

RAISING HORSES IN THE BEARS PAW

When Stan Weaver walks into his horse pastures, he knows the names of every broodmare. He can rattle off bloodlines, winnings, successful offspring, siblings—an impressive feat. For Weaver, it's all in a day's work of breeding top-notch horses on his ranch south of Havre. Walk into the pasture with him and his affection for the horses is apparent. They show their fondness, as well, wandering over to push a muzzle in his hand.

The bloodlines of horsemen run in the Weaver family. In the 1880s, five Weaver brothers came to Lewistown and Utica to ranch and cowboied with the famous western artist Charlie Russell, and William Weaver, Stan's great grandfather, opened a bar in Chinook.

"When Charlie lived in Great Falls, my great granddad used to visit him," Weaver related. "However, my granddad, Elmer, didn't like the bar so he left home when he was 16, moved to Geraldine and opened a livery stable there. He would help trail 300 horses to Canada, and from Geraldine to Chinook. He would break horses, sell them, and get more unbroken ones to sell."

When the livery stable burned down in 1925, Weaver's grandfather purchased the place where some of the

Weaver Ranch lies today in the rolling hills of the Bears Paw Mountains.

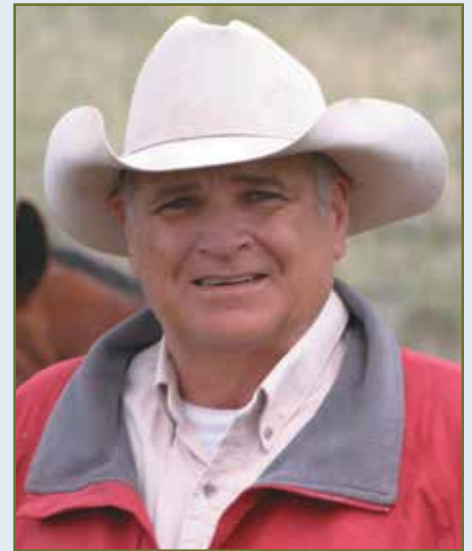
Weaver says, "My dad added to that ranch, and we built onto it. My granddad was quite a horseman. My dad was more of a cowman, but we certainly always had a few horses around."

THE HORSE BIZ

Weaver started his horse breeding business in 1980 when he and his wife, Nancy, bought their first Quarter Horse broodmare. They then bought a couple more, then a couple more. "We were getting enough colts to start selling them," Weaver remembers. "People would often call to ask what I had for sale, so I decided to have a production sale. I started doing research in 1994 and held our first sale in 1996."

The horseman explains that he conducted plenty of research. "I went to every production sale I could to develop ideas and see what worked and what didn't. We just kept buying broodmares and expanding. One thing led to another, and never in our wildest dreams did we expect it to get where it is with all of the national recognition."

National recognition might be an understatement. Their purchased horses have been shipped all over the world. One of the horses sent to



Stan Weaver

Mexico won the Mexican Charro National Championship. The first mare purchased by the Weavers was the grand dam to the horse that was the 2009 AQHA high point horse of the year. That horse ended up AQHA champion and was sold to someone in Brazil. Several horses have made it to the AQHA World Show with one world champion in cutting and one in heading.

"We always bought the best horses we could afford. From day one I had a vision of what I want in a horse," Weaver explains. "I want good bone and good feet, and they need to be about 15 hands tall. I want a pretty horse with good conformation, and color, is a bonus. Above everything, horses must have a trainable mind whether you wanted to show, ranch or trail ride."

The Weavers realized that to achieve success in the sale ring, they needed success in the show ring. "I wanted to show our horses could compete. We showed in cutting and reined cow horse classes. In today's world, it's essential to get your horses out to compete and be seen. I like reined cow horses because the horse needs to have sense about working a cow,

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The Weaver brand has been in the family since 1888.

have a good mind to do the reining and speed to do the fence work. I think we have 17 mares who have won money. "I can't guarantee a horse will win, but they can compete."

RAISING GREAT HORSES

On the first of April the Weavers gather the mares from the mountain, deworm them, and decide which mares will run with which studs. We usually have four bands of horses. The stallions are turned out with the mares around May 15.

"You try to put mares with studs you think will produce the best colts. The mares begin foaling around April 20 (the gestation period for horses is about 11 months). During this time, Weaver checks the mares daily until most of the mares are done foaling.

The foals spend the spring and summer running in the Bears Paw foothills and ranch pastures. On the first of August, the family trails the herd back to headquarters on an impressive 8-mile trip.

"Bringing the mares and foals home is my favorite day of the year," Weaver says with a smile. "It's great to trail the mares and colts, and trailing provides good training for the horse you're riding. When we get the horses trailed in to headquarters, we'll grain them together in troughs. We work the colts five times before the sale. The fifth time we work them is sale week and we clip them and get the burrs out."

The stud horses are removed from their bands the first of August, as well.

Meanwhile, post-weaning, mares go up the mountain where they spend the winter. "You couldn't buy a horse and just put her out there, but these mares are used to being in the high country and finding food in the winter. They emerge in the spring fat and in great shape." Once the mares are brought down from the

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mountain, they're separated into the bands where they will foal and get bred. The cycle begins again.

THE BIG SALE DAY

The Weavers hold their sale in mid-September at the Montana Expo Park in Great Falls. (This year it's Saturday, September 20.) They generally sell about 70 horses, mostly weanlings with a few saddle horses, as well. A successful sale takes work. "If you don't do a good job of promoting, presenting and

advertising your event, you probably won't have a good sale. When I first decided to having a sale, I attended every sale I could and talked to everyone. It's important to spend 10 percent of your gross on advertising. My daughter puts together the sale catalogue.

"You have to set a tone for your sale. We plan the sale order of the weanlings very carefully. I put the colts I have had the most interest in between numbers four and seven. We have a very upbeat sale. It's done in about two hours," says Weaver.

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Not only do weanlings sell, but so do several saddle horses that have been exposed to all sorts of cow work on the ranch, from pairing out (moving a cow and her calf to another pasture), pen work, roping and branding.

"We keep some geldings back, ride them a little bit as two-year-olds, and start working them as three-year olds. For us, it really works well because we can then sell those horses and start all over again. This generates some extra income. It serves to show weanling buyers what Weaver horses are like as older,

trained horses. They see these horses are very usable."

This year the Weavers donated three horses to the Equine Boosters of MSU Top of the West Sale, featuring horses from colt-breaking classes at MSU, UM-Western and Miles City Community College.

"It's good for the kids as they get hands-on experience," he says. "This is a great opportunity to promote Montana-bred horses and donate to the equine programs at Montana colleges."

Not only is the family busy raising horses and cows, but there is plenty

Weaver's grandchildren are the sixth generation to ride horses with that brand, a source of pride.



A curious youngster from this year's foal crop.



Stan Weaver runs 85 head of broodmares in the Bears Paw Mountains.



Waiting to foal.

of farming to do, as well. They grow grain on 2,000 acres each year, with their youngest son leasing hay ground in Denton.

Weaver strongly supports promoting the agricultural way of life with horses and cows. "We have our website and a Facebook page. People like to see that we run our horses in open pasture, not in a little paddock. They like to see that we care about our animals and hear about what we are doing on our ranch."

The Weaver Ranch brand (A standing X) was recorded in 1888 and they still own the original 1888 metal brand. Today the ranch freeze brands their horses. Weaver's grandchildren are the sixth generation to ride horses with that brand, a source of pride. With continued hard work and a great breeding program, that brand will be the source of pride for many years to come.

