

# Keeping the Legend Alive

By KATRINA WATERS

The American Quarter Horse can perform a wide variety of tasks. In addition to the quarter-mile race for which the breed is named, this versatile horse excels in many arenas. This is never more evident than when looking around the office at Harrison Quarter Horses in Fulshear,





Jesse Gonzales Sr. pictured with Les Glos Kate, at the Fort Bend Quarter Horse Show in 1967. Photo by Jim Keeland and provided by Harrison Quarter Horses.



Jesse Gonzales Jr. and his daughter, Becky Gonzales Cook, represent the second and third generations of the Gonzales family to work for Harrison Quarter Horses. Photo by Katrina Waters.

## MORE THAN Horse Sense

Although undoubtedly best known for their horses, cattle have always been a big part of the Harrison Ranch. In the early days, it was mostly Herefords — with some Brahman and crossbred cattle as well.

Jeff estimates that they ran 30,000 head on the Sonora ranch, which the family no longer owns.

Rosemary agrees.

“I’ve got pictures of a sea of Hereford cows. As far as you could see, it was red. It was cool!” she says.

Nowadays, the cattle operation — Rosemary’s RJ Cattle Co., in Cuero — has smaller numbers but

still sets out to raise sound, profitable cattle like D.J. and Dan J. Harrison Jr.

She raises registered Brangus and Charolais, as well as crossbred cattle.

They run about 140 cows and sell all registered cattle private treaty. She estimates that they sell about 50 bulls per year.

“We’re keeping all the heifers now for replacements so right now all we’re selling are bulls and a few Charolais heifers,” Rosemary adds.

They send some of their feeder cattle to their ranch in Catarina to feed out, while others are sold through auction markets.



Opposite page: Photo by Rhonda Rhodes and provided by Harrison Quarter Horses. Above: Photo by Katrina Waters.

## BY THE NUMBERS

- 1,848 . . . number of foals registered with AQHA
- 3,162 . . . total AQHA performance points
- 37 . . . AQHA Register of Merit recognitions
- 26 . . . AQHA Superior Register of Merit recognitions
- 4 . . . AQHA Champions
- 2 . . . AQHA Reserve World Championships
- 1 . . . AQHA High Point Horse
- 1 . . . AQHA World Championship



The current stallions, from left to right: Sonitalena by Doc O'Lena; Doc Acre Glo by Bob Acre Doc by Son Ofa Doc; Payasos Last Buck by Payaso L Straw; Les Glos Colonel by Colonel Freckles; and Roosters Willy by Gallo Del Cielo by Peppy San Badger. Photo by Don Trout and provided by Harrison Quarter Horses

about 35 miles west of Houston.

Walking in, it is impossible not to notice the abundance of trophies, plaques and silver trays lining all four walls. These awards were brought back to the ranch from some of the nation's top equine events and include one world championship, two reserve world championships, one high point horse and four American Quarter Horse Association champions, among (many) others. Pos-

sibly even more impressive than the sheer number of awards is the number of events they represent. Breeding a versatile, easy-to-train horse is one of the primary goals at the Harrison Ranch.

No matter how many halter classes, cutting futurities or pro rodeos these horses have won, the Harrisons have never lost sight of striving to produce the kind of horse the family raised more than 70 years ago — a good all-around ranch horse, the kind a working cowboy wants in his pen.



Jesse Gonzales Jr. with Les Glos Rattler, a world champion in 1982. Photo by Dalco and provided by Harrison Quarter Horses.

### The people behind the horses

D.J. Harrison began breeding Quarter Horses to use to work cattle back in the 1930s, and by 1941 was registering the offspring with the AQHA.

Dan J. Harrison Jr., a TSCRA director from 1964 until his death

in 1980, joined his father in the ranching business — as well as the family's oil and gas business — after World War II.

The father-son duo was dedicated to producing top-notch Quarter Horses and profitable cattle and their hard work lives on. They were posthumously honored by the AQHA with the Legacy Award in 1997, after the family had registered Quarter Horses for 56 consecutive years. In 1999, they were given a niche in the Memorial Hall of the Cattle Raisers Museum.

Now it is Dan J. Harrison III and his wife, Rosemary, who continue the tradition. But it's not without help. Rosemary, who has served as manager of Harrison Quarter Horses since 1976, is quick to credit a staff comprised of long-term employees who know the ranch inside and out.

"How often do you have four generations of a family that know your bloodlines backwards and forwards that can go forward with you?" Rosemary asks.

She is speaking of the Gonzales family, an integral part of the ranch. The first member of the family to work on the Harrison's ranch was Jesse Gonzales Sr., who served as foreman of the Fulshear property, until he relocated to the Harrison's Piloncillo Ranch in South Texas in 1974.

That is when his son, Jesse Gonzales Jr., took over as foreman in Fulshear. He now serves as equine manager and recently celebrated 44 years of service with the Harrisons.

Becky Gonzales Cook, Jesse's daughter, was born and raised on the ranch and now serves as breeding manager. She and her husband, Jeff, live on the ranch with their daughter, Caylee.

"We're lucky that we have people who are committed to the bloodline and they're also really good trainers and they are diligent about the operation. And they've lived here their whole lives. It makes a big difference," Rosemary says.

Barbara Livingston, another

fixture of the ranch, has worked for the Harrisons for 37 years. She serves as agent of the ranching operation and as office manager for the family's Houston-based oil and gas company.

Like the Harrisons, the staff is dedicated to breeding, as Jesse Sr. used to say, "a good looking horse that can ride."

## Getting the job done... whatever the job may be

"You can do anything on these horses," Becky says.

"We've not only won AQHA, we've won at the NFR as well, and we've even been in English and some other things. They're very versatile," Rosemary says.

The Harrisons have the distinction of having horses in every timed event at the National Finals Rodeo. In 2003, Ima Star O Lena — also known as "Jackpot," — a Harrison-bred horse owned by Bryan Fields, was named AQHA Steer Wrestling Horse of the Year.

On the college rodeo level, One Black Starsky, owned by Luke and Casey Branquinho, was named National Intercollegiate Rodeo Horse of the Year in 2000.

In 2006, Devin Caddell was named Champion Barrel Racer and All-Around Cowgirl at the International Finals Youth Rodeo in Shawnee, Okla., mounted on Little Les Rattler, another Harrison gelding.

The list goes on. Other rodeo greats like Cody Ohl, Monte Joe Petska and Richard Gonzales have won on Harrison-bred horses, Jeff says.

"A few years ago, at the George Strait [team roping], there were three horses off of this ranch that placed in the average," Jeff says.

Becky credits the horses' trainability to their success.

"I think that's a big deal. They make you look better than you are sometimes because it is easy to them. When you ask them to do something, they just do it. There's no refusal," she says.

Rosemary agrees.

"Jesse (Jr.) used to say he'd work cows on them then jump

in the trailer and go win a roping on them. Or go win a horse show somewhere," she says.

"I did one time!" Jesse says, describing a day when he took Starsky and Leo — two of the ranch's best — to a horse show in Victoria and, when it was over, drove to a roping jackpot, arriving just before it started.

The other ropers were pretty surprised to see what Jesse was riding.

"I get there right before the roping starts and all the ropers ask, 'What are you riding?' And I said, 'Those two horses.' They asked, 'Oh, they rope?'"

"So, in the first round I use Leo and I got past the first round, then the second round... I used Starsky in the short go and I won first, second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth. On those show horses! The ones people had been asking [about], 'Do you really rope on those horses?'"

Starsky, whose registered name was Skipastarsky, was a gray stallion that could "do anything," Rosemary says. An own son of Skipa Star, who was recognized in *Western Horseman's Legends*, Vol. 5, for his impact on the Quarter Horse industry, Starsky was the 1983 AQHA High Point Junior Heeling Horse. Even though the Harrisons only showed him during his four-year-old year, he earned 277 performance points before retiring to sire 151 foals.

Selling horses for full-time ranch work has always been a big part of the business. Some of Texas' biggest ranches have remudas that include Harrison-bred horses, whether they have purchased the horses directly or brought their mares to be bred to a Harrison stallion.

The King Ranch sent several mares to Fulshear to be bred to the Harrison's Les Glos Colonel, several years in a row.

"They came and bred four or five mares to him and when those horses became of age to break, they put them in a pen and the cowboys got to pick by seniority. When they picked, our horses were the first four or five horses to leave the pen.

"That's when they really started

realizing they made that good of horses because the cowboys wanted to pick them out of the pen first to be able to train on them," Becky says.

## Labor and other challenges

Like any other ranching operation, the Harrisons struggle to find good help — an issue that has become much more significant recently.

"Between the record keeping and the training and the specialized things that they (Jesse and Becky) do, you need someone in here to clean the stalls and to keep the barn clean and help you do other things," Rosemary says.

"In the summer, there are kids who'll come do it. But, the rest of the year, it is very difficult [to find help]. Where you had 15 people [in the past], now you have two," she continues.

"And out of those 15 people, probably four or five of them rode horses every morning," Becky adds.

Labor challenges mean changes in the way the operation runs. A smaller staff means selling most horses as weanlings and yearlings.

They also retain fewer horses. Back in the 1970s, they ran several hundred horses. Now that number is closer to a more manageable 150 head.

Newly discovered diseases and the resulting new pharmaceutical products are another one of the big changes Rosemary cites.

"All the veterinary stuff has changed," she says. "You have new diseases and with all these vaccinations now you have to give, that's a big expenditure. And that's another labor-intensive thing. [For example,] it takes a whole day to worm everything."

But no matter what challenges arise, the Harrisons and their staff are determined to adapt to change and to continue the work the elder Harrison men began so many years ago.

"I feel like you have to keep the legend alive. I've devoted my life to it and so have they," Rosemary says. ■