

Getting back to the Ranch

West Coast Ranch Horse is putting entries – and fun – into the arena

FROM HORSETRADER STAFF REPORTS

TEMECULA — Jenni Dawson entered her first ranch horse class a few years ago – in June 2017 at the Tumbleweed Riding Club open show in Lakeside, to be exact — and the rest is history.

Her show background, from ETI as a young rider in Lakeview Terrace to inter-collegiate competition at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, had been varied and rich. She had jumped a bit, did cutting, western pleasure and some reining. This was different.

“I did my first ranch riding class on my cutting horse, and I was hooked,” recalls Dawson, who won the class. “I didn’t previously appreciate how similar it is to western all-around classes — it’s just in ranch horse you’re allowing horses to move naturally. I have been hooked since then.”

As founder of West Coast Ranch Horse, she is helping to get others hooked, too. The brainchild of Dawson and her husband Sean, the WCRH has energized and organized a horse sport that already had a growing popularity. There are four WCRH-recognized events: Ranch Riding, Ranch Trail, Ranch Rail and Ranch Conformation. Since its Jan. 1 inception last year, WCRH has sanctioned 40 shows in seven states, including California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Oregon, Washington and Idaho. It has also united exhibitors across the region in a Best In The West program where competitors nominate and earn points from any ranch horse show in the region. The Best in the West program offers monthly high-point prizes and year-

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Gary Roberts: Ranch Horse 101 Clinic
Sat., Jan. 23 · 7:30-9:30 a.m.
Green Acres Ranch, Temecula
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Caliber's Revenge patiently awaits work under Raquel Cordova of Acton at the Dec. 12 WCRH Winter Series #2 Show in Temecula.

end awards such as belt buckles. WCRH also has developed a platform for both “live” shows at venues and virtual shows judged online. At last count, there were more than 800 WCRH members – and over 5,000 Facebook followers. If you passed by Green Acres Ranch in Temecula in December and witnessed activity at the most recent WCRH Winter Buckle Series Show, you saw the popularity.

Thoughts of starting an association had percolated in Jenni and Sean for some time, but horse shows were not at the forefront when they met a decade ago in Colorado. Jenni, working as a quality and regulatory executive for medical labs, and Sean, who had a financial planning and banking background and was also working on commercial ranches, married in 2011. Before returning to Southern California, they lived in central Texas, where Sean rode in ranch horse and reining classes at Capital Area Quarter Horse Association events and other open shows.

“I was still doing western pleasure, horsemanship and trail at the time,” Jenni says. “I

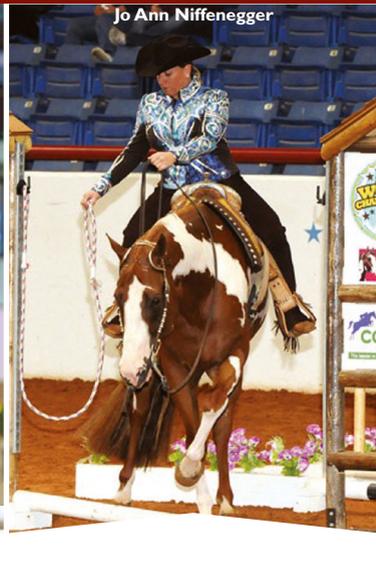
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Kadence Conwell of Bonsall presents Holy Miss Moses to judge Gary Roberts.



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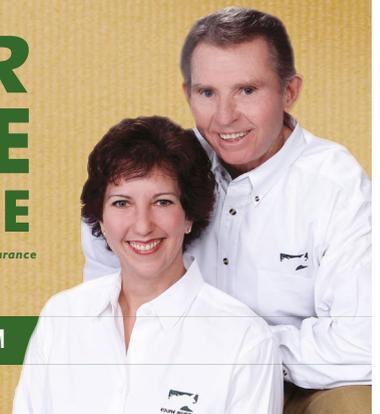


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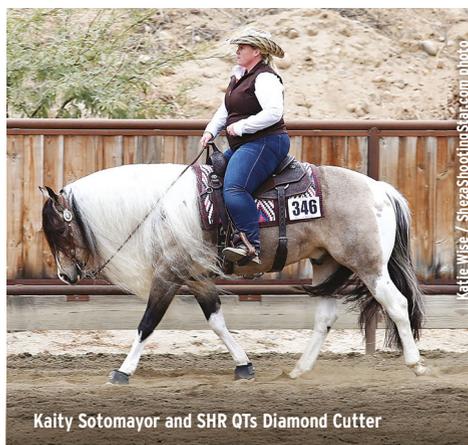
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Sean and Jenni Dawson (from left) present Rosie Cowley and Craig Cowley with a trophy saddle sponsored by Capo Custom Saddles at the Ranch Horse Rendezvous Oct. 25.



Javonne Mullins of San Juan Capistrano and Nimble Wala Walla



Kaity Sotomayor and SHR QTs Diamond Cutter



Amy Naidus of Temecula rode her Sheesa Dun Sansation to the Green Horse Trail title.

honestly thought ranch riding was more like reining. It took me a while to consider doing it — until we moved to California.”

Then came that Tumbleweed Riding Club show three years ago where she rode Stylish Masin, her cutting horse gelding with more than \$20,000 in earnings, in a couple classes.

“I went and bought this pretty expensive cutting horse, and I haven’t really cut on him,” Jenni says. “I ended up showing ranch horse on him just because I enjoyed it so much.

“Ranch classes are always different,” she adds. “There are tons of different patterns, for ranch riding and trail. The rail classes are so competitive. It’s so fun — you really feel like you’ve accomplished something if you win against all these great riders and horses.”

While competing the last few years, Jenni noticed on social media that ranch horse organizations elsewhere in the country had shows dedicated to the discipline and with handsome awards. The East Coast Ranch Horse Association and Stock Horse of Texas were two of them.

“I just felt like there wasn’t anything just for Ranch Horse competitors on the West Coast,” she says. “I thought, well, what if we had an organization that just focuses on ranch classes? These people, like me, are serious about their ranch horses. To me, ranch classes often seemed like an afterthought and I know other competitors have felt this as well at shows that are primarily focused on other disciplines. In my mind, ranch competitors should get a warm-up to go over the poles, see the banners in the arena, or see the judges’ chairs. Reiners often get a whole day of practice, and we get — well, no dedicated warm up a lot of the time. So, we just got to a point where I said, ‘you know what, I’m going to do this!’”

Then she and Sean went to work, refining ways to organize, handle entries and results — and also the daunting task of developing relationships with events across the western U.S. to sanction shows. The work paid off when The Best In The West program went live last Feb. 1 with more than 40 sanctioned events in four states. The list included larger shows, like the Gold N Grand events in Northern California and the popular Southern California Professional Horse Show Association events in California. Equestrian Trails, Inc. had sanctioned an entire Ranch Day run by WCRH and a WCRH sponsored Top Hand buckle at its ETI Convention — an event Jenni competed in as a youth.

“It’s great because WCRH approval is promoting their organization as well as promoting ranch horse and our organization — it’s

really a win-win,” says Jenni, who charges a nominal \$100 for a series or \$50 for a stand-alone show. “Approved shows transfer their points to us, and then we enter all the points for all the nominated competitors.”

Just weeks after launching the Best in The West program, COVID-19 put a damper on things. Shows were “dropping like flies,” she puts it.

“There was one night I had to cancel or postpone eight shows in our approved show schedule — and that was a huge chunk of all the work that had been done — and I was lying in bed, asking ‘what do we do now?’” she recalls. “That’s when I thought of the online shows.”

With no live show venues, WCRH took to virtual ones. Essentially, exhibitors enter online and obtain the patterns, then video their rides, post them and await judging. WCRH handles the workings.

“We sort through it all with systems Sean developed,” says Jenni. “We make sure that everybody matches up. I know that for some online shows, it can be like, ‘oops, you submitted your video wrong — you’re out of luck’, but with us, we shepherd the videos the entire time. So, it takes a little while to get the judging all complete, but everybody gets judged.”



Katie Wise / ShezaShootingStar.com photo

Katie Demmer of Hesperia showed in Green Rider Ranch Trail with Dually.



Katie Wise photo

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Arabella Clark and Sir Reminics Rose competing in the Short Stirrup (12-under) Ranch Trail.



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Heather Correa of Escondido and Catty in Amateur Ranch Trail.

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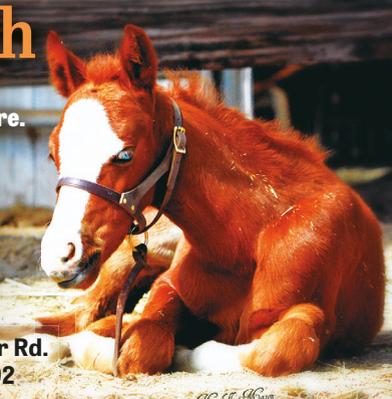
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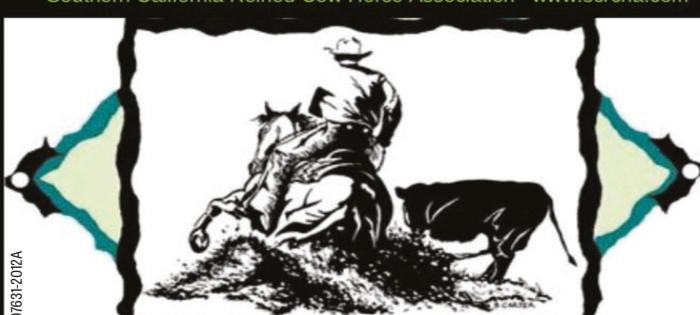
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CRC - Temecula, CA

March 12 - 14 / The Pot of Gold
CRC - Temecula, CA

May 14 - 16 / Jimmy Flores Sr. Memorial
Green Acres Ranch - Temecula, CA

July 30 - Aug 1 / The Grant Berg Memorial
Green Acres Ranch - Temecula, CA

September 10 - 12 / September Classic
Green Acres Ranch - Temecula, CA

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Kayla James of Fallbrook and Zephyr vied in Green Rider classes.

Katie Wise / ShezaShootingStar.com photo



Bonnie Graetzl of Valley Center with Five Alarm Fire in the Green Rider Ranch Trail.

Katie Wise / ShezaShootingStar.com photo

“We go out of our way to find the very best judges we can,” adds Jenni, whose judge list has included industry standouts such as Laurel Walker-Denton, Ben Balow, Gary Roberts and Michael Damianos.

The first WCRH online show, the Ranch Horse Round-Up, had 800 entries. The second, the online Ranch Horse Showdown, had about 1,200, with some open classes featuring 40-50 entries — and in the amateur classes, about 80 entries. “To my knowledge, this is the largest single online show ever, at least for the ranch horse. I have not heard of any larger. It was a real challenge as we didn’t anticipate this level of participation, but we had to rise to the challenge.”

Even with the return of live shows in 2021, WCRH is seeing continued participation online, especially for green rider, youth and

first-timer divisions. Online shows are a cost-effective option.

“People obviously want it, and you don’t just see the same people over and over,” Jenni says. “One of our biggest divisions that is not offered at live shows but is very popular in online shows is the first-timers division, for those who are new to ranch horse and want to give it a try. These competitors will show in the first-timers division so they can gain confidence and learn what it’s all about. Online showing is a great option for those who can’t afford to haul to shows, want to try new events without the pressure of a live show, reside in remote areas or don’t have a horse trailer.”

Another exhibitor benefit discovered from online shows last year was the enhanced attention and personalized feedback by

judges on each rider — all judged through an electronic scoresheet developed by Sean and posted on a PDF so exhibitors can refer to it as a tool to improve.

“One of the cool things is that judges look at each person’s rail video for the entirety of the video — they are just looking at that person,” said Jenni. “In a live rail class, you don’t get that type of attention. So, you get each gait judged with the pluses or minuses — same for the ranch riding patterns and trail patterns. The judges give constructive feedback in the form of comments about strengths and opportunities for improvement.. Judges are instructed to give at least one of each. In a live show, unless you stay after and the judge remembers who you were, you’re not going to get that type of feedback.”

The online reach has extended not just across the United States, but internationally. Entries last year came from exhibitors in Canada, Germany, United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Australia and Sweden. That trend will continue, and as a result, the online program is now called International Ranch Horse (iRanch Horse). With the success of this online program, WCRH will be conducting the first online Ranch Horse World Show in fall of 2021.

WCRH offered 12 total shows in 2020 with close to 5,000 entries, predominantly online. About \$40,000 worth of prizes, including 40 buckles and a saddle were awarded. A core focus for 2021, Jenni says, is more live shows in the West Coast region — especially in areas where interest is high but travel is too difficult to current scheduled events. In short, creating more chances for riders to take their horses into the area — and get hooked on ranch riding.

More online: <https://bit.ly/2101wcrh>



Jojo Kingsland of Pala, here with King Of Olinas, shined in Youth classes.

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