

# Finding a Focus

A breeding program dedicated to producing versatile athletes gives Wagonhound Land & Livestock trainers many options when deciding where to send their young horses.

By Molly Montag

Wagonhound Land & Livestock strives to breed versatile horses that can excel in the show pen and on the ranch.

**Wagonhound Land and Livestock** has become known for turning out horses capable of winning in reined cow horse, cutting, roping and ranch competitions. They also produce horses hardy enough to be used on a ranch. Their success is, in part, due to a philosophy of giving horses the chance to show trainers what performance discipline suits them the best.

Wagonhound was purchased in 1999 by Art and Catherine Nicholas, who have made the Douglas, Wyoming-based ranch one of the top producers of Western performance horses in the nation. Bloodlines often give an indication of which discipline might be the best fit for a horse, but each horse is ridden before trainers decide in which direction it should be pointed.

"We want to try to get the most athletic ability as we can, but I think our No. 1 goal is mind," said Wagonhound's head trainer, Matt Koch. "We try to get them as trainable as possible, because then we can decide on what kind of talent we have and what direction to go."

For Wagonhound, that talent comes from an elite roster of mares and stallions. They rely on top bloodlines and conformation to turn out horses with the athletic ability and mentality to win in the show pen and pull their weight on the ranch's 200,000 acres in Wyoming and Montana.

Wagonhound-bred horses have amassed **Equi-Stat** records totaling \$1.1 million since 2007, primarily in cutting, reining and reined cow horse. They have also posted earnings to **Equi-Stat** in barrel racing and ranch horse versatility events. The ranch doesn't try to breed the most horses on the range; it tries to raise the best.

"It's really consistent between our farming, our cattle, our horses and our outfitting business," Wagonhound Ranch Manager Dustin Ewing said. "We really focus on a 'quality over quantity' type of mindset. We try to find the markets that are the strongest [and] we tailor our products to those markets."

## Early training

Approximately 40 horses begin their career paths the same way each fall in the training facility across the road from the breeding barns in Douglas. All horses get the same start, usually as late yearlings in November. It doesn't take long to figure out what performance events are a match for each horse's talents, or if the animals are better suited for ranch life.

"We put the first 10 rides on them, so they had exactly the same start, every one of them," Koch said of this year's 2-year-olds. "After that 10 days, you can kind of start feeling what that horse wants to be, how it moves and how it covers the ground. Then, we start them on the flag and see how cowy they're going to be."

Horses that display the greatest affinity for cutting are often sent to **Equi-Stat Elite** \$5 Million Rider Boyd Rice. After having a chance to evaluate the horses, Rice lets Wagonhound know if a horse has the ability to compete at cutting's elite levels. If it doesn't, the horse usually heads back to the ranch.

"[Rice will] try them for a while, and if he doesn't think that they're going to be good enough for the top of the top, he'll send them back here and we'll make another plan for them or try to sell them or something like that," Koch said.

Horses owned by the ranch have earned more than \$638,000, according to **Equi-Stat**, mostly in cutting and reined cow horse competitions. Much of that versatility can be traced to the ranch's head stallion, **Equi-Stat Elite** \$6 Million Sire WR This Cats Smart (High Brow Cat x The Smart Look x Smart Little Lena).

"We try to get the cowiest horse possible, whether it's by breeding a 'WR' daughter to Dual Rey or something like that," Koch said. "If it'll make a cutter, great. If it doesn't quite have that, we'll try to make a cow horse out of it. And, if it doesn't want to be a cow horse, we can either make a rope horse or a ranch horse out of it."

"You just kind of start with the most precise discipline, and work your way around to what that horse wants to be."

Koch points the ranch's reined cow horse prospects to the National Reined Cow Horse Association (NRCHA) Snaffle Bit Futurity. Since 2009, Koch has amassed an **Equi-Stat** record of nearly \$200,000. Formerly with Haythorn Livestock & Cattle Co., Koch's greatest successes so far have been with 2011 American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) World Champion Junior Working Cow Horse and NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity Level 1 Limited Open Champion SDP Blue Blood (Laredo Blue x SDP I Got Good Genes x Dual Rey). Earlier this year, the pair placed sixth in the World's Greatest Horseman competition.

Not every horse will make it to the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity, and Wagonhound cow horse prospects that don't

Performance Horse Photography



Dual With A Shiner and Matt Koch won the Mid America Colorado State Fair Futurity Open in October. The 2011 gelding has earned \$9,496 through April, according to **Equi-Stat**.



Courtesy of Wagonhound

After his show pen success, Dual With A Shiner transitioned to ranch work, where he also excelled.

Courtesy of Wagonhound



Hesa Hickory Cat has amassed an **Equi-Stat** record of \$8,918 in reined cow horse and versatility ranch horse competitions, but also earns his keep as a ranch horse for Wagonhound.



Scottemshoetem

Hesa Hickory Cat and Koch won the Wyoming Reined Cow Horse Association Cathy Coleman Legacy Futurity Open in 2013.

are often shown at smaller events in the Wyoming area. That's particularly important for the ranch's mares, Koch said.

"There are a lot of smaller futurities around here, so we can try to win money on them," he said. "We're trying to focus more on the fillies here now, on showing those and getting a performance record on them and trying to put them back into the broodmare band."

Horses that don't make it to the show pen at all may find jobs as mounts for guests or ranch hands at Wagonhound. Horses destined for ranch work have to show they have the structure to hold up and the disposition to do the job.

"[For ranch duty] we want them so they

can handle our personal guests or our ranch families, their wives and kids, so we really want to make sure we get those right minds and those dispositions out with those folks, which is really important to us," Ewing said.

### Changing jobs

In the case of many Wagonhound horses, their first career, whether showing or ranching, isn't the only job they'll perform throughout their lives. Ewing and Koch are always evaluating how a horse will provide the most benefit to the ranch, including whether it is a candidate for a career change or if it's the kind of horse that is in high demand from a certain kind of buyer.

"I've sold some older horses, also, that were just ranch horses that we weren't really using enough to really keep around," Koch said. "So, we might rope on them a little bit and then sell them as a prospect roper, but our main emphasis this year has been on 2-year-olds."

The ranch sells many of its younger horses privately as performance prospects, but also tries to find markets for secondary careers for horses more suited to timed events or roping. By not depending solely on public auctions, Wagonhound can host prospective buyers at the ranch. In addition to the state-of-the-art horse operation, the ranch has a 3,000-head Red Angus herd, finishes beef

Courtesy of Wagonhound



Smart By Starlight is a money-earner in reined cow horse and versatility ranch horse, as well as a useful ranch horse for Wagonhound.

Courtesy of Wagonhound



Two Wagonhound-bred money-earners – A Smiling Colonel and Smart By Starlight – show off their skills on the ranch.

in its own feedlots and grows high-quality alfalfa for itself and others. Its outfitting division offers hunting for elk, whitetail deer, mule deer, antelope and waterfowl.

“This facility is one of the coolest places I’ve ever been, so I just like to share it with people,” Koch said. “Let them come and get some information, and if they want to come ride some, they do. They come look at the colts and start spreading the Wagonhound horses around.”

The ranch also participates in a select number of regional horse sales, namely the Black Hills Stock Show Sale in Rapid City, South Dakota, and the Legends of Ranching

Performance Horse Sale at Colorado State University. Horses with potential as roping horses and timed-event prospects are often sold in Rapid City. By sending a few young horses to Colorado State for its students to train, Wagonhound is allowed to consign older horses to the college’s annual sale in Fort Collins, Colorado.

Participating in the Colorado State equine program and sale is a way to help students learn, as well as sell some older, well-broke horses that are a good fit for the more relaxed riders who often look for horses at the Legends of Ranching Performance Horse Sale, Koch said.

## Strong stallions

**The stallion roster** at Wagonhound Land & Livestock is an accomplished group of horses assembled for their ability, or promise, of passing along talent and substance to their offspring. WR This Cats Smart has already proven his worth. He serves as the foundation of most of the ranch horses.

“Every one of them is just full of cow, and they have no quit in them,” Wagonhound head trainer Matt Koch said of the 1999 stallion’s get. “When you go to use one outside, they give you 110 percent at 6 o’clock in the morning and at 6 o’clock at night. You can ride them all day and if a cow turns at them, they’re gonna hold it, or if you rope a big mamma cow, they’ll get down and try their darndest to do whatever you need them to do.”

They also excel in the show pen. Through April, foals by WR This Cats Smart had earnings of nearly \$6.2 million, according to **Equi-Stat**. Most of the 16-year-old stallion’s 329 performers through seven crops have earned money in cutting and reined cow horse competitions, but he’s also sired winning reining horses and barrel racers.

Wagonhound hopes WR This Cats Smart will eventually develop into a solid broodmare sire. His daughters already have the good conformation and soundness necessary to get ranch work done, said Wagonhound Ranch Manager Dustin Ewing. That longevity – the ability to pass on quality through his daughters – is one of the things the ranch was looking for in a stud, he said.

“While a lot of them aren’t out in the show pen to prove it, they’re proving themselves here on the ranch. I think down the road we’ll start seeing some activity out in the show world,” Ewing said. “So, it’s just a good overall product.”

WR This Cats Smart and fellow Wagonhound sire, National Cutting Horse Association Futurity Open winner Rockin W (Dual Rey x Boon San Kitty x High Brow Cat), both stand at the Four Sixes Ranch in Guthrie, Texas.

Young cow horse sires Genuine Masterpiece (Shining Spark x Kings Masterpiece x Peppy San Badger) and National Reined Cow Horse Association Derby Open Reserve Champion Stressolena (CD Olena x Stressin x Dual Pep) stand at Wagonhound in Wyoming.



Wagonhound sells many horses privately at the ranch, but also utilizes a few select sales to market horses to a wider audience. The ranch held its first production sale in 2013.

“It’s a good place for us to bring our really gentle, guest kind of horses that anybody can ride, because that’s the market down there,” Koch said. “There’s a lot of people that just go trail ride or want to go team pen maybe just on the weekends or something like that. That’s just kind of a normal day for a lot of these ranch horses, so it fits the program really well.”

### Breeding the best

Although a horse’s career path is determined by its ability and aptitude, conformation plays an undeniable factor in what feats each horse is physically able to perform.

“The cutters are going to be a little lower-headed, really have a good trot to them and cover a lot of ground. The cow horses will have a little more leg. Both the cutters and the cow horses have got to have a lot of stop,” Koch said. “The rope horses will have a little bit more size and be built a little thicker across their chest and through their hip.”

Those physical attributes are the result of a carefully constructed breeding program designed to combine athletic ability, a trainable mind and substance. The goal is to strike the balance between a smaller horse that’s athletic enough to compete in the show pen and one that has enough size and substance to hold up to ranch work.

“[Wagonhound’s] emphasis is that everything has good bone and good hoof,” Koch said. “We try to have as much size on them as we can, which is kind of hard with the per-

**You just kind of start with the most precise discipline, and work your way around to what that horse wants to be.**

— Matt Koch

formance horse deal. But, we try not to get too many small ones. Everything should be built big enough that you can go use.”

Ewing likes to see horses that are 14.3 to 15 hands tall with good withers and strong bones.

“We find that these smaller, more athletic horses will hang with the old mindset of you have to have this big, 15.2- or 16-hand horse to make a big circle in the pasture,” he said, adding that pedigree is extremely important.

“We’re looking for the size, the conformation, the bone, the structure of the horse and the pedigree,” Ewing said. “The pedigree is pretty instrumental in it.”

Wagonhound’s approximately 50-mare herd includes several daughters of WR This Cats Smart. The ranch matches those second-generation mares with some of the

top sires in the industry. This year they bred several mares to One Time Pepto (Peptoboonsmal x One Time Soon x Smart Little Lena) and to legendary cutting horse sire Dual Rey (Dual Pep x Nurse Rey x Wyoming Doc).

“When we first started, we went out and bought some of the best mares and we selected a stud – it happened to be WR This Cats Smart. Our goal was to raise really, really good ranch horses for us to use on the ranch,” Ewing said. “But, we also wanted them to have the ability to go to town and show, if we decided to.”

Over the years Wagonhound has also added several daughters of Shining Spark (Genuine Doc x Diamonds Sparkle x Mr Diamond Dude).

One of their foundation mares is NCHA Futurity Open Champion Little Tenina (Peppy San Badger x Tenino Fair x Doc Bar). The mare earned \$394,315 during her show career and has offspring earnings of \$362,974 through April, according to **Equi-Stat**. Several of her daughters remain in the Wagonhound broodmare band.

Another cornerstone mare is Kings Masterpiece (Peppy San Badger x Doc’s Masterpiece x Doc Bar). The mare’s offspring have earned \$320,658, according to **Equi-Stat**. Her son by Shining Spark, Genuine Masterpiece, stands at Wagonhound, while several of her daughters are in the ranch’s broodmare band.

Mares are continually evaluated. Those that aren’t producing the desired quality lose their spot in the herd.

“It happens over time – a continual evaluation of our broodmares and making sure they’re adding to the program, and if they’re not adding to the program, we’ll probably move them out,” Ewing said. “Adding to the program is bringing daughters in to continue to raise really strong athletic ranch horses and some that can go do cow horse and cutting events. We just want a good durable horse that’s not going to break down on somebody in a year, two or three, like you hear some doing.”

“Good bones, a good set of withers and pretty,” Koch added, listing the ranch’s desired traits in a horse. “And darn sure their mind – you want a horse quiet as possible but that still wants to train and wants to go do a job.”

It all allows the ranch to continue its quest to breed a better horse with the looks, talent and brains to tackle any discipline. ★