



—Photo courtesy of AQHA

# Connecting to Gen Z

Wagonhound Land & Livestock Co. offers up resources to the AQHA as it works to bridge the gap between youth and the horses they love.

By Kelsey Pecsek



Art and Catherine Nicholas of Wagonhound Land & Livestock Co. are excited to share their ranching heritage with tomorrow's generation of horse enthusiasts.

—Photo by Boyd Harris

**G**eneration Z – they're the Google Generation, the iGeneration and Generation Now. But most importantly, sitting in front of tablets, cell phones and on-demand TV are the curious minds of future horsemen and women.

"When you look at children ages 5-9 years old, their ultimate love for horses is not reining, cutting, Western or English. It's a unicorn, a My Little Pony and a Breyer horse," explained Todd Branson, the director of youth development for the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA). So how should a parent fuel the interest of a youngster that is captivated by horses?

"It's really hard for parents to get that entry-level start," Branson said. "I don't mean in an entry-level show arena, I mean entry-level – 'Where can my child find a live horse to touch and ride?' Many parents find it's much easier to go to Walmart and buy a soccer ball."

In today's fast-paced, technology-centered society, Branson fears the horse industry as a whole is about 20 years behind the digital curve. Thanks to the generosity of Wagonhound Land & Livestock Co. owners Art and Catherine Nicholas, the AQHA is able to begin building the framework for youth to get more involved.

## Pioneering

Building, contributing and improving are not new concepts for the Nicholases. The couple resides at the 150,000-acre Douglas, Wyo., ranch, along with many other young families who help operate and grow the business. Art and Catherine have been devoted to developing a prestigious, fully operational equine and cattle facility since the late 1990s when they purchased the establishment, which dates back to the late 1800s.

"I just love everything about ranching," Art said. "Among ranchers, there's no difference between your work and your life. Your life is your work. It's living a passion."

Since 2007, Wagonhound-bred horses have amassed an **Equi-Stat** breeder record of \$815,747 for the Nicholases, who also boast an **Equi-Stat** owner record of \$448,329 beginning in 2003.

Among the leading horses bred by Wagonhound is 2010 National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA) Futurity Open Reserve Champion Some Like It Hott (Spots Hot x Mighty Fine Sue x Smart Little Lena), with \$155,757 in lifetime earnings. Another is 2012 Pacific Coast Cutting Horse Association Derby Classic/Challenge Open Champion Peptos Opus Cat (Peptoboonsmal x Opus Cat x High Brow Cat), with \$82,376.

Wagonhound delivers top-notch horses to the industry with the help of its **Equi-Stat Elite** \$3 Million Cutting Sire WR This Cats Smart (High Brow Cat x The Smart Look x Smart Little



Lena) and homebred reined cow horse stallion Genuine Masterpiece (Shining Spark x Kings Masterpiece x Peppy San Badger). Together, the two stallions have earned about \$300,000 in show arenas. PC Frenchmans Hayday, a leading barrel and rope horse sire owned by close friends Mel and Wendy Potter, is another bloodline regularly used to produce the ideal Wagonhound ranch horse.

While morphing the Wagonhound brand to its current state, the couple also earmarked donations to Texas A&M and Colorado State universities for their equine science programs. Along with ranching enthusiasm, Art and Catherine have always been eager to help young people. It is the couple's passion.

"Those who are lucky enough to have [the ranch] experience can really appreciate what a horse can do for the human being," Art said. "It teaches young people the values of the West – hard work, responsibility and the opportunity to experience the circle of love and care that happens with horses."

The couple feels it is their duty to share the ranch lifestyle with interested people who are not fortunate enough to experience it firsthand. This has inspired them to make a donation to the AQHA, spearheading its vision for the future.

## The first step

Now that financial backing is secure, the AQHA released its initial plan to bridge the gap between children interested in horses and the equine industry. The effort will coalesce as an interactive digital platform called Take Me Riding!

"We are revitalizing current programs and developing new ones that showcase how the horse can support a healthy lifestyle, be a tool for education and be a part of positive youth development," Branson said. "We are trying to use technology – whether by tablet, smartphone or desktop computer – to educate kids in a fun way and bring more people to the horse industry."

"A child's interest in horses is not declining," he continued. "The effort we are making is: Let us expand on that love your kid already has for horses, educate you and create connections where we can use technology to help get your child horseback in a very cost-effective manner."

When the Nicholases heard the AQHA's strategic plan, they were eager to help make it a reality. Art was especially supportive of how the association planned to tie technology into what he considers the values of the West – responsibility, character, healthy lifestyle and leadership.

"There's no getting around it, technology is part of our lives," Art admitted. "Kids are involved with it, so I think using it as a step forward is a good choice. I think technology is



**While taking a non-breed-specific approach is not a new concept for AQHA, the new digital initiative will build on the value of existing programs like Junior Master Horseman.**

—Photo courtesy of AQHA

wonderful and it's a great tool, but the risk is that we become more introverted and isolated. We need to get out of the house."

In order to develop Take Me Riding!, Wagonhound graciously offered \$600,000 in startup funding. Additionally, the couple has committed to another half-million-dollar donation once the AQHA matches that amount with fundraising.

"It takes a lot of hard work and resources to make it happen and AQHA is really committed to putting the hard work into it, so we were honored to be able to take the lead in helping provide the resources," Art said.

## The bigger picture

The key to the AQHA's strategic plan for connecting with tomorrow's generation of horsemen is to first connect children with horses, then introduce them to the association lifestyle.

"We, as members of the horse industry, need to constantly be cognizant of what we can do to get more people involved with horses," Branson said. "I think, especially with the advancement of technology, that first step has been assumed – not forgotten, just assumed."

Over time, the horse industry has become segmented. While breed, color and discipline organizations are invaluable, Branson believes it will take horse enthusiasts uniting as one strong entity to attract interested children who come from horseless backgrounds. It's all about the bigger picture.

"Catherine and I feel that it's really important

to get young children involved with the horse, not only to learn about them, but to actually touch and feel and get on one," Art explained. "Kids' involvement has been on the decline for the last five years and we find that pretty disturbing. We'd really like to change that trend, so the objective is just to get young children to a horse."

In a world where technology is so dominant and with a generation that craves frequent stimulation, the goal of Take Me Riding! is to grow a child's interest in horses to a point where he or she wants to go outside and be around one.

Once a young person becomes more involved with horses, it is the job of each organization to prove its worth to the child and the parents.

"If we can use technology to make horses relevant in society, then we have done job one of getting more people involved in the horse industry," Branson said. "Then AQHA will utilize all of their resources to showcase why the American Quarter Horse is going to be the best choice when families are ready to make the next step."

Overall, the pool of children involved with horses has been shrinking. As Take Me Riding! helps grow the pool of participating kids, the American Quarter Horse Youth Association (AQHYA) will likely see a rise in involvement, as will other organizations, Branson explained.

As part of the AQHYA's own initiative, new reward systems are being developed for those who are involved outside of the show pen. The goal is to build the next generation of horse owners and develop responsible leaders in the horse industry.

"We were brought up on a ranch, with the hard work and responsibility and care that comes with involvement of the horse," Art said. "These are values that go way beyond the horse. They are so important to our country. In a way, it's all about the horse, but it's really about something even bigger than the horse."

## The plan

When the AQHA unveiled its Junior Master Horseman curriculum in 2006, the first generation iPhone had not yet been released. The hard-copy, non-breed-specific books and activities start with basic horse knowledge and build on a child's equine education with each level. They were created to reinforce the information set forth in the American Youth Horse Council's Horse Industry Handbook. Branson was quick to explain these kinds of programs are not disappearing, they're simply adapting.

Take Me Riding! will utilize content from the Junior Master Horseman curriculum, as well as offer fun and interactive games and activities for kids with varying levels of horse experience.

During the first public presentation of Take Me Riding!'s strategy at the AQHA Convention



**The AQHA has come forward with all-breed programs to get more children involved with horses overall. From there, it is up to individual organizations to promote their horses.** —Photo courtesy of Born To Ride 4-H Club

this year, some members expressed concern about casting too large of a net online. Branson reassured that the target audience for the initiative is not a group of children without interest.

The AQHA is clearly seeking out kids who are already charmed by the horse, but are unsure of where to take that obsession.

For the Nicholases, the “gradual eroding” of

the beneficial heritage that comes with being around horses is as big of a sadness as the lessening involvement.

“It’s time to make a statement here,” Art said boldly. “By intercepting this early, we can make a real difference and teach overall responsibility. When you get down to assuming personal responsibility, it can have a pretty big impact, not only in involvement with the horse, but from a national perspective and in your life in general.”

### A family affair

Another endeavor of Take Me Riding! is to create the horse industry’s version of the soccer ball by making it easy for parents to not only get their children involved, but also participate themselves. The platform will be primarily directed at kids, but there will be a portal for mom and dad, too. This will be their link to see what their children are learning, as well as learn about different venues and activities available outside of the digital realm.

“The horse industry does not have a soccer ball. You can just let your child outside with a soccer ball and say, ‘Go play.’” Branson said. “You don’t have to know anything about horses to realize that [interacting with] horses is a very physical activity and it requires mom and dad to be engaged. It takes quite a bit of

A large, stylized white silhouette of a horse's head in profile, facing right, set against a black background. The silhouette is simple and clean, capturing the basic shape of the horse's head and neck.

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A photograph of Mike Major, a Colorado horseman, sitting on a brown horse. He is wearing a red shirt and a cowboy hat. The background shows a field and a fence.



parental support.”

Right now, there is no single source of information available, Branson explained. With informal research, he confirmed that most local Amarillo, Texas, families use tack and feed stores to find horse-related information. When conducting a Google search, he found thousands of varied (and often confusing) listings. He added that there is also no good way for a parent to confirm the reputability and trustworthiness of what pops up in a Google search.

“Those entry-level pieces are hard to find,” said Branson, a father of two young children and the owner of two American Quarter Horses. “At the speed of technology, the accessibility and availability of finding horse activities is not keeping up. That’s the gap we are trying to fill. What we’re trying to do is reconnect with the audience that currently exists, but doesn’t have the resources today to know exactly where to go.”

The AQHA is also enthusiastic about keeping the association’s

current youth members involved in the Take Me Riding! effort. This year’s Youth Excellence Seminar (YES) attendees will start brainstorming fresh ideas for what will keep the next generation interested. The AQHYA event is scheduled for June 20-23 in Amarillo.

Wagonhound is fully committed to these efforts, too. The ranch manager of 10 years, Dustin Ewing, is serving on the advisory board for Take Me Riding! As a father raising children on the ranch, he knows how much influence horses have on a child’s healthy lifestyle. He aims to bring that knowledge forward and assist in planning productive activities.

“From our perspective, most of the families that live and operate the ranch are young and have kids involved,” Ewing said. “We’re bringing that experience to the table. The responsibility it takes to take care of horses flows over into our daily lives. It’s like raising a family, you’ve got to be there for it, mend and take care of it.”

## Pitching in

Take Me Riding!, which is set to launch next spring, has been well-planned in a self-sustaining business model, Branson said. But, technology is forever evolving. No one can guess what the next hot gadget will be.

As with any digital effort, financial support is the biggest burden. For this reason, the AQHA and Wagonhound are asking fellow horse industry participants to join in the effort.

“If you don’t build it from the bottom with the children, you lose the fundamental strength of involvement within the horse industry,” Art said. “If others’ passion is getting youth involved with horses, and they have the ability to support it financially, this is an incredible way to make your passion a reality.”

“The bottom line is that AQHA has stepped forward to address the declining involvement that the horse industry as a whole is seeing,” Branson added. “We need your support in order to make this happen.”

Branson is asking all organizations to pitch in whatever they can, whether it comes in the form of a trainer database or educational materials for the platform.

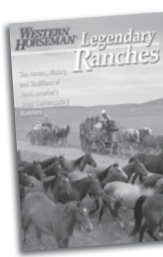
“It’s the effort of a lot of people who share the passion that makes it happen,” Art said. “We would encourage others to step up as well.”

With the Wagonhound offer to match fundraising efforts when they reach the \$500,000 mark, the possibility for Take Me Riding! is exponential. The AQHA is hoping to work with others in the industry to build a broad steppingstone that will simply get every interested child horseback.

“We need to embrace the love that a child has for a unicorn and a My Little Pony by encouraging real horseback experiences. We need to educate them and their parents about the natural, positive benefits of owning a registered horse,” Branson said. “If the child falls in love with a Clydesdale and goes on to become a Clydesdale trainer, God love ‘em.” ★

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