

# RAISING THE BAR

STORY BY JENNIFER DENISON



**ABOVE:** Rick Kieckhefer uses one of his K4 Ranch-raised horses during branding.





# RAISING THE BAR

STORY BY JENNIFER DENISON



*With more than 80 years invested in their horse program, the Kieckhefer family is producing solid ranch horses that are making their way into the elite ranks of tie-down roping competition.*

**A**s team roping, breakaway roping and tie-down roping events are paying out millions of dollars annually, a steady stream of new contestants is getting involved; the rope horse industry is booming. Ropers at all levels are looking for horses that will give them an edge when hundredths of seconds are at stake.

Not just any rope horse can make a tie-down athlete, however. It takes a horse that will stand statue still and remain calm and collected in the box while a calf leaves the chute. Once the calf clears the barrier, the horse must sprint straight out of the box, catch up to the calf and rate its speed to get the roper in position for a shot. The instant the loop snares the calf, the horse drives its hindquarters beneath its body and stops on a dime as the roper dismounts. Then the horse sits back on its hocks and backs up to tighten the rope slack while the roper dashes down the line, flanks and ties the calf. The horse must have ambition, athleticism, agility and robotic precision, yet also think for itself without a rider on its back.

“They have to want to do it because trying to make them do it doesn’t work,” says tie-down roper Joseph Parsons of Marana, Arizona.

It’s a rare opportunity to gather generations of tie-down ropers together to discuss the characteristics of standout horses in their sport and how they’re raised. But last fall, before the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo, four-time world champion Tuf Cooper stopped in Marana, Arizona, to make some practice runs and catch up with fellow NFR-qualifying tie-down ropers Joe Parsons and his son, Joseph, and Rick Kieckhefer of the K4 Ranch in Prescott, Arizona.

The Parson name is synonymous with tie-down roping in Arizona, where only a few tie-down ropers have qualified for the NFR. Joe is a five-time NFR qualifier, while his son made the finals in 2010, and both are fixtures on the Turquoise Circuit.



**TOP LEFT:** K4 cowboys, like Beano Kimball, are valuable in the ranch’s horse program. They are given a string of young horses to ride, and they know how to pace the horse to ensure they make it back to the corrals at the end of the day. They expose the ranch colts to all aspects of ranching.





**BELOW:** After losing his three best horses, Joseph Parsons traveled all over the United States trying out horses. He purchased Boogersgonnabfamous, aka "Houdini," at the 2020 Legacy Ranch Horse Sale. He and his father have since purchased three other horses at the sale, including the 2022 high seller, Cee My Credit Maxed.

Rick and his wife, Sarah, manage the K4 Ranch, the family's farming and feedlot operation in southern Arizona, and ranches in California and Oklahoma. In 2018, they purchased Cholla Livestock, which operates the legendary Diamond A Ranch outside of Seligman, Arizona. Rick spent years rodeoing and qualified for the NFR in 2002, while his wife is a barrel racer and has made the Turquoise Circuit

Finals more than 20 times.

The Kieckhefer family has raised cattle and stock horses for more than 80 years and were recently recognized by the American Quarter Horse Association for 75 consecutive years of breeding Quarter Horses. With their knowledge of ranching, horses, rodeo and roping, they have refined their program to produce horses that can go from the ranch into the up-

per echelons of rodeo. In 2016, they started the Legacy Ranch Horse Sale through which Cooper and the Parsons have purchased multiple tie-down roping mounts and prospects based on their trust in Rick and the K4 brand's proven horses. What is it about ranch-raised horses that makes them so adaptable for the elite rodeo ranks? These top ropers share their perspectives.





## EIGHTY-YEAR EVOLUTION

Established in 1941 by J.W. Kieckhefer, the K4 Ranch began as a Hereford cattle operation. Within a couple of years, he started raising horses and registering them in the then fledgling AQHA. Foundation stock came from Greene Cattle Company of Cananea, Mexico, which had a neighboring ranch in Prescott, Arizona. J.W. Kieckhefer's son, Bob, had an interest in improving the horse program, adding stallions Hank Will (Tonto Bars Hank x Mine Will x I Will) and Poquito Mas (Joe Moore x Yokohama x Spokane 1). Hank Will went on to become an AQHA Supreme Champion in 1972.

The early K4 horses continued that legacy and became solid horses used for ranching and racing. Bob later served as an AQHA president, chaired the judges committee for a number of years and was inducted into the American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame.

In the 1960s, Bob's son, John Kieckhefer, and K4 ranch manager and respected rodeo cowboy Chuck Shep-

pard continued to expand the horse program with the purchase of Driftwood Ike (Driftwood x Hancock Belle x Buck 01), who stood at the ranch for 17 years and produced offspring that excelled in rodeo events. Sheppard's daughter, Lynda, married John in 1970 and they had two sons, Rick and Johnny, who were active in rodeo and continue to be involved with the ranch.

"Rick's grandad, Chuck Sheppard, was a hero of mine," Joe says of the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame inductee. "The first calf-roping saddle my dad bought me [at 10 years old] had a Chuck Sheppard tree. I also knew the K4 had Driftwood horses through the years, and a lot of cowboys rode them because they were tough and natural rope horses."

Under the direction of Rick and Sarah, the K4 continues to raise cattle, operate a direct-to-consumer beef program and hone its horse program. Their band of approximately 30 broodmares, tracing to such foundation sires as Driftwood, Harlan, Colonel Freckles and First Down Dash, are crossed on stallions bearing the bloodlines of

**ABOVE:** The Kieckhefer family and their ranch cowboys, such as Beano Kimball (left) have produced horses for top tie-down ropers such as Tuf Cooper (second from left), and Joe and Joseph Parsons. **BELOW:** Rick, Sarah and Kodi Gwynn Kieckhefer live at the K4 Ranch headquarters in Prescott, Arizona. They manage the family's cattle and horse operation, while also marketing their Gourmet Beef and producing the Legacy Ranch Horse Sale.





Cee Booger Red (Cee Bar Badger 71 x Cross 159 Bell 71 x Cara Rojo), Popular Resortfigure (Dual Pep x Bar J Jackie x Zan Parr Jack) and Fiesta Royale (Royal Shake Em x Firewater Fiesta x Fire Water Flit) just to name a few.

K4 horses are bred and foaled on the ranch's northern Arizona pastures. They learn quickly how to survive outside, traversing rocky terrain and foraging on the high desert bunch grasses. As 2-year-olds, the youngsters are started by such K4 cowboys as longtime employee Beano Kimball and used for light ranch work as 3-year-olds. By the time they're 5, they're part of the cowboys' strings and can be ridden up to 25 miles in a day.

"We ride them on all of our ranches and on the feedlot," Rick says. "If it has anything to do with working cattle on our operation, they do it. We operate on over 1 million acres throughout the

Southwest, and we do it horseback. We have over 50 employees in our operations, and I think we own only two four-wheelers. The thing that's so valuable about the cowboys who work for us is that they know how to ride 20 to 25 miles and have some horse left at the end of the day. We really have some good hands working for us.

"Our cowboys are given their string of horses, and as they progress over the years, we make our decisions as to which horses will make their way to the auction block," Rick continues. "In our program, there are always some horses I watch on these ranches, and I can just tell that they have what it takes. When I see these horses, I talk to the cowboy who is riding it and give him some suggestions as to what it'll take to send the horse to the next level."

When Rick believes a horse could

compete at a high level, he spends extra time on the horse, so he can see how it works and who might fit it.

"I will take a couple of months riding those really special horses, which helps the horse develop and allows me to know the horse so that when some of these top competitors want to know what I think about them, I can really give them a good idea of what potential a horse has," Rick says.

"We're ranchers first and foremost, and our cattle come first, but we need good horses to do our job," Rick continues. "I know these horses, and they have been rode and rode and have had everything done on them, and they're not [mentally] messed up. I give everything I have, and I expect my horses to do the same. I can't ride a horse that isn't trying as hard as I am, and I think these top guys feel the same way."



**ABOVE:** Rick Kieckhefer spends extra time riding young horses on the ranch that he believes has the potential to be top tie-down roping horses.



## RANCH TO RODEO

Once the young horses have solid foundations, many of them will be consigned to the Legacy Ranch Horse Sale, held in September at the Prescott Rodeo Grounds, featuring horses from the K4 and Diamond A. The sale has given the Kieckhefers an outlet to market their horses, and it's helped them specialize their program.

"The best thing the horse sale has done for us is add structure to our [horse] program so we know where we're going," Rick says. "It's put a lot of focus on what we want our horses to do and put markers on where they need to be by a certain time."

Cooper purchased his first K4 horse, This Fiestas Lonely ("Blanco"), in 2020, but he's known and respected Rick a lot longer.

"I've known the Kieckhefers my whole life," Cooper says. "Growing up in calf roping, I watched Rick's success in the arena through the years. I feel for-

tunate that fate allowed me to buy the gray horse [Blanco] from them; he has opened doors for me that have led me to where I am today."

Blanco had originally sold to another buyer at the 2017 Legacy sale. When the buyer had second thoughts, Rick reimbursed his money because he had ridden the horse on the ranch and knew he could find another buyer.

"I knew he was a calf horse," Rick says, adding that one of the most important traits of a tie-down roping horse is a powerful hindquarters. "He had the ability to get his hindquarters straight and square regardless of whether he was going fast, slow, left or right. It was a feel that you can't train into horses — it comes naturally."

Rick sold half interest of Blanco to seven-time NFR tie-down roper Cade Swor, who spent two years seasoning him. Cooper bought the horse after riding it at the 2020 NFR, which was held in Arlington, Texas. He rejuvenated Cooper's roping and has been his main mount ever since.

**ABOVE:** Tuf Cooper has two K4 horses in his rodeo string: This Fiestas Lonely ("Blanco") and Boogers Ramblin Man ("Touchdown"). At last year's Legacy Ranch Horse Sale, he purchased a 4-year-old mare, Moonlight Eclipsed ("Wanda"), that he hopes to show in rope horse futurities.

"I was drawn to how confident and comfortable I felt on top of him," says Cooper, who rode the horse during the NFR. "I'd seen the horse go once before, and he drug his butt. I thought, 'That's an NFR horse there.' I was fortunate the NFR was in Texas that year and the horse was only 40 miles down the road. That was the first time I had ridden him in competition, and we won the round. I instantly knew I had to have him. I could relax and breathe on him, and he could go faster than me."

When Cooper committed to riding the horse in a performance at the NFR, Swor texted Rick to be sure to watch the NFR because the K4-bred horse was going to come out of the box that night.





“It’s like watching your kids compete,” Rick says. “You’re nervous and anxious, but you’re not surprised. You put the best roper on a horse you think is going to step it up, and that’s the result you get.”

Sarah Kieckhefer adds, “You could tell right away that when [Tuf] started riding the horse that there was a connection. People go their whole lives and never click with a horse the way Tuf and Blanco did.”

After Blanco, Cooper purchased Boogers Ramblin Man (“Touchdown”), a 2016 red roan gelding by Boogers Cross Bell out of Ikes Bonita Star by Tuffy Ike, based on a video Sarah had posted of her husband breakaway roping on the horse prior to the sale. Cooper is now hauling Touchdown in his rodeo string and starting to use him in competition.

“[K4 horses] are tougher than most any horses I’ve ever loaded up in my trailer,” Cooper explains. “The road is hard on horses, but these horses seem to know how to handle it. When they get somewhere, they know how to rest and drink and take care of themselves.”

“These horses have taught me more about roping and horsemanship than any other horses I’ve rode,” he adds. “One thing I notice is when they put their foot in the ground, you know, without a doubt, it’s connected to the earth, each step they take. Knowing the horse is underneath you and knows what to do with his feet — it gives me confidence I can go do anything I want to do on top of that horse.”

Rick has no doubt that the horses develop these qualities from being raised on the ranch.

**TOP AND CENTER:** Cooper and Blanco (2012 gray gelding, Fiesta Royale x Annie Be Lonely x Ikes Last) get in some practice runs last fall in Arizona before the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.

**BOTTOM LEFT AND RIGHT:** Parsons and Houdini (2014 sorrel gelding, Figure Me Famous x Boogers Deb x Cee Booger Red) are a winning duo at tie-down ropings in Arizona.





“In our rocky terrain, the horses have to think about where they put their feet,” Rick explains. “It also comes from the people who ride them on the ranch and have confidence that transfers to the horse. We ride them in rough country where one bad step could lead to injury or death, but the horses feel our confidence and get the attitude that there’s no mountain too tall or no ground too bad.”

In 2022, Cooper bought a third horse: Moonlight Eclipsed, a 2019 bay mare by Figure Me Famous and out of Moonlight Walkharlan by Harlans Tuff Voodoo. As with most tie-down ropers, Cooper typically prefers geldings at least 5 years old, but after riding “Wanda” on the K4 Ranch, he bought the mare with the intention of showing her in rope horse futurities over the next few years.

### SIZE, SPEED AND SUBSTANCE

Joe knew Rick from when he would come out to jackpot ropings at the Parsons’ arena in the 1990s while attending the University of Arizona, Tucson. Joe was impressed with Rick’s home-grown horses.

“Every horse he had was phenom-

enal,” says Joe, who retired from professional rodeo in 1991. “I wondered how those horses worked so good; they did everything perfectly.”

In 2017, more than a decade after he started rodeoing, Joseph slowed down his rodeo schedule and stayed closer to home. Prior to that, he’d had three of his best roping horses have complications in three months: one had a heart attack, one fractured a leg and one fractured a hock. Since he was a kid, Joseph looked up to Rick for his roping and his horses, and they traveled to some rodeos together. So, when he was looking to rebuild his tie-down string, he knew where to go.

“In 2020, Joseph said we needed to go see this horse they call ‘Houdini,’ so we went up and watched the sale,” Joe recalls. “We left early and had a friend stay and buy the horse for us. We were driving down the mountain, and the phone rang, and we asked where we were in the bidding, and it kept going up. I still get knots in my gut thinking that we left that sale and almost lost the horse to a higher bidder.”

Houdini, registered as Boogers-gonnabfamous, is a 2014 sorrel gelding by Figure Me Famous and out of Boogers Deb by Cee Booger Red. Jo-

**TOP LEFT CORNER:** Five-time NFR tie-down roping qualifier Joe Parsons has watched the quality of horses and ropers rise through the years. **BOTTOM LEFT CORNER:** Following in his father’s footsteps, Joseph Parsons developed a passion for tie-down roping as a teenager and has had success on a professional level. He qualified for the NFR in 2010.

seph trained the tall, stout horse and uses him in tie-down competition today. The gelding was destined to be a tie-down roping horse.

“His dam was Boogers Deb, a mare we raised, and Rick rode at all the major rodeos, and 11-time NFR qualifier Jerome Schneeberger rode at the 2007 NFR,” Sarah says. “In 2009, we bred five mares to AQHA Superhorse Champion Popular Resort Figure, and Figure Me Famous [a K4 Ranch stallion] is one of those offspring. His dam, Step By Jody, was another mare Rick rodeoed on for years.”

A year later, the Parsons bought a three-quarters brother to Houdini, Figure You A GoGo (“Torpedo”), a 2015 chestnut gelding by Figure Me Famous out of Tuffy Harlander by Tuffy Ike. Then, they bought the high-selling horse at the 2022 Legacy





horse that is easy and fun to heel on with a good mind. After watching the sale preview, he was impressed by how the 3-year-old moved. He plans to team rope and breakaway on the horse and get the horse ready for his grandkids to rodeo on in the future.

“What I see in the K4 program, beyond the bloodlines, is that they’ve been ridden by some of the best cowboys in the business,” Joe says. “A lot of ranch horses aren’t broke very well, but when you see the K4 horses, they are broke because they’ve been through everything. To see these horses and what they’ve done, it would’ve taken us years.”

Joseph notices that in tight spots, Houdini moves away from other horses, rather than kicking and biting. He credits that to the horse being raised in a herd environment and being hauled in the trailer with several other horses.

Joe also notices how easily they back into the box and stand without resistance.

“I think it goes back to their good minds and having been put in high-pressure situations on the ranch and having the confidence to get through them,” Joe says.

Rick agrees being ranch-raised is a key to the success of K4 horses.

“Those street smarts come from being on the ranch and learning to take care of themselves,” Rick says. “What we do is unconventional in the roping horse industry. For guys like Joseph and Tuf to go, find a 4-year-old horse that has size and soundness and, maybe, has some roping experience and hasn’t been screwed up by someone is uncommon. These aren’t rejects—they’re ranch horses.”

## A LEGACY OF QUALITY

Quality horses command a high investment, though Rick says, in return, the ropers get a horse with value.

“Shortly after Tuf bought Blanco, he and I were talking, and he mentioned how much the horse brought, and I reminded Tuf that the price is just what you pay, but the value is what you get,” Rick recalls. “These guys get it, and

that’s why they’re the best at what they do; they know the value of that horse.”

Joe adds, “I’m 66 years old and have been in the sport pretty much all my life. The most I ever paid for a horse was \$10,000 in 1987, and that was a lot. I think in general, ropers didn’t have a lot of money back then, so they were trying to buy cheaper horses and training them. The horses that have made it to this level now are exceptional horses. The competition is so much tougher now, and it has caused the quality of horses to improve. When we were rodeoing, if you got out clean at the barrier and made a decent run, you’d place. Now, you can make a good run and not even place. Everything has to be just right, and you have to be in shape and ride the best athlete you can find.”

When Rick looks back on his rodeo career, he says he rarely went and bought a horse, but rather he spent his time training young horses from the ranch.

“I’m certain I would’ve had more success in my rodeo career if I hadn’t always been riding a green horse,” he says. “However, had I done that, I wouldn’t have learned what we wanted in a horse and wouldn’t have developed our program into what we have today, where you have guys like Tuf and Joseph buying these horses. The trials and tribulations I went through back then have made these horses and our program what it is today.

“It’s so rewarding to ride these horses to do a job, and then watch them go through the sale and turn on the TV and see them at the NFR and all these major rodeos,” Rick says. “It couldn’t be any better feeling, but it takes 80 years to get there.” 🐾

*For more information on the Legacy Ranch Horse Sale, visit [legacyranch-horsesale.com](http://legacyranch-horsesale.com).*

**TOP CENTER:** Joseph Parsons competes on Houdini at rodeos in the Turquoise Circuit, including the Prescott Pioneer Days Rodeo. **TOP RIGHT:** Riding ranch-raised horses, Rick Kieckhefer qualified for the 2002 NFR.

sale, Cee My Credit Maxed (“Grut”), a 2017 bay gelding by Bestcreditmesunfrost out of GB Neci by Boogers Cee Bar, which sold for \$100,000.

“Grut is the most talented young horse we have potentially ever raised,” Rick says. “He’s one of those horses that does certain things you can’t train in them, but the horse is born with it. Grut has the cow sense, athletic ability, speed and attitude to be the best of all those traits. Rarely do you ride or see a horse that excels in every aspect of performance, but Grut does.”

A long-legged roper, Joseph was drawn to Grut’s size and conformation, but it was the horse’s good mind, speed and upbringing that sold him.

“We went up to the ranch and rode him before the sale,” Joseph says. “The horse had the greatest feel I’d ever felt on a horse. I knew that day we wanted to buy him.”

The Parsons also purchased Cholla Blue Salts (“Bo”), a 2019 blue roan gelding by Ron Burgandy Buckles and out of Saltys Reba by Salty Blue Hancock. The horse is the first from the Diamond A Ranch to end up in the competent hands of the Parsons and will be trained for tie-down roping and heeling. Joe was looking for a