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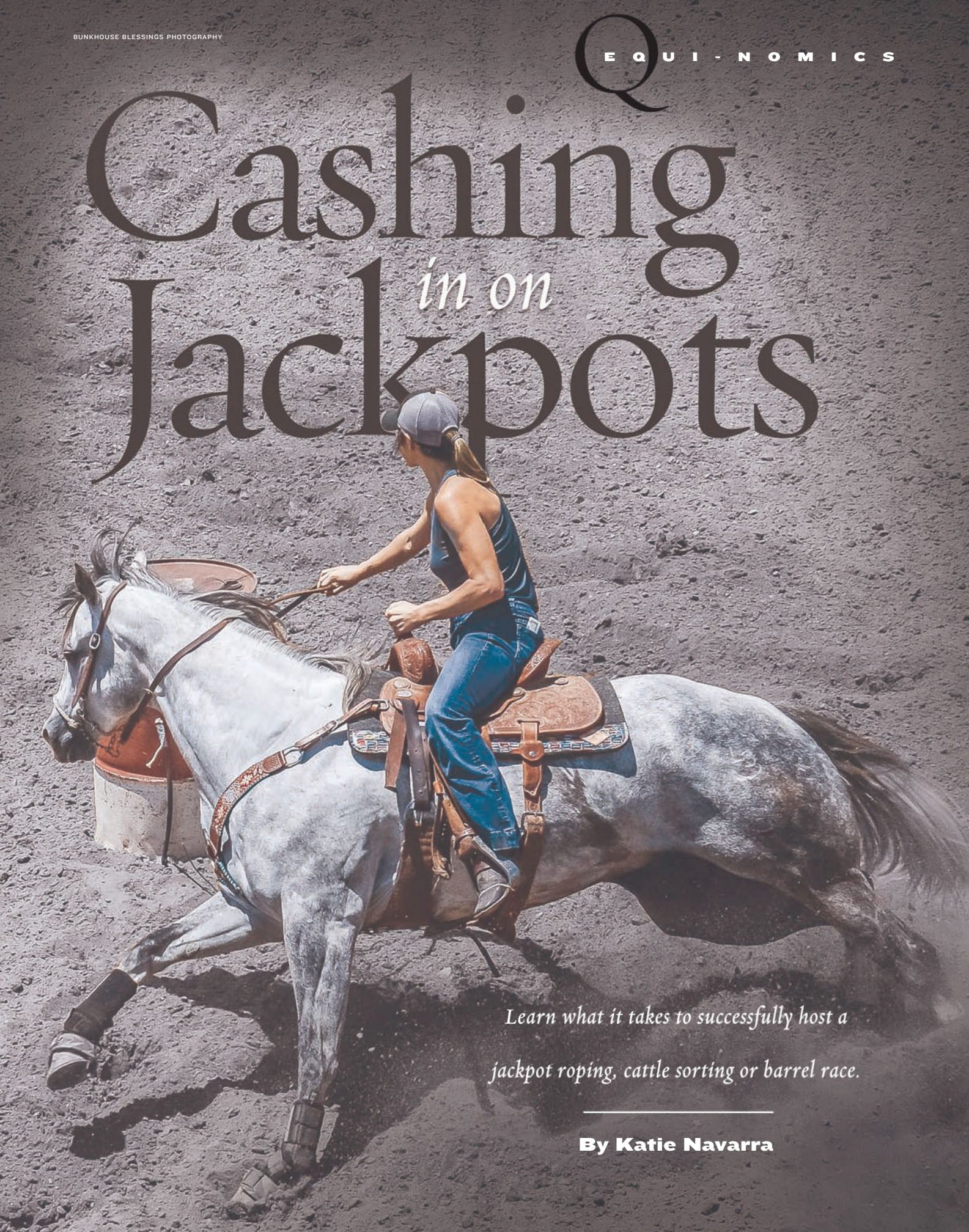
EQUI-NOMICS

Cashing in on Jackpots



Learn what it takes to successfully host a jackpot roping, cattle sorting or barrel race.

By Katie Navarra

One advantage sortings have over team penning: less cattle. It takes 10 cows to create one herd for a sorting event, compared to the 21 head needed for team penning.

TARA MATSLER

IMAGINE: IT'S JUST AN AVERAGE FRIDAY NIGHT, AND you're gathered together with 100 of your closest friends. At the end of the night, someone is going home a few thousand dollars richer. It's a formula that's worked for a number of event producers, including Jera Harris, her boyfriend, Vic Morrison, and their friend Amanda Beckford. For the past few winters, the group has hosted a Friday night jackpot team roping series in Amarillo, Texas. Within the first year, participation ballooned to 180 teams, in part, because of the payouts. The format has changed, but a $150-per-rider entry fee guarantees a $3,450 team payout.

Jackpot events are a popular way to get a group of like-minded riders together for a chance to win cash and prizes for competing in barrel racing and select cattle events. These gatherings are also an opportunity for riders to assess their skills to determine strengths and weaknesses in a format that fosters competition and camaraderie.

Higher entry fees with larger payouts can increase participation and the level of skill needed to be successful.

"People know we have a well-organized event and good payouts," Jera says.

But not every jackpot needs to offer thousands of dollars in prize money or run triple-digit contestants. Smaller jackpots provide newcomers an opportunity to try a new discipline without investing a lot up front.

"We keep our entry fees low so that no one gets hurt financially," says George Peters of Win$um Ranch in Schuylerville, New York.

The ranch regularly hosts jackpot odd-and-even cattle sortings. Three-person teams must move the herd of 10 cows through one of two gates. Odd-numbered cows go through the odd gate, even-numbered cattle through the even gate. When the team starts, it is given a number between zero and nine. That is the first cow they must sort from the herd and put through the correct gate. The rest must follow in sequential order, one at a time, within 90 seconds.

Jackpot events tend to be most successful when they fill a niche that's not currently being served. Lana Tibbets of Terry, Montana, launched a series of Barrel Daze events that averages 200-plus riders per day. The Montana Barrel Daze, which includes a qualifying race for RFD-TV's The American, boasts more than 400 riders.

In part, her series is successful because she recognized that there wasn't an abundance of Women's Professional Rodeo Association Finals-caliber barrel races in her geographic area.

"Girls were traveling 12 hours or more to compete at finals events," she says. "The Montana Barrel Daze is like a mini-WPRA finals because of the caliber of competition we draw."

Read on as three event producers share how they found their niches, plus get an inside look at what it takes to build and maintain a successful jackpot series.

Offering the Right Event

ROPING, BARREL RACING, SORTING AND TEAM PENNING are events that lend themselves to a jackpot format. The key is strategically choosing what is most compatible with the facility and resources available.

When George first offered jackpots, they were team pennings. This event supplemented the family's active participation in team roping as competitors and trainers. The ranch owned cattle and the jackpots were another opportunity for the cattle to pay for themselves. The challenge was the number of cows needed to sustain regular events. George's herd peaked at 110 head. That allowed for three herds of 21, plus replacements for rest and rotation.

"It's tough here to carry that many through the winter," George says. "It was the law of diminishing returns for us."

As sortings became more popular, George decided they were a better fit. It only takes 10 cows to create one herd for a sorting event, compared to the 21 head needed for team penning. Depending on the number of participants, that means 20 to 30 cattle is enough for any one sorting jackpot, rather than 42 or 63 in team penning. At first George worried the sortings would ruin the ranch's valuable roping cattle. Instead, he found that the variety of activities freshened up tired roping steers.

Jera agrees that adjusting a format can have a significant impact on the number of cattle needed. When she launched her team roping series, it was originally a 12-slide format. That essentially offered a handicap that added time for higher-ranked ropers or subtracted time for lower-ranked competitors to level the playing field.

As a 12-slide, Jera needed almost 150 head of cattle for one night of competition. This year, the format is based on the roper's ranking. Her series offers #9, #11 and #13 ropings. That change cut the needed herd size in half.

"It's somewhat of a new concept here, but now we can get through one night with only 75 cows," she says.

Not only did the change halve the herd size, it streamlined the competition. Because the 12-slide ropings attracted 180 teams, the events lasted well past midnight. With the numbered roping, entries are limited to 30 teams per division with 90 total teams. Now events conclude by 10 p.m.

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Whether it's a roping, barrel race or sorting, the key to a successful jackpot is providing an enjoyable experience from start to finish.