

RANCH HORSE COMPETITION IMPACT ON THE HORSE INDUSTRY

Ron Lane

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The evolution of the modern ranch horse competition began in the mid 1980's. Several sales began holding special sections for ranch geldings. The format of the sale was to have the consigned horses compete in a judged competition. The horses were scored and placed in the show and the owner or rider received cash and prizes for the top placing horses. The horses were then offered at auction. The horses were sold according to how well they placed in the competition. The sale usually followed the competition so the competition also served as a sale demonstration. This format was very well received and several of these early competitions and sales have evolved into premier events and the top geldings average of \$20,000.00. The high selling geldings at two of the sales in 2002 brought \$40,000.00 each.

The sale demonstration for these sales began to gain recognition and through marketing and advertising these sales were turned into premier events. The most popular of these sales and competitions are held in conjunction with the stock shows at Ft. Worth, San Antonio and Houston. These events really focused the non ranching public on the ranch made the ranching industry realize that there was a potential market for what had been up to this point a utilitarian item. Many ranchers wanted to compete in the ranch horse competitions but did not want to sell their horse after the competed each time. In the early 1990's several small ranch horse competitions began to show up that were not affiliated with a sale. The early competitions had very few rules and there was no consistency from competition to competition. In 1993 a group of West Texas ranchers decided to hold an invitational competition in conjunction with the Western Heritage Classic ranch rodeo in Abilene, Texas. The response to this event was larger than they expected and realizing that there was a public interest in this type of event the Ranch Horse Association of America was formed.



The original ranchers that developed the concept formed the original board of directors and developed a rule book and guide lines for holding ranch horse competitions. The Western Heritage Classic ranch rodeo was chosen as the location to hold the year end National Finals of the new association. The Ranch Horse Association of America began sanctioning shows in several states. There have been and still are other ranch horse shows that are not affiliated with the Ranch Horse Association of America. Many of these shows have very successful continue to raise the level of awareness and generate interest in these types of events. The American Quarter Horse Association recently added the Ranch Horse Versatility class to its shows. There are several other organizations that have been formed and showcase the ranch horse, these include the Stock Horse of Texas and the Ranch Cutting Horse association.

The ranch horse has long been an indispensable part of the ranching industry and a part of the romantic image of the cowboy. Ranches have traditionally raised horses for the use of its cowboys. The ranch horse has long been a source of pride for the not only the ranches but the cowboys that work there. Many modern horse show events and rodeo events have their origins in the ranch horse. These events were set up to settle disputes about which ranch had the best cutting horse or the smoothest riding horses. While the ranch horse was a source of pride for the ranches they also served a very real purpose. The horse raised on the ranches were intended for the use of the employees or for replacement of the breeding herd.

The geldings were trained for use on the ranch by the cowboys. This development of the young horses was part of the cowboys job. The fillies were sorted based on quality and the best ones were kept as replacements for the brood mare band. The fillies that were not kept were in most cases viewed as a liability and sold as quickly as possible. The geldings spent their entire useful life on the ranch were only sold when they became unsound or were too old to be useful. These gelding were for the most part sold each year as a group and for salvage value only. Occasionally a nice gelding or mare might be sold for a premium price but this was not the standard practice.

The ranches were constantly replacing the geldings in the remuda and the mares in the brood mare band. In the mid 1980's as the interest in ranch horse competitions and sales increased several sales began offering segments for ranch fillies. These early sales were very successful and what traditionally been a liability began to evolve into a potential profit center. Ranchers began to see the benefit of seeking alternate ways to market the surplus horses from their ranches. Many ranches began holding production sales or several ranches would hold a joint production sale. The use of advertising and marketing began to increase and the averages of these sales grew steadily. From this point the role of the ranch horse has evolved. The current state of the cattle market and agriculture in general has forced the ranchers to diversify. Diversity is the only way that ranches can compete in these challenging economic times. What had once been a utilitarian item suddenly became a profit center. Many ranches not rotate gelding out of their remuda before the end of the horses useful life. This has allowed many very nice and still serviceable geldings to get into the hands of the non ranching public. This has helped to generate more interest in the ranch horse. The marketing of the unneeded females has allowed the non ranching public access to years of selective breeding and offers outcross potential for many popular bloodlines.

The ranch horse competitions and the changing role of the ranch horse have had many benefits for the ranches and the horse industry. The cowboys working on ranches in most cases took great pride in their horsemanship. However, there was very little way for these cowboys to measure their horsemanship or educational opportunities for the cowboys to advance their horsemanship. As the ranch horse shows gained popularity the cowboys competing could compare themselves to other cowboys and identify areas that needed improvement. The changing role of the ranch horse as a profit center made many ranches realize that they could provide educational opportunities to their employee's and not only improve the horsemanship of the cowboy but the value of the horses as well. Another benefit of the increased level of horsemanship is that it improved the safety of the horse and cowboy as well. Many of the tasks performed in the day to day operation of the ranch are hazardous. The better broke the horses the cowboys use the safer they will be. As insurance and workers compensation costs continue to rise, safety becomes a very important factor. In many cases clinics or seminars on horsemanship can be used to satisfy safety meeting requirements for insurance companies. These are just a few of the benefits of the evolution of the ranch horse and the ranch horse competitions.

The Ranch Horse Association of American was formed by a group of West Texas ranchers in 1993. These ranchers are still directors of the association. The purpose and intent of the Ranch Horse Association was to promote the working ranch horse and develop a uniform set of rules and standard for judging. The association has in excess of 25 sanctioned shows per year. The competition is broken down into three divisions. The open for all horses that meets the guidelines. The junior for horses four years old and younger. The cowboy class for riders with lifetime Ranch Horse Association earning of \$500.00 or less. The sanctioned shows must offer all three classes and based on the number of entries horses qualify for the National Finals held in Abilene, Texas. The National Finals are held in conjunction with the Western Heritage Classic ranch rodeo. Championships are awarded in each division and the three division champions will compete for the overall champion.

The Ranch Horse Association continues to grow in membership, number of sanctioned shows and prize money awarded. A copy of the rules and guidelines can be obtained by contacting the Ranch Horse Association in Abilene, Texas at (915) 672-8233.

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