



Colton Russell moves calves through an alleyway on the Matador Cattle Company.



Camp manager Tim Washington has successfully shown Matador horses in ranch horse competitions, including a reserve title at the 2011 AQHA Battle in the Saddle.



Ranch manager Bob Kilmer and his team have worked to increase safety by improving the horses and horsemanship on the Matador.

● ON THE RANGE

# Matador Earns Best Remuda Award

With a rich history and progressive horse program, Matador Ranch earns high honors from the American Quarter Horse Association.

*Story and photography by MATT BROCKMAN*

**S**OON AFTER SCOTTISH INVESTORS organized the Matador Land and Cattle Company in 1882, the ranch grew to encompass about 1.5 million acres of open range. Such an expansive outfit required a massive remuda to carry out its daily tasks. While the Matador no longer operates at the size and scale of yesteryear, today's ranch runs a progressive horse program that has earned the 2013 Zoetis-AQHA Best Remuda Award. A team effort focused on genetics, conformation and disposition is the ranch's formula for success.

The Scots began exiting the business in the middle of the 20th century, and their holdings—by then approximately 800,000 acres—were divided and sold. A Kansan named Fred Koch purchased the headquarters and three significant land parcels near Matador, Texas, as well as the Matador's original Flying V cattle brand and "50" horse brand.

Combining his new purchase with other ranches he owned in Montana and Kansas, Koch began operating the Matador Cattle Company, which today is owned by Koch Agriculture Company,

a subsidiary of Koch Industries, Inc. One of the largest privately owned companies in the United States, Koch Industries is a diversified company employing more than 60,000 people, mainly in the manufacturing sector. Like other Koch subsidiaries, Matador Cattle Company is an innovative and progressive entity.

The Matador functions primarily as a traditional cow-calf operation. However, like many other ranches it offers hunting programs and markets its horses to the public. While the ranch has, in some respects, a "corporate feel," it readily embraces tradition. Cowboys tend to enjoy long tenures there. They say that Koch's management philosophy and guiding principles give them a sense of empowerment and a stake in the ranch's future.

"I've always had a sense of ownership here," says Tim Washington, Matador camp manager. "I feel like I'm a part of the place and not just a hand."

The empowerment became important when ranch manager Bob Kilmer received some unwelcome attention from Koch headquarters in 2000.

"We [Matador Cattle Company] held a record that you didn't want to hold," says

Kilmer. "We had the most accidents per thousand man-hours of any company in Koch Industries."

Kilmer and his crew knew they needed a plan to rid themselves of the stigma.

First, they formed a safety team that began reviewing accident data to determine how and why ranch accidents were occurring. Not surprisingly, many involved horses. Next, they decided outside help was needed, so, with a recommendation from local rancher Terry Crofoot, they invited California clinician Mike Bridges to Matador Ranch. Skepticism prevailed among the seasoned cowboys, and the fact they would be schooled by a Californian didn't help. But Bridges' approach slowly won over even the most ardent holdout, and he was welcomed back for follow-up clinics.

After some time, however, Bridges and the safety team determined that, too often, cowboys were "reprogramming" geldings that mostly originated from sources outside Matador's broodmare program.

"We got to thinking how we could avoid having to do this reprogram step, because some of these old habits would show back up," says J.D. Russell, a former



Matador foals are sired by sons of High Brow Hickory and Boonlight Dancer.

# Ranchlands

Matador Ranch employee who now manages Matador Cattle Company's Spring Creek Ranch in Kansas. "That's where we decided to start raising our own horses to a larger extent than we had been."

Matador again took a team approach to the situation. The group's challenge was to build a program to produce quality ranch horses that would help maintain a safe working environment. Mares were scored and ranked using specific criteria.

"We focused hard on genetics," says Kilmer. "We looked at conformation, history. And the biggest thing was disposition—their minds."

While some mares scored very high, those that scored a little lower were crossed with carefully chosen stallions that complemented them.

"What could we do to strengthen their weaker points? We went to looking for stallions with characteris-

tics that would fill those needs," adds Russell.

The safety team's efforts gradually paid off.

"As a result of our program, we've seen an improvement in safety performance among the cowboys," says Russell.

The team continues to produce outstanding horses the cowboys enjoy riding, which also boosts morale.

Several recognized foundation bloodlines show up in today's Matador Ranch broodmare band, including Gay Bar King, Hollywood Gold and Echo, while others like Hickory Lowenbrau and Peppy San Badger are also prevalent. Two stallions have influenced Matador Ranch progeny in recent years. High Marked, who was recently euthanized, was by High Brow Hickory and out of a Smart Little Lena-Colonel Freckles mare. The younger stud is Wrigly, by Boonlight Dancer, who won the National Reined Cow Horse Association's Snaffle Bit Futurity in 2001 and is a grandson of Peppy San Badger through his sire, Peptoboonsmal, and Smart Little Lena on his dam's side.

Matador cowboys riding company geldings have excelled in the competition spotlight. Washington rode MCC Double Heaven to the reserve championship at the 2011 AQHA Battle in the Saddle, and came back as a top 10 finalist in 2012. Former Matador hand Kris Wilson rode MCC Hank San Teen to the top 10 at Battle in the Saddle in 2010. Washington brought additional attention to the ranch's program when he rode MCC Peppy San Royal to the Ranch Cutting Horse Association's 2007 year-end junior championship.

Still, it's supplying safe, dependable and solid ranch horses that underpins Matador Ranch's horse program.

"We didn't go about building our program trying to raise a world champion," says Russell. "We have a need for a horse that's a valuable tool."

He's also proud that Matador Ranch reached the Best Remuda Award milestone using every cowboy's input.

"This took every member of our team, and all the crew had input and played a factor in the program," says Russell. "Our passion is for our horses and cattle, and it's really an honor for us to be in the company of ranches that hold this award." 🍷

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