

Keeping it **REAL**

Montana horsemen showcase some of the Northern Rockies' best ranch horses in an invitation-only sale.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY A.J. MANGUM

WHEN A SAVVY BUYER is in the market for a bomb-proof trail horse or a seasoned bridle horse, he often looks for candidates that have earned their stripes in ranch country. The appeal is understandable.

When such a horse is started under saddle, it's with the goal of developing a long-term partner for a working cowboy. To make the cut, a horse must have the physical stature and toughness to stay sound while enduring the rigors of ranch work.

On the job, ranch horses are ridden for hours at a time, often on a near-daily basis. Over years of use, they learn to be calm, controllable and unquestionably reliable in all situations, from holding dallies on rank cattle in inclement weather to showing impeccable ground manners when a cowboy dismounts to handle an earthbound task.

Despite such marketable strengths, though, when a veteran ranch horse is offered at auction, it can be tough for its owner to get a price that reflects the years of work that have gone into "making" the horse.

"In an open consignment sale, good ranch horses are often grouped with other types of horses," explains Montana cowboy Jack Blankenship. "You can't always compare apples to apples."

And, in any auction environment, prudent bidders err on the side of caution. Healthy skepticism about a seller's claims, a horse's soundness, or the way in which a horse might

handle himself outside the sale ring can all keep bids in check.

"You might see a great ranch-trained bridle horse go through a sale," Blankenship says, "but he might not bring a fair price if no one knows enough about the horse or its owner to bid with confidence."

For prospective ranch-horse buyers, this can mean relative bargains. But for sellers of ranch horses, it can mean swallowing lower-than-expected prices or reluctantly taking horses off the market, missing what might be much-needed paydays.

IN 2004, Blankenship and a group of fellow Montana horsemen, ranchers and working cowboys began discussing a concept for a new type of horse auction: an invitation-only ranch-horse sale that could elicit fairer prices by fully showcasing consigned horses' talents and by taking exhaustive measures to ease bidders' nerves.



Rawhide Robbins, by Zips Black Wolf and out of Annie Blue Badger, brought \$4,300 at the 2010 REAL Ranch Horse Sale in Billings, Montana. The 8-year-old Quarter Horse gelding was consigned by Rawhide Quarter Horses of Lodge Grass, Montana.



Above: Twin Bridges, Montana, horseman Wade Fisher won the sale's open ranch-horse competition aboard his 12-year-old Quarter Horse gelding Bambas Grey Pistol. Montana's S Ranch, a recipient of the American Quarter Horse Association's Best Remuda Award, provided cattle for the sale's preview and ancillary events.

Right: Jack Blankenship, a founding member of the Montana Ranch Horse Association, manages the REAL Ranch Horse Sale. His duties include providing commentary on each consignment.



"We envisioned a sale where we could invite sellers working hard to make good horses," Blankenship says. "We wanted nothing but real ranch horses, made by guys cowboying on them every day, guys that had owned and used them for years."

Over informal meetings at various diners in small Montana ranching communities, the group brainstormed a set of pre-sale measures to boost bidder confidence. Members of an "inviting committee" could personally inspect each potential consignment before adding the horse to the sale catalog. Thorough vet checks the evening before the sale could weed out horses with last-minute health or soundness issues. And, the morning of the sale, sellers could be required to saddle and work their horses fresh—straight out of their stalls—in a mandatory preview event.

That informal group—which has since organized as the Montana Ranch Horse Association—held its fourth annual REAL Ranch Horse Sale this past April 17, at the Yellowstone Boys & Girls Ranch, located outside Billings.

EACH YEAR'S REAL Ranch Horse Sale is limited to 60 consignments, all horses 4 years of age or older. Many are bridle horses, ridden in spade and half-breed bits. Sellers, exclusively ranchers and working cowboys, must have owned their horses for at least two years and must be invited to consign.

seven members are scattered throughout Montana, allowing for in-person inspections of horses from first-time sale participants.

Committee members take note of a horse's soundness and disposition, as well as how he works under saddle. Repeat sellers are typically exempt from committee inspections, but their consigned horses must continue to live up to the sale's standards.

"Their horses have to be what they say they are," says Nate Wald, a Lodge Grass, Montana, rancher and a member of the sale's inviting committee. "Our guys have



Participation in the REAL Ranch Horse Sale has become a key business strategy for Northern Rockies horsemen. "I started planning a year ago for the sale," says Luke Wiggins, a horse trainer and ranch cowboy from Dillon, Montana. The 2010 sale was his first as a consignor. "I like that this isn't a sale for horse traders. It's for ranch horses, and draws buyers looking specifically for that."

"It causes hard feelings, but it's how we keep the quality we want," Blankenship says. "The qualifying factors are the horse, how that horse has been ridden and the character of the consignor. The horses have to be gentle and easy to get along with, and sellers have to be people we know deal square."

The sale's inviting committee relies on the "cowboy grapevine" to track down potential consignments, many of which are suggested by a network of trusted sources in the ranching community. The committee's

to be accountable. If there's a problem with their horses that go through the sale ring, they won't be selling any more horses through us."

Consigned horses must have health certificates and negative Coggins tests, of course, but they're also subjected to a thorough veterinary screening—including a demanding lameness test—the evening before the sale. Standards are high; "the slightest bobble," as Wald puts it, can get a horse pulled from the sale.

"We've taken a couple out every year," Wald says. "They were all probably pretty nice horses, too. They just happened to be a little off that day."

THE MORNING OF THE SALE, each consigned horse must be previewed in front of bidders and spectators. Sale rules dictate that horses must preview fresh, meaning they can't have been ridden or otherwise worked before being led into the arena, saddled and warmed up in front of the crowd.

"If a horse gets 'humpy,' buyers see it," Wald says. "The horse winds up going to the right kind of buyer, one that won't be bothered by that. We try to get it all out there, and make sure buyers get what's presented to them."

In the preview, each rider carries a slicker and drags a sandbag by a rope dallied to the saddle horn, mimicking dragging a calf. Every rider works a cow along the fence. Working in pairs, riders neck and heel a cow, stretching her on the ground before dismounting and tying off, showing their horses' abilities in working situations. During the preview, Blankenship offers commentary, explaining each horse's background and offering information on its seller.

"Sellers are half the equation," he says, "so I'll talk about the ways they made their horses, the ways they use them."

To further showcase their horses' talents, sellers have the option of entering two ancillary events, a team roping and an open ranch-horse competition, both held the day before the sale.

HORSES CONSIGNED to the REAL Ranch Horse Sale have gone to new homes as far away as Florida, Virginia and Hawaii. Most buyers, though, are from the Northern Rockies and Plains states.

"Our typical buyer is a 40- to 60-year-old rancher who wants a horse he can use, then turn out for a couple of months and know that the horse will be just as solid the next time he gets on him," Blankenship says. "We also have big ranches buying horses for their remudas. They want horses that won't worry them. They hire cowboys, not bronc riders, and they don't want to pay workman's comp."

The highest-selling horse in the sale's history, a Quarter Horse gelding named My Little Black Fox, brought \$13,500 at the 2009 sale. Don Selle and Nicole Wheeler of Baker, Montana, consigned the then-8-year-old, which sold to the Diamond B Ranch in Hawaii.

Another Don Selle consignment, a Quarter Horse gelding named Starburst Racketeer, topped the 2010 sale; the 10-year-old Doc O'Lena great-grandson brought \$8,500. The top 10 sellers averaged \$6,980; the top 20 averaged \$6,010; and the overall average was \$4,975. Such prices have made the annual event critical to the business strategies of many participating horsemen, most of whom begin planning for the sale a year in advance.

"It can be tough to plan that far out, to pick a horse and keep it off the market that long," says Wade Fisher, a horseman from Twin Bridges, Montana.

Fisher consigned two horses to the sale.

"In this part of the country, though, this sale brings the best prices for ranch horses, so the wait can be worth it."

Organizers hope the sale is changing the landscape of the ranch-horse business in the Northern Rockies by encouraging horsemen to take their time developing such horses, and by providing a venue in which to sell them as polished, seasoned ranch mounts—sound and with plenty of working years ahead of them.

"If we can encourage sellers to raise their own horses, work with them slowly and carefully, and hold onto them until our sale," Wald says, "that would be the ultimate."

IN LATE APRIL, days after the sale concludes, members of the inviting committee meet in a small café in Custer, Montana. They review the quality of the horses in the sale that's just ended, and discuss potential consignments for the next sale—at that point just under a year away. Each committee member leaves the meeting with a list of at least a half-dozen phone calls to make to potential consignors.

"We want to know if they have horses for the next year and what those horses are," Blankenship says. "Of course, if repeat consignors are taking their time to make horses, they won't have one every year. I enjoy it when they tell me they need another year with a particular horse. It shows they're doing things the right way."

The list of potential consignees is then whittled down to 60 horses. Each is videoed at work on its home ranch and the resulting clips posted on the sale's Web site, realranchhorses.com.

Capping consignments at 60 provides an additional measure of quality control, and helps ensure that each April's sale—with its preview and optional competitions—remains a manageable undertaking for organizers, bidders and spectators. For the horsemen behind the sale, the event's success is less about growth in numbers and more about furthering the ideals with which the sale was created.

"We're not trying to sell the most horses, or trying to top the numbers at anyone else's sale," Blankenship says. "We're just trying to get a good product out there, and reward cowboys making great ranch horses." 🐾

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Silverdollar Duece, by Wyo Duece and out of Jessica Kilkenny, sold for \$8,400. Deer Lodge, Montana, horseman Chad Rainsdon consigned the 7-year-old Quarter Horse gelding.

Partnering for YOUTH

THE REAL RANCH HORSE SALE is held each April at the Bill & Anita Jones Equestrian Center, on the campus of the Yellowstone Boys & Girls Ranch. Founded in 1957, the 400-acre ranch, located west of Billings, Montana, offers a wide variety of programs for troubled youth, including mental-health services, foster-care administration, mentoring and vocational training. The ranch, home to a residential K-12 school, provides daily care for approximately 650 boys and girls.

Throughout its history, the Boys & Girls Ranch has drawn support from the agricultural community. One fund-raising effort, the Homes for Heifers program, has created long-term partnerships with working ranches throughout the West. Each rancher participating in the program designates one heifer in his herd to benefit the Boys & Girls Ranch. Income generated by the heifer over her lifetime helps support ranch programs.

Each year, a member of the Montana Ranch Horse Association donates a 2-year-old gelding to the Yellowstone Boys & Girls Ranch. The horse is sold through the REAL Ranch Horse Sale, with all proceeds benefiting the ranch. This year, Rawhide Quarter Horses—located outside Lodge Grass, Montana, and owned by Nate, T.J. and Jackson Wald—donated a 2-year-old Quarter Horse gelding, Rawhide Leo Badger, sired by Stylish Tip and out of Annie Blue Badger. The horse was purchased by Rick Gilliland of Livingston, Montana, for \$1,600.

To learn more about the Yellowstone Boys & Girls Ranch, visit ybgr.org. For information on the Homes for Heifers program, contact Gary Adams at (800) 726-6755.