

BACKED BY BLOOD

A tried-and-true ranch horse is thoughtfully bred and carefully developed. That is how the King Ranch approaches raising top-notch ranch horses that are successful not only in their program but on other ranches across the United States.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATE BRADLEY BYARS





The sun hasn't begun to brighten the eastern horizon when three Kineños, or King Ranch cowboys, arrive at the Spohn pens on the ranch south of Kingsville, Texas. Using truck lights to illuminate the darkness, they saddle three sorrel horses. As the sky lightens, the trio trots out, packing ropes and geared up to handle the mesquite brush prevalent on the Texas southern coastal plains. Soon, a herd of nearly 400 cherry-red Santa Gertrudis cattle break the tree line, aiming for the pens.

It is the start of another workday on the 825,000-acre King Ranch, where 35 cowboys work on four divisions that handle

25,000 mother cows, a feed yard that can hold 17,000 head of cattle, and pastures that focus on calving or running yearlings. It's an undertaking that requires good horses every day.

"As much as other people want to breed horses, we need to breed horses," says James Clement, former Quarter Horse manager on the ranch and a King Ranch family member. "What we are trying to do is build a better animal."

Those animals, each adorned with the famous "Running W" brand on its left hip, are known worldwide for their talent and heritage. The sires that shaped the breeding on the King Ranch also helped to build the American Quarter Horse Association.

Stallions such as Old Sorrel, Wimpy, Mr San Peppy, Peppy San Badger and Rey Jay, as well as Thoroughbreds like Bold Venture, impacted the breed's bloodlines.

"King Ranch developed its horse program not out of novelty but out of necessity," says Vice President Heath Grigg. "Ranching in the South Texas environment is challenging, and the ranch needed a horse that could work all day in the harsh conditions found in this part of the country."

What is the magic recipe to make a ranch horse? How does one continuously breed a horse that has strong bones and ample size, is light-footed but gritty, and with no quit? Since 1853, the King Ranch has tweaked the ingredients and adjusted the



measurements to make the perfect horse to fit its program. And other ranches have taken note.

“All of our horses here descend from Old Sorrel, and they are proven not only as a working all-around ranch horse but also in the performance pen,” says Lee Roy Montalvo, King Ranch Quarter Horse program manager. “Our horses are bred to last and can handle any type of weather and terrain: rocks, sand, snow or rain. Our horses are going to do what they are bred to do. Our bloodlines have great minds, they have plenty of heart, natural cow and they want to please.”

No matter if it is crossing sandy pastures in Texas or Nebraska, punching through

brush on the coast or climbing rock-covered mountains in Arizona, a ranch horse does a job, and if bred specifically for that job, does it exceptionally well. It all starts with that first ingredient—bloodlines—and builds on that foundation.



PROVEN PEDIGREES

Cow sense and speed. Size and endurance. Those ingredients—and more—must be mixed to create a horse that can go all day but handle any bull, mother cow or quick calf it comes across. The King Ranch started on the path leading to today’s ideal ranch

horse when Bob Kleberg purchased Old Sorrel in 1916. He kicked off what would become the Quarter Horse program on the ranch.

Today, the King Ranch can trace its first Quarter Horse type-bred horses back to 1922, with more than 100 years of breeding working horses to the ranch’s name. While working-type horses were being bred on

OPENING SPREAD: King Ranch Quarter Horse Program Manager Lee Roy Montalvo and the ranch’s AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse Junior World Champion, Coronel Del Rancho, epitomize a new era in the historic working ranch horse program.

BELOW: Rick Falcon and a Cats Red Feather gelding (out of Peppy San Badger mare Lil Badgers Moon) make easy work of gathering more than 400 Santa Gertrudis and then sorting them at the Spohn pens south of the ranch’s headquarters.





the ranch at the onset, 169 years ago, it was then that the first four ranch-registered horses were granted numbers: Celia 023, Little Richard, McBride Chestnut 021 and Panchita Kleberg.

Around the same time, the ranch launched into owning Thoroughbreds (TB). Soon, the two styles of horses would entwine. Following his Kentucky Derby win in 1936, Bold Venture (TB) sired multiple horses for the King Ranch, including Depth Charge (TB) and Assault (TB), the King Ranch's 1946 Triple Crown winner. The speed in that line continued and today is carried on by one of the ranch's sires, Kineños Moon, a double-bred Peppy San Badger stallion that is an eighth-generation descendant of Old Sorrel. All the ranch's stallions have stories similar to that of Kineños Moon with their bloodline molded and blended to create the athletic, fast and cow-savvy horses.

The King Ranch has multiple breeding stallions in Kingsville. One of its stallions, The Boon, stands at the Four Sixes Ranch in Guthrie, Texas. At the ranch, each stallion is turned out with roughly a dozen mares to breed, providing the ranch with a ready supply of horses.

Junior sires include 2016 sorrel stallion Coronel Del Rancho, 2021 AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse World Champion All-Around Junior Horse, by Not Ruf At All, winner of the National Reining Horse Association Futurity and Derby, and the National Reining Breeders Classic. Coronel Del Rancho is out of a Les Glo Colonel mare San Gris Girl. Another junior sire, El Rey Hidas, is by Taquito Sugar, who reflects a time when the ranch branched out to pull in Colonel Freckles blood.

Senior sires on the ranch include 2002 brown stallion Kineños Moon, by Ritas Sweet Badger and out of Lil Badgers Moon by Peppy San Badger, and 2003 sorrel stallion Marsala Red, by Play Red



(a son of Freckles Playboy) and out of Marsala Dulce by CJ Sugar.

For decades, with the success of Mr San Peppy and Peppy San Badger, known as Little Peppy, the ranch was focused on replicating those lines within its fences. The "Peppy" blood is strong, and forever linked to the ranch due to the two stallions' high-profile cutting careers. Mr San Peppy was a two-time National Cutting Horse Association world champion. His son, Little Peppy, won the 1977 NCHA Futurity

and 1978 NCHA Derby. However, Clement says that in the 1990s the ranch took a hard look at what it was breeding and what was working for its cowboys. Instead of selling to other ranches or the public, the ranch focused solely on providing for itself in the late '80s, '90s and early 2000s

"We had a lot of Little Peppy and Mr San Peppy blood that made athletic horses, but we really were seeking an outcross that could complement the horsepower we already had," Clement explains. "It became a question of what stallions to breed to and retain athleticism while retaining their ability to work.

"On our bloodlines, you see CJ Sugar, a full-blood brother to Colonel Freckles, and Les Glo Colonel that were added. We also started to look within to see what we could breed to retain our lines. In the early 2000s, Kineños Moon and Marsala Red were born out of that change. We kept the bone, the size, the cow, the muscle and the ability, and continued to improve a bloodline that was unique to the industry."

When offspring of those two stallions hit the ground, it became apparent the ranch had hit a combination that was going to help the ranch and its Kineños, which translates to "the King's people," reimagine what they could do horseback.



LEFT: Born in 2002, Kineños Moon has become a trusted and sought-after senior ranch horse sire, throwing bone, size and a trainable mindset to his mares and colts. **TOP RIGHT:** The first 2022 colt by Coronel Del Rancho, out of Dry Paloma, bears a striking resemblance to his sorrel sire. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Coronel Del Rancho was with his manada, or pasture group, and breeding up to 63 days before he and trainer Ben Baldus won the AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse Junior World Championship in 2021.



SOLID STARTS

Spring at the King Ranch means pastures filled with red calves and frolicking foals. Colt starting occupies the ranch's Kineños. Across the road from the barn where legends like Mr San Peppy and Little Peppy lived, a pen encircling the year's crop of 2-year-old fillies sits next to a small wooden round pen. It is the hub of where the ranch's horses start learning their jobs.

"To me, whether it was back in the day or now, one thing I've always admired is the great minds on our horses," Montalvo says.

A seventh-generation cowboy to live and work on the ranch, he grew up predominantly learning horsemanship from his grandfather, father and great-uncles, and riding the predecessors to the ranch horses he manages today.

"Overall, I think these horses have a great mind and I think our horses have heart. I know our horses have a lot of cow in them," he says. "We get the horses soft,

get into their minds and take more time for them to understand what we are asking."

In addition to learning from Kineños who have come before, Montalvo says that both noted colt-starter Jeff Williams and horseman and clinician Joe Wolter have worked with the ranch, as well as Cody Crider, and, for the last eight years, trainer Ben Baldus has ridden and shown some of their horses. Baldus rode Coronel Del Rancho to the 2021 AQHA Junior Versatility Ranch Horse World Championship.

"We try to produce 30-plus horses a year and we start anywhere from 10 to 15 for our cowboys," Montalvo says. "We do the first rides and start some ourselves and also send some to another trainer for 60 or 90 days before they go to the cowboys. I love starting colts, so I will do the fundamentals and then send them off. That makes the cowboy's job easier."

The fillies have their first rides in the wooden round pen, and all take it in stride. The one filly that bucks with gusto is sired by an outside stallion, which makes Clement laugh.

"We have looked at the performance world more and crossed our mares with some [outside] stallions, but our primary goal is to breed what works on the ranch, so we are trying to balance how to cross into the show arena with what we need to work on the ranch," Clement says.

Part of that process was to purchase and incorporate The Boon, a 2008 red roan stallion sired by NCHA Futurity champion Peptoboonsmal, a son of Peppy San Badger. The Boon is out of Boon San Kitty by High Brow Cat.

"The Boon goes back to Old Sorrel and Mr San Peppy, two boxes we like to check, but he is an outcross," Clement explains. "Tio Kleberg will say that Mr San Peppy was like Dick Butkus. He could keep

BELOW: By Marsala Red and out of Kineños Moon daughter Moons Kiñena Bandida, this foal already has the conformation desired in a working ranch horse. **RIGHT:** James Clement makes the first ride on this 2-year-old filly as Montalvo watches. The horsemen have developed their skills from years of starting 15 or more young horses annually and also through outside influence of Ben Baldus, Joe Wolter and others.





pounding and keep going. The Boon had an injury but came back from that and has proven to always fight for that cow, like Mr San Peppy. It is important to our program to have a horse that demonstrates that grit and a lot of cow. He updated our bloodlines, he's a freak athlete and his foals are trainable."

Trainability and work ethic go together in a good ranch horse. For Montalvo, it is vital that the ranch's breeding program focus on creating a horse that allows the cowboy to do his job.

"While our bloodlines are evolving, we are continuing to build a horse to last," Montalvo continues. "It is important because they have that grit and that heart to carry the workload on that bone. We are making tweaks to ensure we keep horses with big bone that can

handle anything out here. Whether it is gathering, working in pens and sorting, or pulling a 2,500-pound bull, our horses are bred and built to last. They do the talking about our lines through their work. They go through whatever is in front of them and they like to do their jobs."

The cross of bloodlines more well known for their performance in the show pen than in the pasture has helped the ranch produce a horse that is lighter on its feet, but still punchy enough to face down a Santa Gertrudis bull. When that horse is retired at around 15 years old, it can then pack family members on trail rides.

"Being insular for a decade or so kept the outside world from really knowing the strength of our bloodlines," Clement says.

"We were ranching, working, and now, the horses are branching out and showing what a great product the King Ranch has always produced. Those out there in the world that are the get of our senior sires and now our junior sires, like Colonel Del Rancho, are coming on. Our crop of young studs is improving upon them."

In 2013, the world was able to once again see the kind of horses the King Ranch produced when it began to offer them again for sale to the public. Now, the ranch is included in the annual Return to the Remuda Sale held at the Four Sixes Ranch, where other longstanding ranch horse programs—the Four Sixes, Beggs Cattle Company, Pitchfork Land & Cattle Company, Tongue River Ranch and Wagonhound Land & Livestock—showcase the best of their herds for sale.



WIDE-REACHING WORK HORSES

Drew Knowles had never witnessed a King Ranch horse work firsthand, but the horses spoke to him when he attended the Return to the Remuda sale at the Four Sixes Ranch in 2021. The owner of the XIT Ranch, based in La Veta, Colorado, was on the hunt for mares to restart his family's horse breeding program.

"We went with the objective to establish our ranch horse mare band. We wanted to purchase the mares to let us have the best ranch horses around, and our approach started with conformation, good feet and sound mind. Of the couple hundred horses there, we were really impressed with what the King Ranch brought," says Knowles, who is at the helm of the famed XIT Ranch that once covered much of the Texas panhandle.

Just as the King Ranch was establishing its historic horse breeding program in 1915, the XIT was ending its own in 1912. Now Knowles is rebuilding the XIT program, thanks in large part to those King Ranch-bred mares.

"The King Ranch's commitment to excellence in its ranch horse program is second to none," Knowles says. "We bought a bred mare, Kineños Bandida, as sort of our matriarch. She is by Kineños Moon and was bred to Marsala Red. She foaled out on the full moon in April, which I thought was fitting. That little filly is the first we have had born in our program since my family stopped breeding horses in 1912."

Of the eight horses that Knowles and his Quarter Horse manager Ben Lard selected to purchase, four were from the King Ranch. Why make such an investment? Knowles says the bloodlines are more than proven.

"We believe for the core ranching needs of our herd, those [King Ranch] lines are some of the best you can possibly have in your herd," he explains. "There is no one that epitomizes ranch bloodlines better than the King Ranch. We were targeted in [the characteristics] we went to look for [at the sale], but we wanted diversity in our bloodlines. Try to find a horse that doesn't go back to King Ranch bloodlines. I bet you can't in this day and age."

Knowles isn't the only ranch owner to take note of today's King Ranch Quarter Horses. While the King Ranch landscape doesn't include mountains, its horses' surefootedness and solid conformation helps them handle all types of terrain.

"Our horses need to handle being ridden all day, sometimes for several days, over any terrain," Montalvo says. "They can't be soft-footed across a pasture. They need to have cow, of course. Our horses can do any job, no matter what you put in front of them because they have a mindset to work. In my humble opinion, our horses are world famous for their work ethic. King Ranch horses are their own legacy because they prove themselves while continuing to get better and better. You can get a job done [on them]."

Outside Prescott, Arizona, the ORO Ranch traces many of its mare lines to Peppy San Badger and recently purchased a Kineños Moon colt out of a Marsala Red mare to incorporate into their stud arsenal. In California, Lacey Livestock has a long history of breeding and purchasing from the King Ranch and has bred mares to both The Boon and Kineños Moon. The list of ranches incorporating King Ranch bloodlines reads like a who's who of the industry: Four Sixes Ranch, Florida's Deseret Ranches, Wagonhound Land & Livestock of Wyoming, and multiple other Texas ranches like the O'Brien, Beggs and Pitchfork. The ability for the ranch to provide horses for sale outside of its own fences isn't because they are lesser than those used on the ranch; it's the opposite. The ranch wants to sell quality horses and have them represent the historic breeding program.

"Because of our ability to breed 'extra' [horses], we can offer some for sale," Montalvo says. "Before we sell one, we have a sister or a daughter that can continue that bloodline. It is awesome that our horses sell and go to be tested, so to say, at different ranches around the world. Then we know what may work better [breeding-wise] for our cowboys."

RIGHT: Lonnie Espinoza (wearing red) holds the corner on a Marsala Red gelding while Rick Falcon riding a Cats Red Feather gelding sort a heifer off the steers and through the gate manned by Jaime Obregon aboard a Taquito Sugar-bred gelding. While the sires are different, the strong mare line helps create uniformity in sorrel ranch geldings.



CHASING THE FUTURE

Tracing lines along the King Ranch horses' pedigrees looks much like a cow track crisscrossing the sandy grass pasture on the ranch: straight but with small deviations off the path. From Old Sorrel to Mr San Peppy to The Boon, the line is strong, just as strong as the trail from Old Sorrel through Mr San Peppy to Lil Ruf Peppy to Coronel Del Rancho.

"Years ago, King Ranch [competed with] halter horses and racing," Clement says. "We believe in what our horses can do. If the industry evolves, we want



to be able to show that our horses can compete. The versatility is one of our next steps.”

While performance bloodlines from multi-discipline sire Peptoboonsmal and reining triple crown champion Not Ruf At All—both descendants of King Ranch Horses—have infused the proven ranch lines, the goal remains the same: continually improve the horses used on the ranch.

“The King Ranch Quarter Horse is the No. 1 tool in the box and is as vital to our operations today as it was 169 years ago,” Grigg says. “King Ranch is a working ranch in every sense of the term. The volatility of today’s markets forces us to work more effectively. In

an industry operating on thin margins, efficiency and proficiency are vital to profitability. The horses produced on this ranch, paired with our cowboys, excel in both areas. We have the best employees working this land with the best tools we can provide.”

Annually, lower-end and older mares are culled and the best fillies from Kineños’ strings are retained. Outcrosses are sought out to add to the ingredients the ranch already knows produces a good match.

“We feel like every crop of foals is our best crop,” Clement says. “That is what King Ranch has always been committed to—having the next year be the new best year. We are proud of what we have on the

ground. This is the best class of 2-year-old fillies we have had in 10 years. Next year will be better than this year.”

A foundation that starts with strong bone, good feet and a trainable mind is key. Through the years the King Ranch has added speed and athleticism. It’s a mix that has created a horse many point to as the ideal ranch horse.

“People are starting to realize ranch horses—not just ours, but any—are worth more,” Montalvo says. “They are bred tough and can do anything from ranch work to the arena. These horses can see it all and do it all. Like our Kineños, our horses have heart. Our bloodlines are fun to ride, and also able to work. They want to do the job.” 🐾

