

Sporting the Brand!

Throughout the years, hundreds of horses have carried the brand of the Oklahoma State University equine program, but not until recently has this mark truly been recognized as more than just a symbol of ownership, but rather as a sign of excellence.

Within the last year, the American Quarter Horse Association performance industry has seen the progeny of OSU, both man and mount, move from spectator to center spotlight. What may appear to be a fast track to success, however, started at a slow lope more than 100 years ago.

In the beginning

Like most land-grant colleges, from the beginning the Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College was dependent upon horsepower, according to *A History of the Oklahoma State University Division of Agriculture* by Donald Green. Agriculture was structured around the horse; from pulling a wagon to pulling a plow, the horse was without substitute. Dependent upon this need, the draft horse program was organized as a respected portion of the college.

"The draft horses were an important part of OSU's heritage," said Robert Totusek, animal husbandry graduate and former department head. "In the '20s and '30s, OSU had some of the best draft horses in the country with several studs and mares imported from Europe."

A large solid brick structure that housed 40 to 50 head of draft horses, known as the OSU Horse Barn, was built in 1902. It burned in 1922, and Willard Hall was later erected on its site. The replacement for the OSU Horse Barn was built in 1926. It remained standing at the current site of the OSU Colvin Annex until the late 1970s.

In the early 1940s, the draft horses were phased out due to advancing technology. However, Clark "Andy" Kinkead, who oversaw the draft program and also taught a horse production class, was a horse enthusiast and wanted OSU to keep horses as a part of its academic curriculum. With this in



Current Oklahoma State University herd stallion, OSU Sonny Slider, has produced offspring earning in excess of 1,000 AQHA performance points. (Photo courtesy of the OSU Animal Science Department equine program)

mind, the department head at that time allowed Kinkead to retain five Quarter Horse mares to continue the program.

"When I returned to OSU and began coaching the livestock judging team in 1952, we used those few Quarter Horses in teaching and in judging practice," said Totusek. "At that time, livestock judging included horses. Every livestock judging competition consisted of at least one or two horse classes, and those OSU horses were useful for preparation."

From the mid-1950s to the late 1970s, the horse program was essentially nonexistent and was eventually shut down with the removal of the Horse Barn.

A new start

In 1977, due to a recognition of the enormity of the Oklahoma horse industry, the extinct OSU horse program was resurrected with Totusek at the reins as the animal science department head.



1902



1909



1915

“I recognized a need for a horse program, knowing that the Oklahoma equine industry has a greater economic impact than any other livestock species with the exception of cattle,” said Totusek. “I was very fortunate to have a dean of the college of agriculture, Frank Baker, and a university president, Larry Boger, who also recognized the need.”

Upon university approval, the OSU Quarter Horse program began with no horses and one faculty position. Doyle Meadows filled that position, taking on the job in equine class instruction, research and extension.

“Doyle got the program off the ground,” said Totusek. “He grabbed the horse by the tail and ran with it.”

Meadows, in conjunction with the Oklahoma Quarter Horse Association, generated enough contributions from Oklahoma horsemen to build the current horse barn on the grounds of the OSU dairy in 1980. In addition, they remodeled the existing dairy calf research barn and converted it into the horse breeding facility and stud barn.

Totusek soon facilitated the construction of the \$25,000 white vinyl fencing that encloses the horse farm today. Over a period of time, Oklahoma residents donated the horses that became the foundation of the breeding program.

“The horse industry of Oklahoma made that program possible,” said Totusek. “It was all done from donations. In reality, the OSU program of today is a showcase of the Oklahoma horse industry.”

Following Meadows’ resignation in 1983, Totusek lobbied for an additional staff position. Don Topliff and David Freeman were brought in the following year.

“Topliff and Freeman knew exactly the kind of horses they wanted to produce,” said Totusek. “In the beginning they just needed horses; it did not matter what kind. Using the donations, they skillfully used the available genetics to work toward a goal of quality. Some equine donations were quality and some were not. After the conception of the program, they had the freedom to keep and cull, and that is what they did.”

They would breed the mares to whatever available studs they had, said Freeman, but they mostly used stallions outside of OSU.

That changed in 1984, when Harry Hudspeth from Bixby, Okla., donated a stallion by the name of Harlan Okmulgee.

“He was a son of a well-known foundation sire, Harlan, and the first quality stud we owned,” said Freeman.

Harlan Okmulgee served as the cornerstone for the breeding program for seven years and produced 90 registered foals. In 1991, Harlan Okmulgee died at the OSU horse farm.

“We had been keeping stud prospects back,” said Free-



OSU Pistol Pete owner, Elsworth Harrison, demonstrates the talent that made his horse a world champion. (Photo by Todd Johnson)

man. “After Okmulgee died, we focused our program on one of his offspring, OSU Sonny Slider. We started breeding to him in 1994, and he remains our keystone stud today.”

Today, as the OSU horse program celebrates the 25 year anniversary of its reinstatement, it consists of 60 horses maintained on a 50-acre farm located at the corner of McElroy Road and Western Avenue. A 120-acre pasture located at the OSU airport is also a component. Horses are used for laboratory experiences, judging practice and extension activities.

In 1998, the addition of the OSU Women’s Equestrian athletic program increased the number of retained riding horses. From the mid-1980s until now, a main horse stall barn, several outdoor arenas, two small barns for storage of hay and equipment and a new equestrian team headquarters have been added to the horse farm. Freeman has remained as the equine extension specialist, and in 1999, Steven Cooper replaced Topliff as the equine judging coach and equine undergraduate course instructor.

“The current success of the OSU horse program can be found in two areas: the progeny of OSU Sonny Slider and the industry successes of OSU graduates,” said Freeman.

Slider’s offspring success

The OSU equine breeding program has gained national recognition because of the performance traits passed on by OSU Sonny Slider.



1921



1926



1934

“OSU Sonny Slider is a quality producer,” said Cooper. “OSU Pistol Pete is an example of his siring ability.”

In 2000, OSU Pistol Pete, a son of OSU Sonny Slider, became the AQHA High Point, All-Around, Junior Horse of the Year. In 2001, OSU Pistol Pete again excelled winning a world championship title in senior dally team roping.

“That is our niche at OSU,” said Cooper. “We are seeing that Slider’s offspring are excelling in the roping horse world.”

OSU Pistol Pete is not alone in showcasing the program. OSU Sonny Slider has had 87 registered offspring, according to AQHA. OSU Sonny Slider’s offspring have earned a total of 1,299 performance points in the AQHA (948 in open events, 315 in amateur and 20 in youth). Total AQHA earnings for OSU Sonny Slider’s offspring are \$21,567. To date, OSU Sonny Slider has produced one world champion, OSU Pistol Pete, and two other offspring, OSU Power Slide and OSU Watch Sally Slide, that were among the top ten in the AQHA roping standings.

Graduate success

A connection can be found between OSU’s equine breeding program, its judging tradition and the success of its graduates. In the last 10 years, seven national judging titles reflect the leadership and the eye for quality possessed by Topliff, Freeman and Cooper.

“One of our best examples of successful OSU graduates who were active in the OSU horse program is Dave Dellin,” said Cooper.

At age 24, making his first AQHA World Show debut as a professional trainer, Dellin won the 2001 AQHA World Championship in the 2-year-old Western Pleasure Open division. Dellin is a 1999 OSU animal science graduate, and he competed on the 1997 national championship horse judging team, coached by Topliff.

“One of the reasons I took first was because I remembered something Topliff told us when we judged the world show in 1997,” said Dellin. “Topliff had judged that show and told us that one of the things to look for was a horse that immediately loped out when the judges called for it. Most contestants hesitate to lope out immediately in order to make their horse appear to be slower moving, but Topliff said that at the World Show the judges would discount for it.

“All that day I remembered his words,” said Dellin, “and when they called for a lope I fired my horse off immediately. The judges later told me that was one of the best things about my run. My experience at OSU definitely paid off.”

Other OSU graduates who are horse industry leaders include Bill Brewer, AQHA executive director; Cam Foreman,

AQHA senior director of shows; Ed Roberts, American Paint Horse Association chief executive official; and Dan Wall, National Reining Horse Association executive director.

Global outreach

The OSU horse program and its graduates’ successes also are matched with OSU’s leadership in the global equine industry. In 2000, OSU became one of only three U.S. universities to receive an AQHA grant to teach a two-week western riding seminar in Europe.

“The Oklahoma horse industry has a responsibility to the world,” said Freeman. “Our state serves as a host to many worldwide horse association competitions and sales. We are seen around the world as a horse industry leader, and programs such as this are essential in continuing our role. Not only does it benefit international students, but also our own.”

For the last two summers, Cooper along with several students have traveled to Germany, Austria, Denmark and England to conduct the seminars.

“I will never forget the experience and how it broadened my view of the horse world,” said Amber Moffett, OSU graduate student seminar instructor, who was hired as The Ohio State University equine specialist in January 2002.

Instruction in western riding styles and horse management was provided at the seminars.

“We chose OSU to participate in this outreach because it is one of the very few programs in the nation that is so well-rounded,” said OSU graduate and current AQHA International Affairs Director Trigg Rentfro.

Cooper said their vision for the future of the OSU equine program is certain.

“Our goal is not to just leave our brand on our horses, but on the industry as a whole,” he said.

From draft horse to dream horse, from pulling to performance, from culls to keeps, the OSU program has maintained a steady uphill trot. So at the next equine exhibition, watch the center spotlight for an OSU legacy, representing excellence and sporting the OSU brand.

◆ By Josh Brecheen, Coalgate, Okla.

1902: first OSU Horse Barn; 1909: OSU draft horses working a field; 1915: first OSU horse judging clinic; 1921: OSU’s grand champion Percheron stallion; 1926: second OSU Horse Barn; 1934: OSU Belgian breeding mares (Photos courtesy of University Archives, OSU Libraries); 1977: current OSU Horse Barn (Photo by Josh Brecheen); 2001: AQHA World Champion OSU Pistol Pete with owner and the OSU mascot (Photo by Todd Johnson); 2002: a one-week-old OSU filly (Photo by Josh Brecheen)



1977



2001



2002