

*Zoetis AQHA Best Remuda winner Silver Spur*

*Operating Co. celebrates both tradition and innovation.*

**Story and photos by Andrea Caudill**

# Spurred *to* SUCCESS





The organized chaos of the branding pen requires intelligent, willing equine partners that help make the work flow smoothly and quickly.

OVERSEEING THE CARE OF THE NINTH-LARGEST COMMERCIAL cattle operation in the United States takes manpower. Doing so while also honoring history and tradition? That also requires serious horsepower, embodied by the newest Zoetis AQHA Best Remuda winner of Silver Spur Operating Co.

The first Best Remuda Award was handed out in 1992 and recognizes outstanding ranches for raising quality American Quarter Horses, an important tool of their trade. To be eligible for consideration, a ranch must be an AQHA Ranching Heritage Breeder, which indicates that they are a working cattle ranch that produces at least five horses per year for work on the ranch, and have been American Quarter Horse breeders for at least 10 years.

## The History

THE RANCHES THAT MAKE UP THE SILVER SPUR EACH HAVE THEIR own complex history.

The titular ranch, based in Encampment, Wyoming, was founded by Albert H. Hutson in 1879. Subsequent owners increased the land holdings for that ranch, and even in its early years, found great success breeding award-winning cattle, with a focus on Hereford, Angus and Charolais blood.

In the early 1980s, the ranch was purchased by a corporation headed by telecommunications giant John Malone and his wife, Leslie. Over the next few decades, the Silver Spur added to its ranch land holdings, with the most recent purchase being New Mexico's Bell Ranch in 2010. All told, Silver Spur encompasses four Wyoming ranches, four Colorado ranches, the historic TO and Bell ranches in New Mexico, and feedlot and farming operations in Nebraska.

The Bell Ranch, especially, has an extensive history with AQHA. An AQHA Legacy Breeder of more than 50 years, it was managed in the 1930s by Albert K. Mitchell, one of AQHA's founders and the Association's only four-term president.

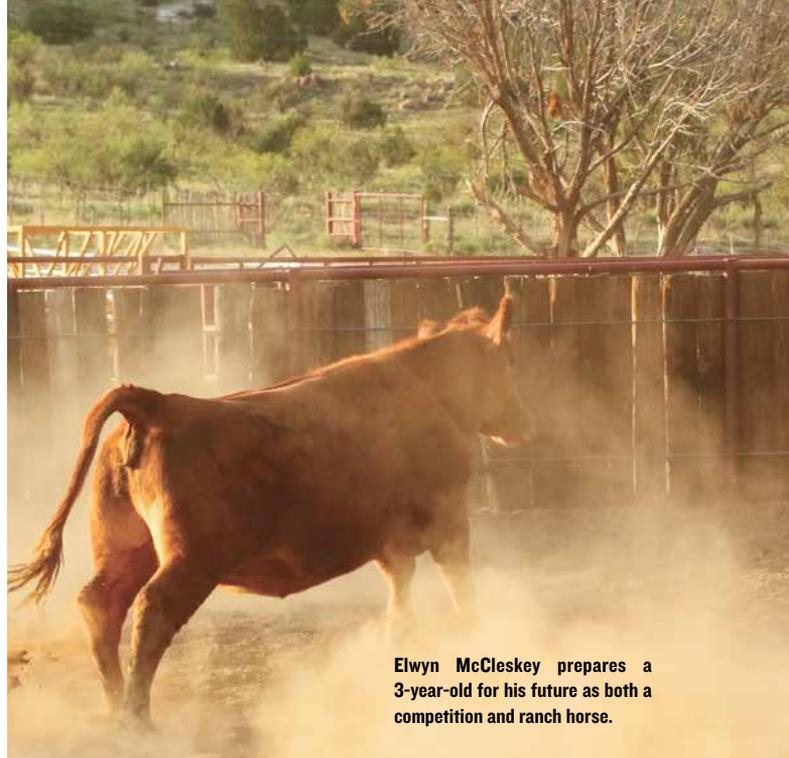
Each division of the Silver Spur has its own employees and managers, all overseen by general manager Thad York, who is the third generation of his family to work for the Silver Spur, and is watching his son grow up on the same ranch. He oversees employees who, too, celebrate long generational histories on their respective ranches. The Malones have indicated an intention that the land they own – they are the largest individual land owners in the United States – will enter a trust with the intention of being preserved forever as open space, so future generations can continue to honor the ranching tradition.

The Malones are also horsemen with interests in many areas.

Earlier this year, the National Western Stock Show honored John as the Citizen of the West, which is an award given to someone who embodies the spirit and determination of the Western pioneer and perpetuates the West's agricultural heritage and ideals.

The Malones are generous philanthropists, having donated significantly in the equine world, including to Colorado State University's equine sports medicine program, which helps not only individual horses through treatment, but also horses worldwide through ground-breaking research.

In addition to their ranching interests, the Malones also have Thoroughbred racing interests. They purchased the historic Ocala, Florida-based Bridlewood Farm, and are partners



Elwyn McCleskey prepares a 3-year-old for his future as both a competition and ranch horse.

on this year's Belmont Stakes winner, Tapwrit, a son of the famous sire Tapit. Leslie is also involved with the Olympic sport of dressage as a breeder, owner and philanthropist.

The ranch is involved with many outreach projects, including the Colorado State University Legends of Ranching Sale, assisting with youth group fundraisers and helping with community improvement projects. Silver Spur also offers internships for college students interested in agriculture.

"Tradition is very important to us," says Thad. "You're not going to see people out gathering cattle on a four-wheeler on a Silver Spur ranch. The cowboy tradition is important. Really, the whole mentality of family being critical, and the way it was in the days of old, is something we still focus on."

## The Cattle

SILVER SPUR RUNS ABOUT 15,000 MOTHER COWS IN AN OPERATION dedicated to producing the highest-quality, all-natural product to the consuming public. The majority of their ranches are high-desert, mountainous terrain, and both bovine and equine must thrive in the environment.

The cattle operation is controlled from start to finish. They begin with a registered herd of about 1,000 mother cows. Their herd is a mix of Red Angus, Black Angus and Charolais, and the ranch has developed its own cross that they call a Range Fire – a mix of Red Angus and Charolais – which thrives in their ranch conditions.

Cattle are raised in a natural environment, and are finished at the ranch's feedlot. The resulting all-natural product provides a niche premium. It is work that requires innovation from every Silver Spur employee. While they honor tradition, they also constantly research better and more efficient ways to produce quality stock.

"We track every calf from start to finish, every cow on this ranch," Thad says.

The cattlemen keep track of everything from pedigrees, crosses, calf growth, performance and feedlot gains, and then they analyze the results.



Foals grow up on rough and varied high-mountain desert terrain.

Yearlings are raised and started at the Bell Ranch Division of the Silver Spur.



## The Horses

GOOD HORSES HELP KEEP GOOD EMPLOYEES, and the Silver Spur has both.

The ranch's horses are foaled and raised at the Bell Ranch division. The temperate New Mexico climate makes foaling and growth easier than it would be in the colder weather in Wyoming and Colorado.

Once the horses are old enough, they are started under saddle, then distributed to the other ranch divisions. The ranch has more than 200 horses, with a mix of riding horses and breeding stock. Unlike some ranches, Silver Spur policy includes riding its mares, evaluating them for quality and ability before selection for the broodmare band.

"The ideal ranch horse, for us, is something large enough that you can do a job on," Thad says. "That means if you have to rope a bull, you have enough horse that you can do that on. If you have to doctor a cow, or doctor a lot of yearlings, you have to have enough size to do that. That's where we run into the

"We have to make those cows perform," Thad says. "We have to look to the future, and we have to make sure these ranches work. So it's a lot of the old, and some of the new."

That requires good employees.

"We've always got to be on the forefront, and we've always got to be willing to learn," Thad says. "Because as soon as we decide we know everything, we're done. I have to have guys on the ranches who look at it in the same manner. They have to be able to say 'Hey, we can make this better.' That's the whole way this works. I only do as well as the guys I have working on the ranch. And I have an incredibly good crew, from the guys who deal with the cattle to the guys who deal with the horses."

problem in the cow-horse industry, a lot of those horses are smaller and lighter boned. So what we're really trying to produce first and foremost has enough size and ability to do what we need to do on the ranch, but also has enough ability to turn around and go show."

The horses also have to be good-footed, able to deal with snow and slick ground in the wintery mountains of Colorado and Wyoming, or able to move out across the hard, rocky soil in New Mexico.

"We're going to run the gamut from sand to rock to ice — it covers all of that, and the horses have to be able to handle that," Thad says.



Silver Spur sire **Metallic Masterpiece** not only does a day's job at the ranch, but is also an accomplished show horse, with more than \$70,000 in career earnings.

Among the horses the ranch has raised in recent years is Versatility Ranch Horse world champion SS Hey One Eye, who in 2016 won the cowboy division with Elwyn McCleskey aboard at the Zoetis AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse World Championships. The sorrel is a son of the ranch's WR One Eyed Jack and out of the Hey Houston mare Desire Some Hey.

Other performers include SS One Eyed N Style, Penny For Your Thots, SS Two Eyed Annie and SS One Eyed Dualer.

The majority of these horses were sired by WR One Eyed Jack, a son of WR This Cats Smart out of the Miss N Cash mare Miss Ann Oleana. Silver Spur acquired the stallion – who was literally left one-eyed after an accident as a foal – in January of his 2-year-old year. He sired quality ranch and competition horses for several years until his untimely death in 2016, but the ranch has several stallions stepping up to the plate.

The ranch's junior stallions are headlined by the 6-year-old Metallic Masterpiece, a son of Metallic Cat out of the Peppy San Badger mare Kings Masterpiece. His sire has offspring earnings of more than \$13 million, and his dam's offspring have earnings of more than \$360,000. Her progeny include world champion and sire Genuine Masterpiece (by Shining Spark) and performers Master Merada (by Freckles Merada) and Spark Master (by Shining Spark).

Metallic Masterpiece – whose barn name is “Quasi” – broke his back in an accident as a very young foal, and thus has a fused spine that, while unusual to look at, has no ill-effects. The horse was a National Reined Cow Horse Association open Snaffle Bit Futurity finalist, a Lucas Oil AQHA World Championship Show Top-10 finalist, and has earnings of more than \$74,000 in competition. He is also used on the ranch, and his first foals are on the ground this year.

“Quasi was used to drag calves, he has been used in ranch rodeos; last year, he was used on the team in the wild cow milking,” Thad says. “He can do everything – he has been used on the ranch, he has drug calves to the fire. That's what we're looking for: Horses that have the right minds.”

The Silver Spur's newest stallion is the 4-year-old Light My Dynamite, a son of CD Lights out of the producing mare Dyna Badger. His first foals are due in 2018.

To date, the ranch has focused on producing horses for its own needs, but will occasionally offer horses, usually youngsters, at sales.

“I think this is the first year we've sold any colts by WR One Eyed Jack, because the ranch guys don't want to see those horses leave!” Thad says with a laugh.

The Best Remuda award will be formally presented to Silver Spur Operating Co. during the 2017 Working Ranch Cowboy's Association World Championship Ranch Rodeo, November 9-12 in Amarillo. The ranch will also be recognized during the 2018 National Cattleman's Beef Association Convention in Phoenix and at the 2018 AQHA Convention in March in Jacksonville, Florida.

“It's a huge thing for us,” Thad says. “It's something we've always looked at, hoping we'd have a chance to win it someday. I think we've worked hard to get there.”

“As stewards of the land, we make every effort to preserve the traditions of yesterday as we forge ahead using new and progressive approaches in both our cattle and equine enterprises,” he continues. “We strive to raise cattle and horses of the highest caliber while working diligently to pass on our values, faith, importance of family and our love for agriculture to future generations.”

*Andrea Caudill is editor of the Ranch Horse Journal. For more information on Silver Spur Operating Co., visit [www.silverspurranches.com](http://www.silverspurranches.com). To comment, write to [acaudill@aqha.org](mailto:acaudill@aqha.org).*

**Silver Spur General Manager Thad York is the third generation in his family to work for the ranch; he is also an active ranch rodeo competitor.**

