

Off *the* Ranch

A few tips on selling your ranch horses at auction.

By Larri Jo Starkey

PUTTING ON AN AUCTION CAN SEEM LIKE A BIG CHORE. But for many AQHA Ranching Heritage Breeders, it's the best way to get their horses in the barns of new owners.

Here are some factors to think about when you're deciding whether to put on a production sale.



Is selling your horses at live
auction right for your program?
Read on to find out some tips.

Advance Planning

IF YOUR RANCH HAS NEVER PUT ON A PRODUCTION SALE, YOU'RE going to need some help.

First off, you'll need an auctioneer who knows your market and can start you off with the right advice – even if that advice is not to have a sale.

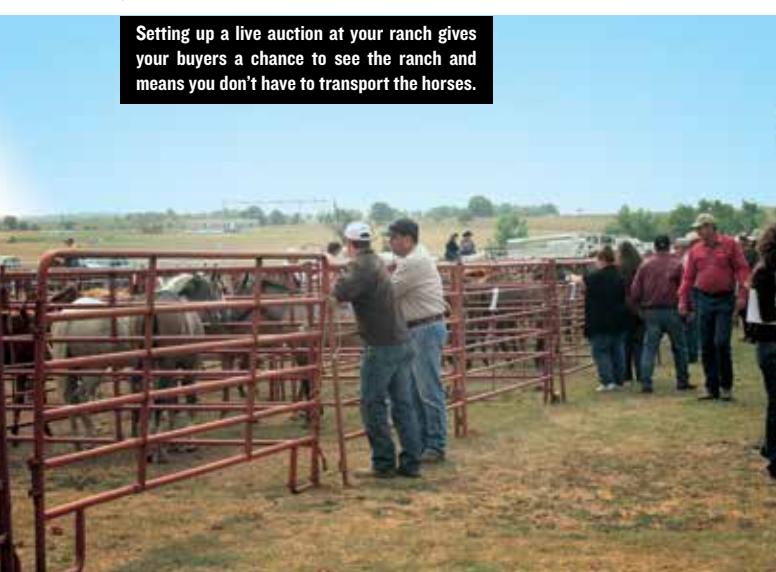
"You've got to weigh the expense (of putting on a sale)," says auctioneer Steve Friskup, who has been in the business for 29 years and conducts many on-site ranch sales. "I like to know what kind of customer base the owner has had previous to the sale. It's sometimes feasible and sometimes not. I don't do much total management. I'm the auctioneer, but I give a lot of advice."

Steve's advice ranges from advertising, location, clerking, ring men, sale ring, sound system, bleachers and parking to food and restrooms – and all that is before horses even come up in the conversation.

Some ranches with established ranch sales handle their own sale management. Preparing for the next year's sale starts the minute the current year's sale is over for the Four Sixes in Guthrie, Texas, and Weaver Quarter Horses in Big Sandy, Montana.

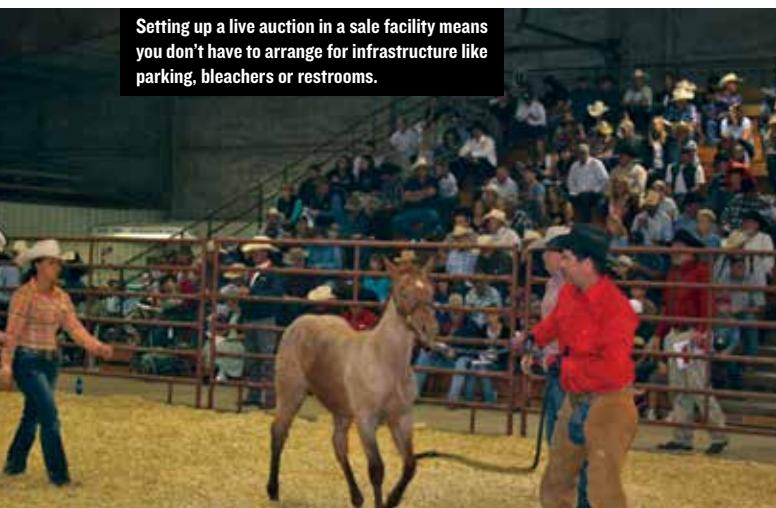
"When the 2012 sale was over, we signed a contract right away for the 2013 sale, which will be the third Saturday of September," says Stan Weaver, who is also president of the AQHA Ranching Council. "We book our building almost a year in advance."

Setting up a live auction at your ranch gives your buyers a chance to see the ranch and means you don't have to transport the horses.



LARRI JO STARKEY

Setting up a live auction in a sale facility means you don't have to arrange for infrastructure like parking, bleachers or restrooms.



COURTESY OF NANCY WEAVER

YOUR BEST SALE TOOL

A sale catalog can be one of your best sales tools when marketing your horses.

Buyers want to see pedigrees, pictures of your stallions and pictures of the horses you're selling.

Putting together a catalog is its own challenge.

In the May 2010 issue of the *Journal*, Christine Hamilton discussed the catalog time table. She talked with professional equine photographer Larry Larson; and breeders Deb and Bill Myers of St. Onge, South Dakota, and Brian and Lisa Fulton of Valentine, Nebraska.

The topic is important enough that the *Journal* decided to include it as an online extra in the digital *Journal*.

Subscribers can see it free at www.aqha.com/journal.

Location, Location, Location

AFTER YOU MAKE THE DECISION TO HAVE A SALE, THE NEXT decision is to pick a site, either your ranch or a sale facility.

Weaver Quarter Horses transports its horses to a sale facility about an hour away in Great Falls, Montana, a decision with pros and cons.

"Our ranch road is 30 miles of gravel," Stan says, "and we felt our location was too remote to have a sale at the ranch. Great Falls has worked pretty well for us. Our out-of-state customers can fly in easily."

Renting a building is an added expense to the cost of the sale, as is the horse transportation. On the other hand, the rented facility has parking, concession stands and restrooms on site.

"We do our own sale administration," says Dr. Glenn

CREATING A CATALOG

While not an exhaustive list, these necessary items can take a bite out of your sale production budget.

- Advertising
- Auctioneer
- Pedigree specialist
- Catalog (including photography and printing costs)
- Additional feed/preparation for sale horses
- Catering
- Restrooms
- Tent or sale facility rental
- Trash container rental and disposal
- Sale ring
- Bleachers
- Ring men
- Sound system
- Clerks
- Horse numbering system, such as tags or paint numbers
- Clerical paperwork, such as load-out sheets and tickets
- Horse handlers
- Horse load-out personnel
- Electrical connections
- Internet connection



A live sale can also include the option of live bidding from buyers through the Internet, and Internet-only auctions can also be a way to market horses.

Blodgett, horse manager of the Four Sixes, which hosts an annual sale with ranching partners Pitchfork Land & Cattle, Beggs Cattle Co. and Tongue River Ranch.

Handling sale administration means hiring a tent company, erecting a sale ring and bleachers, arranging for trash bins and portable restrooms and all of the other logistics that will give buyers a pleasant day at the sale.

"It gives us a chance to showcase the history of the ranch," Dr. Blodgett says. "Our buyers can see an authentic chuckwagon and the way it's set up in a ranch atmosphere, and it adds to the décor and the festivities on the ranch."

"I think people enjoy coming out here."

Very few ranches put on sales these days without partners, Steve says, or at least guest consignors.

"It's a trend nowadays, several ranches joining forces," he says.

The obvious benefit of having other ranches involved in your sale is sharing the cost of putting on the sale.

"We could probably do it on our own," Dr. Blodgett says, "but (having others involved) enables you to maybe sell a few more animals and, hopefully, attract a few more buyers by having other people involved."

If your ranch has nearby ranches raising horses of known quality, you might consider sharing the work load, the cost and the benefits, says Stan, who adds that Ted and Barb Crowley of Treasure State Quarter Horses have partnered with the Weavers since they started having a production sale.

Getting the Horses Ready

SALE WEEK IS A 24-7 OPERATION FOR THE WEAVERS, WHO RELY on family members for all of the work, but sale prep starts much earlier.

"We get our weanlings in around the first of August and start halter-breaking them," Stan says. "We'll start graining them with their mothers so they're eating grain. It puts a little bloom on them. Then we'll work them five times. The

first time, we'll just rope them, face them up and get a halter on them. The second time, we put a butt rope on them (to teach them to lead). The third time, we'll Coggins-test them. The fourth time, we'll freeze-brand them. And then the fifth time, which is usually sale week, that's the week we clip their ears and brush them a little and get the cockleburs out of their tails."

At the Four Sixes, cowboys make sure the weanlings are halter-broke before the sale, and the foals stay with their mother until they go through the sale ring.

"About 60 days out, we make sure all the horses are carrying enough flesh, and if they're not, we'll put them on a diet to put a little more on or take it off, if need be," Dr. Blodgett says. "Broodmares don't require a lot of grooming. With a yearling, you try to get them as slick and shiny as possible and get them out of the sunlight so their coat is good."

The Internet

THE GROWTH OF THE INTERNET MEANS THE GROWTH OF A NEW way to market horses. Professional Horse Services Inc., formerly Professional Auction Services, only conducts online auctions now, says owner Mike Jennings.

"With an online auction, we can help more people in more parts of the country at less expense," Mike says. "You take some ranches a long way away from cities with good hotels. They're not easy to get to. I would recommend taking (the sales) all online."

The ranch could host open houses and previews, he says, for buyers who wanted to examine the horses in person.

Sellers who choose online auctions will need to set aside an even larger portion of the budget for good photography and videos to go online, he says. And even if you choose to host a live auction, you need to have a strong online presence.

"If you have a group of horses you want to sell, you have to have something for buyers to see," Mike says. "If they go to your



Among other personnel, you'll need sales clerks for your auction.

website and you don't have a preview or your catalog available, then you spend a lot of your time on the telephone telling people why you don't have a preview or your catalog available."

Your pictures and videos should do part of your marketing job for you, he points out.

"We get pictures of a horse eating grass in a pasture, and I tell the owners, 'Buyers can't shop from that,'" Mike says. "Your picture should make a buyer say, 'That's a good-looking horse. I want to see more.'"

Reference photos of your stallions or siblings of your sale horses that have performed well are also valuable additions to your website, and good photos are essential in any advertising of the sale.

If you choose a live auction, it's still possible to have Internet bidding, Steve says.

"It's a way to catch some serious buyers who are unable to make the trip," he says. "It's like everything else in a sale, though. You have to weigh the expenses vs. the benefits."

Getting the Word Out

BEFORE YOU SCHEDULE YOUR RANCH SALE, YOU HAVE TO SET UP a budget with a good chunk allocated for advertising, Steve says.

"Everybody has to have a budget," he says. "We've done horse sales where the advertising budget can be anywhere from \$7,500 to \$20,000, maybe more."

"I still highly favor magazines," he adds.

The idea, Steve says, is to spread the word and not concentrate it, putting the same ad in the same mailbox a dozen times. Many ranches have mailing lists and email lists that are good places to start.

"We advertise in trade publications," Dr. Blodgett says. "We've got a reputation now and word-of-mouth disseminates the information."

A consistent date helps buyers find your sale, and a party atmosphere with flags and tents and good food makes it fun for buyers to return year after year.

"We're usually the first of October or in late September," Dr. Blodgett says. "This year, it will be the last weekend of September."

Social media is another way to spread the word about your sale and your horses.

"We've got almost 20,000 likes," Stan says of his ranch's Facebook page. "It blows us away. We've only been on there a year and a half. Once we start foaling, we put pictures of colts and different horses that will be in the sale. That's how we get the most interest."

Reputation is the best way to build a long-lasting customer base, he adds.

"We have a 100 percent guarantee," Stan says. "We have taken horses back if they don't work out for the new owner. I think buyers are comfortable with our policies because 84 percent of our horses go to repeat buyers. We have a lot of people who buy a colt and like it, so they'll come back and buy a full sibling in two or three years. Stuff like that makes you feel good about being in the horse business." □

Larri Jo Starkey is an editor of The American Quarter Horse Journal. To comment, write to lstarkey@aqha.org.

A MARKETING OPPORTUNITY

If you're an AQHA Ranching Heritage Breeder, don't forget to mention to your buyers that horses bred on your ranch are eligible for AQHA Ranching Heritage Challenges.

At least six weeks before your ranch sale, write to Manager of Recreational Activities and Ranching Heritage Brandon Black at bblack@aqha.org. He can send you brochures that explain the program to your buyers.

He can also send you a logo that you can use in all of your advertising.

