**Supreme Ranch Horses**

The rugged high desert landscape of northern Arizona is a prime proving ground for horses raised on the K4 Ranch.

Story by Jennifer Denison

Raising livestock comes with its share of variables, but ranchers in rough, remote country can’t afford to be without a steady supply of horsepower. For more than 80 years, the Kieckhefer family has raised cattle and horses outside of Prescott, Arizona. Horses have always been essential for gathering, sorting and branding cattle in the diverse terrain that is not always accessible via motorized vehicles. The ranch cowboys rely on hardy horses to do the job, and the better the horses the more efficiently they can get their work done.

“We’re ranchers first and foremost and our cattle come first, but we need good horses to do our job,” says Kieckhefer. “I know our horses and they have been ridden and ridden and have had everything done on them.”

Started in 1941 by J.W. Kieckhefer, the fifth-generation family ranch has grown from its original headquarters outside of Prescott, Arizona, to also include farming and feedlot operations in southern Arizona and ranches in California and Oklahoma. In 2018, the Kieckhefers purchased Cholla Livestock, which operates the historic Diamond A Ranch outside of Seligman, Arizona. Rick Kieckhefer and his wife, Sarah, manage all the operations and produce the annual Legacy Ranch Horse Sale each September in Prescott, Arizona, which gives the public a chance to purchase horses from the K4 and Diamond A’s breeding programs, which include foundation bloodlines tracing back to Driftwood, Harlan, Colonel Freckles, Cee Booger Red and Popular Resortfigure, just to name a few.

Many of their horses go to other ranchers or top-level tie-down and team ropers. Kieckhefer, who qualified for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo in 2002 in tie-down roping, knows what it takes to produce a horse that can withstand the rigors of ranch and rodeo life. He works closely with his ranch employees, including colt starters Brady and Marianne Clark who had previously worked on the Diamond A and came to the K4 this past January, to ensure that the horses have the skills they need for success, whether they are used on the ranch, consigned to the sale or go into rope horse futurities.

“We make good colts by using them,” says Mariann Clark. “We give them a job outside and then, when we start roping on them in the arena, that’s the easy part and they relax.”

Here are a few key qualities instilled in the ranch colts from the time they are foals that make them desirable for any discipline.

**1. Surefooted Travelers**

From the time they are born in the pasture, the ranch colts learn quickly how to survive in the elements and traverse rocky terrain as they follow their dams to feed and water. In the process, they develop strong feet and legs.

In the fall, the colts are gathered, weaned and halter broken. They also have their feet handled and are introduced to saddling. If they’re gentle, Brady says they’re turned back out to pasture to mature until they’re 2 years old. Colts that need a little extra handling are kept in for a while longer.

Clark, who grew up on ranches and has worked on outfits in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, starts riding the 2-year-olds in a round pen or arena. By the third or fourth ride he and his wife ride them outside the pen so the colts can get exposed to different terrain and stimuli.

“On this ranch there are forests, creek beds, rolling hills and steep, rocky places,” says Mariann. “They’re always seeing something new.”

Brady adds, “It’s rocky and brushy enough that they stumble around a little bit at first, but they learn to carry themselves and a person on their backs quickly.”

The surefootedness and confidence the colts develop benefits them down the road on a trail ride or in the arena where uneven footing can be an issue in roping, barrel racing or other events.

“In our rocky terrain, the horses have to think about where they put their feet,” Kieckhefer explains. “We ride them in rough country where one bad step could lead to injury or death, but the colts feel our confidence and get the attitude that there’s no mountain too tall or no ground too bad.”

**2. Cow Prowlers**

The Weavers introduce the colts to roping steers and slow cattle in the round pen, teaching them to track and move a cow.

“It gives them somewhere to go and something to follow,” Weaver says. “Tracking a cow is no different than what they’ll do in the roping pen or running barrels—it involves watching something.”

They also teach the colts to drag a log with a rope, so they learn to feel the jerk and weight on the end of the rope in preparation for dragging calves to the branding fire and later roping events.

“They catch on to the cow work quick when we start using them to sort, gather and drag calves,” says Brady. “They’re so smart and good-minded and pick it up. They’re all pretty gritty and want to do their job right. It goes back to keeping them confident.”

The cowboys sort a lot of cattle in the fall during weaning and shipping and the colts get tired, but they learn to push through their comfort zone and get the job done.

“When you have trucks waiting to load cattle, you can’t have your horse quit,” says Brady. “They learn they can do more than they think and how to save themselves, even when they’re tired. And, being around cattle, chutes and the commotion really prepares them for when you take them to town.”

**3. Road Warriors**

As 3-year-old the colts are used on short—10- to 15-mile—gathers and start dragging calves to the fire at brandings. The Weavers are intentional with their training and try not to push the colts too hard and burn them out.

“We can drag small calves on them and let the guys on the older horses handle the bigger calves,” explains Brady. “We don’t have to go quite as far [during spring works] as we do in the fall, because there are branding pens everywhere on the ranch. It’s perfect for the colts; we gather and brand a handful of calves and call it good.

“You want to keep it enjoyable for them and build their confidence,” adds Mariann. “Brady is good about not overdoing it.”

The older colts are frequently hauled to different parts of the ranch and even to the feedlot in Douglas, Arizona, and the ranch in California with different horses.

“We ride them on all of our ranches and on the feedlot,” says Rick Kieckhefer. “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,” he 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.”

The more they are used, the more the colts learn how to preserve their energy, so they have enough to get back to the trailer at the end of the day. They also learn to drink and rest whenever they have a chance.

“[K4 horses] are tougher than most any horses I’ve ever loaded up in my trailer,” says three- time world champion tie-down roper Tuf Cooper. “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.

Part of what makes the ranch colts so foolproof is that they’ve been ridden hundreds of miles by talented horsemen and cowboys who expose them to every situation possible on the ranch. After that many wet saddle blankets, not much phases the colts when they move on to other ranches and jobs.

“We just want to keep things enjoyable for them and without overdoing it,” says Brady. “Every day is different, and it keeps their minds fresh. You can go any direction with these horses—they’re bred to work cattle and it’s simple and natural for them.”

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The Legacy Ranch Horse Sale

September 16, 2023

Prescott, Arizona

This eighth-annual sale produced by Rick and Sarah Kieckhefer features seasoned ranch horses and solid prospects raised on the K4 and historic Diamond A ranches in northern Arizona. The horses are all started on the ranches and used in the cowboys’ strings until they are broke and have solid foundations. Ranch employees also consign their own horses. For more information, visit [www.ranchhorsesale.com](http://www.ranchhorsesale.com) and follow @thelegacyranchorsesale on Facebook and @legacyranchhorsesalellc on Instagram.