much the same technique to create Santa Gertrudis cattle, the first breed of cattle developed in North America. The bottom half of the colts were gelded and put in with the saddle horses, the top half were broke and ridden by family members and other top horsemen, while fillies went through a similar routine. The top three or four stallions then were turned out with a carefully screened group of half-sisters and handpicked other mares for an outcross, a dozen or so daughters of the ranch’s Thoroughbred stallion Chicaro.

Ultimately, more than 100 were registered in AQHA’s first stud book. Those included Old Sorrel, who went in as P-209, and others such as Macanudo, Peppy and Ranchero. Perhaps most famous was Wimpy, who was by Old Sorrel’s son Solis and was foaled in 1935 out of Old Sorrel’s daughter Panda. By virtue of standing grand champion at the 1940 Fort Worth Stock Show, Wimpy was granted P-1 in the book, which also included Old Sorrel’s sons Little Richard and Tomate Laureles among the first 19 numbers reserved for what AQHA founders deemed the breed’s foundation sires.

King Ranch continued the process both with outside sires and homebreds. The ranch leased Mr San Peppy in 1973-74 and purchased the son of Leo San the following year. Foaled in 1968, Mr San Peppy was out of Peppy Belle, who was by the Macanudo stallion Pep Up and out of a daughter of Little Richard. The NCHA world champion in 1974 and 1976, Mr San Peppy at the time was the youngest horse to be the NCHA world champion, the youngest to earn more than $100,000 in open cutting competition in a single year and the youngest horse to be inducted into the NCHA Hall of Fame.

That prompted King Ranch in 1977 to buy Mr San Peppy’s son Peppy San Badger. The sorrel stallion won that year’s NCHA Futurity and the following season’s NCHA Derby, before winning the 1981 NCHA finals. He became a leading sire in his own right and joined his daddy in both the American Quarter Horse and NCHA halls of fame.

**Late Time**

**At the height of its success in the show ring, the King Ranch horse program was led by Tio Kleberg, with American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame member Buster Welch leading the training and showing. Other King Ranch notables who have**
Mexican families that started the ranch with Capt. King. On a cattle buying trip in early 1854, the captain came upon a dried-up village in Mexico and bought its drought-starved herds. However, with the cattle gone, there was little left to sustain the town, so he offered to take the entire community back home with him to the Santa Gertrudis, where they could build homes, have jobs and earn regular wages. More than 100 men, women and children followed Capt. King to his ever-expanding ranch, where they became known as Los Kineños, the King People.

“I’m living the dream,” declares Lee Roy Montalvo, a seventh-generation Kineño who grew up on the Laureles division and works in the horse program. “When I was 5 years old, my dad and my grandfather put me on a horse and told me to keep up. He was my hero – a good cowboy and a good horseman. He took me under his wing and showed me what it was to take pride in what you do, and in helping and mentoring others, training horses. He taught me pride in working for the King Ranch and pride in representing the ranch. He always told me to go above and beyond what was expected.”

The concept is a pillar of King Ranch philosophy.

“It means we owe it to our ancestors, the people who came before us and built this,” James says. “People who have long been dead raised the bar. The year after Capt. King bought his first ranch, he purchased Whirlpool, a stud who cost twice what he paid for that first ranch. So from Year 2, this ranch has been focused on building a top-notch horse program and cattle operation, and everything we do has to be like that. We’ve got to be doing this at the highest level.”

The King Ranch horse program is a collaborative effort combining the best efforts of the Quarter Horse staff and the best working cowboys that ever sat a saddle. Today’s program continues to reap the benefits and knowledge of past Quarter Horse management, current King Ranch personnel and King Ranch family members. James emphasizes the importance of continued input from every living person who has ever worked with King Ranch Horses.

“Our current program has been a meeting of the minds of so many people who have served this ranch,” he says. That includes the Kineños, the descendants of the original Mexican families that started the ranch with Capt. King. On a cattle buying trip in early 1854, the captain came upon a dried-up village in Mexico and bought its drought-starved herds. However, with the cattle gone, there was little left to sustain the town, so he offered to take the entire community back home with him to the Santa Gertrudis, where they could build homes, have jobs and earn regular wages. More than 100 men, women and children followed Capt. King to his ever-expanding ranch, where they became known as Los Kineños, the King People.

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The King Ranch has been doing it for more than 160 years. Since 1992, AQHA has honored the heritage of the American Quarter Horse by presenting the AQHA Best Remuda Award to a ranch that raises outstanding ranch horses. This year, AQHA picked the all-time leading breeder by number of foals, King Ranch having registered more than 7,200 in its long history.

So yeah, the King Ranch has the best remuda. The King isn’t dead.

Long live the King. Ranch.
And its horses. ☮

Richard Chamberlain is a special contributor to the Journal. To comment, write to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.