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KATE BRADLEY BYRNS

Joe Armstrong, PhD, raises a number of foals each year. Colts like this are sold as weanlings or yearlings.



THE PROFESSOR

For more than six decades, Joe Armstrong, PhD, has given time, expertise and heart to build a strong equine community in New Mexico and beyond.

By KATE BRADLEY BYARS

ALONE HALOGEN LIGHT CASTS A SOFT GLOW ACROSS THE BROODMARES in a dozen or so white-fenced runs at Armstrong Equine Services. Out of the semi-darkness, Joe Armstrong, PhD, leads a dark brown mare from her pen to the barn. It is 10:15 p.m. and time for her to be bred. The 81-year-old has been working since before the sunrise lit up the Organ Mountains northeast of La Mesa, New Mexico, but the long hours are typical during breeding season.

Armstrong has spent the majority of his life handling horses. With shoulders squared and a spectacled gaze sharp on his subject, he works through each task with practiced motions that speak to his decades-long career. He's touched every aspect of the equine industry, from starting the New Mexico State University equine program to judging horses at American Quarter Horse Association events, teaching horsemanship at international camps and competing in ranch riding events. Armstrong Equine Services provides the La Mesa area—about 25 miles south of Las Cruces, New Mexico—with a top reproductive facility that also stands running and Western performance Quarter Horse stallions, houses a resident trainer, and sells well-bred horses at affordable prices to the public.

Today, Armstrong's work focuses on supporting his family's equine endeavors, including son Josh's training business and a multi-stallion breeding operation, and providing help to those in the local horse industry through equine prospects and education.



ABOVE: Armstrong stood and owned Von Reminic, and now rides Rankins Reminic in ranch riding events.

LEFT: Broodmares and foals are at the heart of Armstrong Equine Services.

ROUNABOUT ROUTE

There are approximately 1,200 miles between Coffeerville, Mississippi, and La Mesa, New Mexico. Joe Armstrong took detours through Oklahoma, Colorado, Montana and Georgia before landing in the Southwest. Armstrong can trace much of his early horse knowledge to his grandfather.

“My mother’s father was a country doctor and a farmer,” he says. “I got up at 4:30 every morning and went to the farm with him. He had cows and horses [on his farm near Coffeerville], and that is where I got my start. When I was in junior high, he gave me a horse.”

From there, Armstrong’s interest in livestock and horses grew. At the time, most animal husbandry programs focused solely on cattle. He attended his first two years of college at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, before moving on to Mississippi State University in Starkville. He was uncertain of a degree plan, but one of his professors steered Armstrong toward animal breeding.

While studying in the animal science department, Armstrong participated in a horse judging seminar put on by AQHA. He was the only student to correctly place every class.

“I was given the No. 1 rating, and sent a judge’s card in the mail. I was only 21 years old. In the spring of 1959, I was invited to judge a show in Grapevine, Texas, but I



turned it down,” he says. “I judged my first show when I was 23 years old.”

He judged shows to make money while finishing school. After graduating from Mississippi State, Armstrong completed his master’s degree in animal breeding at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater.

Following graduation, he moved to Fort Collins, Colorado, for more education.

“I had always wanted to live in the mountains. At Colorado State [University], I got my PhD in animal breeding,” he says. “Back then, it was all beef cattle and very little horse work.”

In Colorado, Armstrong gained not only a doctorate but also a wife. It was there he met Rusty, an animal science program graduate.

“Through Rusty’s efforts, I [became a Christian] at Colorado State. It made me a better person and made me want to help other people,” Armstrong says. “That is what I’ve tried to do in my life.”

The couple moved back to the South, where Armstrong took a job as a beef cattle specialist at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. Two

other brief moves landed the young couple in Florida, where Armstrong ran a ranch in Polk City, and then in Montana, where ranching for themselves didn’t work out as planned. By 1974, Armstrong was once again in the South, this time working at the University of Georgia in Athens as a beef cattle specialist.

Horses remained part of Armstrong’s life as a tool necessary for cattle work and as a means to earn income through judging AQHA events. It was Charlie Hutton, a fellow University of Georgia beef cattle specialist and eventual owner of National Reining Horse Association Hall of Fame

stallion Nu Chex To Cash, who gave Armstrong the push he needed to pursue horses as a career.

“A job as the horse program manager and 4-H extension specialist came open at New Mexico State University,” Armstrong recalls. “Charlie convinced me to take it, though I wasn’t sure I wanted the job. We moved to Las Cruces in 1979.”

For the next 23 years, Joe, Rusty and their children—Josh, Edward and Crissy—called Las Cruces home.

FROM THE GROUND UP

From the beginning, Armstrong’s goal was to prepare students for real-world jobs.

“The way I set up the [NMSU] program was for the kids to be able to do everything they could ever want to do in the horse industry while they were in school: breed, foal, fit for show and sale, and train,” he says.

“When they graduated, they actually knew their jobs.

“Some students were truly talented and they could go the way of making [horse training] their livelihood. But some just loved horses and weren’t going to make a job of it. I wanted everyone to get the skills to go out and enjoy horses.”

Working as a teaching professor, coach to the horse judging team and New Mexico 4-H extension specialist required Armstrong to wear many hats. While courses evolved through time and with industry trends, the program has always included a breeding program focused on producing horses that can work New Mexico’s ranches and compete in horse shows.

In the early years, Armstrong took the knowledge he gained from years of judging with AQHA to purchase horses and solicit horse donations to start the breeding program. He mixed in his own horses to kickstart it, including partnering on Quarter Horse stallion CJ Sugar, by Son O Sugar (a full brother to Jewels Leo Bars) and out of Christy Jay, the dam of Colonel Freckles.

Armstrong’s connection to Hutton produced a beneficial meeting with New Mexico rancher Mary Davis of the CS Ranch.

“King Correon [by Continental King] was a horse from Georgia that Charlie Hutton thought would work for the [CS Ranch], but they thought he was too little,” Armstrong remembers. “[Mary] asked if the university would take the horse, so we moved him down here.”

The stallion sired Suerte Fuerte, an All American Quarter Horse Congress freestyle reining champion shown by Armstrong’s son Josh.

A successful performance horse trainer, Josh has good memories of growing up with the program.

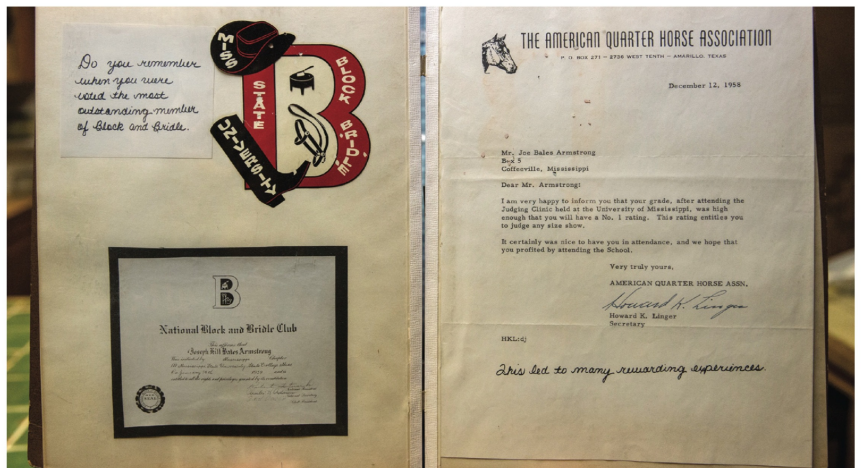
“I got to hang around and watch my dad do his different classes. It was a low-key education but I picked up things,” Josh says. “My dad spent a lot of time with us kids and took us with him a lot [on work trips]. He took a judging team to Congress every year, [and would drive] through Kentucky and take them to



Gone To The Mountain is one of the running Quarter Horse stallions Armstrong stands at his facility. Sunland Park is nearby, so the racing industry is in Armstrong’s backyard.



No matter the hour, when a client delivers cooled semen for breeding, Armstrong gets to work.



While still in college, Armstrong received a letter from the American Quarter Horse Association’s secretary, Howard K. Linger, granting him a judge’s card. Armstrong kept his card until he was in his 70s.

Thoroughbred farms. It's a good education for a kid to see those places, and then see the caliber of horses at the reining futurity at the Congress."

The external exposure drove Armstrong to breed even better horses while giving students a greater opportunity to learn. He began the New Mexico State 4-H Horse School, where he invited trainers like the legendary Jack Kyle to teach.

"A lot of people have benefitted from events he set in motion, and were influenced by him," says Josh. "He sure made a difference in the quality of horses people ride. You would see a kid come to a 4-H school with a so-so horse, then a couple of years later, they'd be back with a better horse than they started with."

Armstrong also added an Intercollegiate Horse Show Association competition team that eventually transitioned to a National Collegiate Equestrian Association team under the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

Today, the NMSU Horse Farm can boast it has raised champions in the National Cutting Horse Association and NRHA, and world champions in AQHA, Palomino Horse Breeders Association, National Reined Cow Horse Association and Stock Horse of Texas competition. One standout is NMSU Truckin Chex, a three-time AQHA world champion by Nu Chex To Cash and out of NMSU Doc Truckle CJ by CJ Sugar. The university's homebred horses are by stallions like The Big Gun, an American Paint Horse Association senior reining world champion, and Love Em N Leave N by One Time Pepto. The program holds an annual sale, and educates riders in horsemanship, sale fitting, equine nutrition and other horse-related classes. In addition, the program's horses have been in 4-H projects and garnered awards for youth riders.

Armstrong retired from the university in 2002.

"My years at New Mexico State, they were wonderful," Armstrong says. "[The program] thrived. Back then, it was me and a farm manager doing everything. I had a week-long packing class annually, and we were hands-on. It is still hands-on, but all the work we did as teachers and extension agents evolved from word of mouth to a written science."

Today, NMSU Associate Professor Laura White, PhD, continues Armstrong's work



Armstrong competed on his stallion Command N Chex in ranch riding.

teaching some of the classes he started, such as introductory horse science, management of equine operations and advanced horse evaluation. She says that coming into the program was daunting at first.

"He put his whole self into our program," White says. "We continue to have a commitment to giving students hands-on opportunities, and he started that. He retired before I came to NMSU, but it still feels like I inherited his program. There aren't that many programs built up like this in the western states, and he did an incredible job."

White says it is impossible to sum up what Armstrong did for the university program and for the New Mexico 4-H program. For 17 years, Armstrong volunteered as a leader in Dona Ana County, coaching judging teams and taking 4-H members on pack trips. Even after retiring, Armstrong continues to impact young riders. He aims to raise high-quality but affordable horses specifically for youngsters in 4-H.

"I am the superintendent for the Southern New Mexico State Fair and we have a horse futurity for yearlings, 2-year-old and 3-year-old horses," White says. "Armstrong Quarter Horses are everywhere. I see 4-H kids with Armstrong horses each

year, and the ability to buy [those horses] from him makes it really helpful."

WORLD OF KNOWLEDGE

Many mornings, as the sunrise seeps through the window blinds, Armstrong enjoys a cup of coffee in his office at Armstrong Equine Services. The light touches the glass on a shelf filled with photos and reflects off the framed certificates hanging on the wall. All around are reminders of Armstrong's horse industry involvement, from show photographs when he competed on Command N Chex in AQHA ranch riding classes to recognition from the Deutsche Quarter Horse Association for riders who have benefitted from his annual clinics in Germany.

In the area around Las Cruces, Armstrong provides reproductive work for a large client base, from Arabian horse owners to Quarter Horse enthusiasts. Metallic Gun, a son of Metallic Cat, stands at the facility, where he is joined by racing stallions Platinum Pharaoh (TB), Regal Eagle, Gone To The Mountain and Streakin Zoomer. In addition, frozen semen from deceased NRHA Futurity champion stallion Von Reminic is still available.



Using a stock designed and built by his son Edward, Armstrong can check a mare for pregnancy or inseminate the mare with a foal at her side.

Though living in an area with strong ties to racing—Sunland Park racetrack is just down the road—Armstrong diversified his own business to meet local needs. He says the equine industry in New Mexico is varied, but thriving. He gears his own Quarter Horse breeding program to recreational horse show competitors.

“In our area, the majority of the horses are racehorses because of the proximity to Sunland Park,” Armstrong says. “Then, it’s mainly show horses, barrel horses and team ropers. I foal out 15 [of our own] horses annually.”

The pastures at Armstrong Equine Services cause passersby to slow down and stare, as long-legged foals dash about in the morning or rest lazily in the afternoon sun. It is the appeal of a prospect that Armstrong banks on when he sells a young horse.

“There is a mystique about a yearling; people think they can make it a champion,” he says. “I know I’ve never made a profit on a horse I’ve rode and trained. If I can sell it as a weanling or yearling, we can average a profit on them and I go to the bank with more. It’s cost that drives when I sell them, plain and simple.”

Though no longer an AQHA judge, Armstrong works to stay current on the breeding trends driving the performance

industry. He appreciates competing in ranch riding, and continues to do it despite having a hip replaced in November of 2017. Recently, his show string included perlino stallion Command N Chex, who is now deceased.

“Command N Chex was probably the best horse I’ve ever known as far as a riding horse. I would say he was my great horse,” Armstrong says. “The first time [I entered ranch riding], I knew nothing about it and was just adding a horse to the class. I was in the cow horse and the reining. Everybody likes the ranch riding because it gets away from the old Western pleasure.”

Watching the ranch horse segment of the industry grow sparked an idea in Armstrong’s son Edward. The family started the Ranch Horse Championships, an event that combined the style of paying the majority of the entry fee back to the competitor, like a jackpot, and the typical ranch horse show.

Although the event didn’t continue, Armstrong’s interest in ranch riding is still strong. In fact, each summer he flies to Germany to lead horsemanship schools for the Deutsch Quarter Horse Association, and each clinic includes a ranch riding session. The summer of 2018 was Armstrong’s 21st abroad.

Armstrong was first introduced to the European show industry while judging AQHA shows there, and it was through the contacts he made that son Josh first traveled to Germany to conduct a clinic. The clinic was based on the 4-H model Armstrong implemented in New Mexico.

“As a result [of the clinic], the Germans we helped won the reining and cow horse at the German national show,” Armstrong recalls. “Then, they got interested in the [horsemanship] program we were doing here, and they asked us to go to Germany and do it.”

For several years, Josh traveled to Germany four or five times a year helping riders. But since 2001, Armstrong has been the one to conduct the clinics. He takes two assistants, and most often they are college-aged riders.

In 2017, Morgan Moreno, 23, a graduate student at Texas A&M University and the current Stock Horse Team coach, accompanied Armstrong on his 20th summer of teaching in Germany. Moreno was joined by fellow stock horse rider Taylor Godwin.

“We had no idea what we were getting into that summer,” Moreno says. “We were the main instructors for three camps, each five days long. They were very interested in the ranch riding, so we shared tips with them. The riders were ready to learn. Many of the riders had known Joe for 20 years, so it was like another family.”

Moreno says that the outward impression of Armstrong as quiet and stoic is dispelled shortly after meeting him, and he shows incredible patience and humor with students. Whether a client needs help with a horse, or a former student needs advice on the next step in his career, Armstrong is there with words of wisdom.

For Josh, having a father who has left such a mark is a source of pride.

“He’s 80-plus years old and still the hardest working man I know,” Josh says. “His legacy is the people he’s trained and given opportunities to in this industry. I can’t go anywhere in New Mexico without running into someone that was in one of his classes or camps, and most of the time, they also say he was their best teacher.”

KATE BRADLEY BYARS is a contributing editor for *Western Horseman*. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.