



A New Route Out West

BY BETSY LYNCH



Bobbie Cook's enthusiasm for reining horses led her to invest in a full-scale breeding and training operation in Scottsdale, Arizona. Bucking the Texas-Oklahoma migration, she saw the need for top facilities 'Out West.'



Photo by Betsy Lynch

When you're at Out West, you feel like you're out West. The adobe stallion barn and office are in keeping with the desert setting

By staying focused on the reining horse horizon, the team at Out West Stallion Station has turned a piece of sunny Arizona real estate into a thriving training and breeding oasis — a true “full service” facility.

While it may seem as though the whole reining horse world has packed up and moved to Texas and Oklahoma, Out West Stallion Station near Scottsdale, Arizona, is leading a migration of its own. Breeders and owners in the western U.S. now have a viable option for letting their mares and stallions roost a little closer to home. Those in the East, as well as overseas, are finding the westerly trade winds favorable too.

When Out West owner Bobbie Cook and trainer Matt Mills first put their heads together three years ago to set a course for

the ranch, they were of like mind. Scottsdale is a growing hub of Reining, cutting and cow horse activity with a strong population of horses. When they factored in California and the growing international market, they agreed that there was, indeed, a need for a first-class breeding and training operation in the Grand Canyon state.

Like many enthusiasts, Cook first got into horses as a hobby, even taking classes at Scottsdale Community College so she could do things right. Her first horse was an Arabian gelding that she used as a trail horse, but after she was introduced to Reining in 1999, she sold him and bought Quick Red Leo, her first reining horse.

It didn't take her long, however, to figure out that showing



was not for her. It was simply too nerve-wracking. But that didn't dampen her enthusiasm for the sport. She loved watching her horse compete as long as she wasn't in the pilot's seat.

When the 27-acre facilities in Rio Verde where she kept her horse went on the market in 2002, Cook decided to make the leap from horse boarder to ranch owner. This successful businesswoman recognized opportunity when it knocked. She and her husband, Dave, have been consultants for the mortgage banking industry for more than 20 years and saw the ranch as a good investment. But building a reining horse operation soon became Bobbie's passion.

After a touch-and-go start, Bobbie began exchanging ideas with Matt Mills, a talented young horseman who, by this point, was anxious for a place to hang his own training shingle.

"We had a great working relationship from day one," Bobbie confirms. Mills and Cook quickly developed a comprehensive plan to help customers navigate every stage of performance horse ownership — literally from conception to getting young prospects into the show ring.

Reproductive Expertise

One major component to making the plan work was Cook's commitment to providing the latest in reproductive technology and service to outside clients. And she wanted Out West's reach to extend beyond the immediate geographic area.

Enter Dr. Jerry Longworth, an enthusiastic veterinarian with a penchant for equine reproduction.

Dr. Longworth has lent his expertise to setting up Out West's breeding facilities and continues to be a daily fixture at



Photo by Betsy Lynch

Rachael Weese is a skilled stallion handler. She keeps a ready supply of carrots to reward her guys for being mannerly and productive in the breeding shed.

the ranch. He works year-round with the stallions and mares to maximize their reproductive success. He's a dedicated problem solver, and even difficult-to-breed mares have flourished under his care.

He's also a master at teaching young stallions the facts of life. How a stud is handled from the beginning will impact his longevity as a breeding horse far into the future.

"It's a matter of patience and consistency. It's really easy to get hurt in this environment if you're not careful, so we take our time and teach them right," Dr. Longworth explains. "We try really hard to do the same thing every time, so the stallions know what the ground rules are, what behaviors are acceptable and what behaviors are not," he confirms.

Stallion handler Rachael Weese has a supply of carrots that she uses to reward positive breeding manners. Poor behavior results in a "do-over" and no treats. The stallions quickly figure this out.

International Diplomacy

The calculated gamble is paying off. During the last two years, the demand for Out West's breeding services has, indeed, grown.

In 2005, the ranch officially became a USDA-approved facility for international semen shipments — no small accomplishment. In addition to the voluminous paperwork the approval process required, Out West Stallion Station had to satisfy a long list of health care criteria. Quarantine facilities, mare care and stallion housing, as well as breeding and laboratory equipment all had to pass muster.

"What this all means is that Out West has been inspected and approved by the European Union to accept semen from



Photo by Betsy Lynch

Dr. Jerry Longworth manages Out West's breeding program, which was recently approved as an international shipping and receiving station by the USDA.



us. It's a very good thing," confirms Dr. Longworth.

To further enhance its capabilities, the ranch also recently purchased a state-of-the-art semen freezer. It's an important step up from the liquid nitrogen vapor freezing techniques Out West was utilizing last year.

"The computerized semen freezer actually sets up a cooling curve," Dr. Longworth explains. "It allows us to cool the semen over a slower period of time, which means less damage to the cells. It really improves the quality of the frozen semen we can supply, so we feel it is well worth the investment."

Office Manager Debbie Mills agrees. She points out that as Reining grows as an international sport, foreign breeders are going to want even greater access to top U.S. stallions. High-quality frozen semen is a valuable commodity. Out West also has sport horse enthusiasts knocking on the door for the same reason. There's an important international exchange going on in equine genetics.

Even on the domestic front, Dr. Longworth predicts that the demand for frozen semen will rise — right along with pregnancy rates. There's a learning curve associated with using frozen semen, he admits. Fortunately, many good equine reproduction managers and veterinarians are taking up the challenge.

Although it takes more supervision on the mare end to pinpoint ovulation, and frozen semen must be handled with kid gloves to maintain viability, there are certain convenience factors that are hard to deny.

For mare owners who want to breed to stallions that are still maintaining busy show schedules, missed cycles are a common cause of frustration. The option to have frozen semen on hand can eliminate some of the timing issues associated with using cooled semen. Frozen semen is also good insurance. Warehousing semen in liquid nitrogen can extend a stallion's breeding career in the event of injury or death.

While not every stallion has semen that freezes well, Dr. Longworth and the Out West crew are diligent about experimenting with extenders and the cooling and freezing processes to arrive at a formula that works best for each horse. A complete reproductive evaluation takes place before the start of the breeding season, and stallions are monitored throughout the year to ensure success.

Manageable Numbers

While Out West is currently in an expansion phase with another mare motel and a covered arena underway, the plan is to keep the resident horse population to a manageable level.

"It's not a factory," confirms Debbie Mills. "We're trying to provide a personal touch with a real focus on quality care and customer service. We never intended to be a gigantic stallion station with a gazillion mares."

Mills says the original idea was to stand up to six resident

stallions. Already on Out West's stallion roster for 2006 are Easy Otie Whiz, Chocolate Chic Olena, Shining Starlite and Starlight N Lena.

The ranch also provides collection and semen shipping services for stallions that live off-site. Non-resident studs are brought to the ranch as demand for their services dictates, providing they meet the strict health and behavioral standards established.

Broodmare numbers won't surpass 50, according to Debbie. But because many owners prefer to take their mares home once they are checked safely in-foal, 30 is a more likely average. Out West has also set up five foaling stalls, two with closed circuit TV cameras so broodmares can be closely monitored as due dates draw near.

In addition to managing its own small band of credentialed broodmares, Out West provides services to non-resident mares as well. It is a receiving station for shipped semen. In addition to doing reproductive evaluations and inseminations, Dr. Longworth is adept at performing embryo transfer flushes. The recovered embryos are then air-freighted for same-day delivery to recipient mare stations in California or Colorado — or wherever else a client might request that an embryo be sent. Given the lack of pasture in Arizona, it makes more sense to ship embryos than to try to maintain a recipient mare herd.

Training and Showing Link

Adding to the population, of course, are the horses that Matt has in for training. The show horses and performance prospects are housed away from the breeding barn, which helps keep their minds on their work.

Stallions who are doing double duty as breeding and show



Photo by Betsy Lynch

Easy Otie Whiz, by Topsail Whiz out of Miss Poco Easy, is the cornerstone of Out West's breeding program. He has more than \$208,000 in NRHA earnings.



Photo by Betsy Lynch



Homegrown prospects such as these Out West yearlings will soon start training with Mills and his assistants, Ori Ostrowsky and Maverick Smith.

horses (such as Easy Otie Whiz did last year on his way to NRHA Lifetime Earnings in excess of \$208,000) have an entirely different handler who takes them to the breeding shed on collection days. That way they don't get any mixed messages or confusing signals that could impact their breeding or training performance.

Dr. Longworth emphasizes the importance of keeping the stallions' routines consistent — one set of behaviors for the training environment, another set for the breeding environment.

One advantage, however, of having a training operation in conjunction with a breeding facility, says Matt, is the ability to keep show horses fit and their careers on track. Breeding and training don't have to be an either/or choice.

What's more, Mills and Cook are determined to help owners prove their colts. With a full service training operation, they're set up to do just that.

"What's even better is that we now have a pool of stock right in our own backyard for customers to choose from. They're by a stud we believe in and out of proven mares. We're very motivated to help those babies do as well as they can," said Matt.

It doesn't hurt Out West's reputation one bit that this 26-year-old horseman has just celebrated a banner show year. In 2005, Matt was a champion or finalist at virtually every event he went to. In addition to winning the NRBC Intermediate Open championship, Matt and Easy Otie Whiz were the Intermediate Open Derby Champions at the Reining by the Bay Derby and the Open Derby Reserve Champions. They also finished third in the NRHA Derby Intermediate Open Division and third at the AQHA World Championship Show in Senior Reining.

Matt also had a string of successes with his three-year-olds, including wins in the KRHA Sunflower Slide Futurity Intermediate Open Division and the California Reining Horse Challenge Futurity's Open and Intermediate Open divisions on Sanjo Lena Nic, owned by Joe and Cindy Johnson's C & J Investment Partnership. He won the CRHA Challenge Stallion Stakes on Katie Gilchrist's Mr Rattle N Jazz. Then he finished up the year by placing in the top ten in the NRHA Futurity's Intermediate Open Division on his own Taylor Made Jac.

Matt has also been honing his skills as a Non Pro coach. His new bride, Karen Mills, made the finals in all three Non Pro divisions at the 2004 National Reining Breeders Classic (NRBC). Another student, Melissa Baird, was a Limited Non Pro finalist at both the NRBC and the NRHA Derby in 2004 and 2005.

Mills credits Bobbie Cook with helping him step up in the NRHA ranks by providing him with the horsepower he needed to achieve big goals. After his stellar year in 2005, Matt has graduated from the Intermediate into the Open Division — no small feat for a young man who began training professionally in 1997 when he was barely out of the Youth Division.

An Integrated Program

To hear Matt tell it, his show ring success is simply a part of Out West's carefully integrated plan. That plan factors in the need for horsepower on both sides of the genetic equation, proven performance credentials, state-of-the-art reproductive services, a clear commitment to clients and an aggressive promotional program.

Debbie explains that part of her job as office manager is to coordinate marketing efforts on behalf of all the Out West



Photo by Betsy Lynch

Trainer Matt Mills is responsible for Out West's performance horse program. His stellar 2005 show season boosted him from the Intermediate into the Open ranks with nearly \$185,000 in earnings.



stallions. She fields inquiries from mare owners, disseminates information and coordinates a collaborative advertising campaign to make promotional dollars stretch farther. Debbie also keeps close contact with clients and coordinates the timing of semen shipments. She also assists in the breeding barn and the repro lab.

Of no small merit, Debbie spent 25 years managing human resources for the City of Long Beach, California. She's using those same skills to orchestrate breeding schedules and other ranch activities. She's detail-oriented and great at multi-tasking.

Incidentally, Debbie just happens to be Matt's mother. How she came to join her son at Out West makes perfect, practical sense.

"I found myself on the phone constantly, trying to run the ranch as well as my own training business," recalls Matt. "I would end up talking to my mom, asking her opinion and getting her to do things for me. So I thought, 'What better person to have in the office on the phone than someone who's been in human resources?"

"And besides, who can you trust more than your mom?" he added with a grin.

For Cook, assembling the Out West team and getting a game plan in place has been an exciting challenge. It's also been something of a roller-coaster ride. When she lost her first stallion, Heres Your Shine, three years ago, it was a disheartening setback. But the acquisition of Easy Otie Whiz, a son of Topsail Whiz out of Miss Poco Easy, has been a huge stride forward. She credits the stallion's purchase to Matt's insight and astute negotiating skills.

Cook and her crew still have the challenge of keeping several balls in the air at once, but it's a juggling act that's already attracting an attentive audience.



Photo by Betsy Lynch

Now that Easy Otie Whiz has retired to stud, owner Bobbie Cook and Matt Mills have high hopes for him as a breeding stallion. They've launched a promotional program called "Easy Money," which promises to pay out \$75,000 in futurity incentive money.

The latest headline-grabbing idea is a promotional program with the theme, "Easy Money." Out West is promising a \$75,000 pay-out to the highest placing Easy Otie Whiz offspring in the 2010 NRHA Open Futurity (\$25,000 to the owner, \$25,000 to the rider and \$10,000 to the breeder) in addition to a \$15,000 cash incentive to the highest placing Easy Otie Whiz Non Pro Futurity rider. Those figures have certainly generated some buzz.

It's another way that the Out West team is promoting its goals. Bobbie and Matt want Easy Otie Whiz to stand to a full book of top quality mares. They know the prospect of "Easy Money" is hard to resist.

It certainly doesn't hurt that the beautiful bay stallion has a charming personality, a winning show record and other merits all his own — which is why Out West's plan for running a successful stallion station in sunny Scottsdale, Arizona, isn't too far-a-field after all. □



Photo by Betsy Lynch

With 25 years in human resource management, Debbie Mills is a skilled multi-tasker. She assists in the breeding lab and manages the office, coordinating with mare owners, stallion owners and staff to make sure semen gets where it needs to be on time.



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