

Lease a horse, of course

A Montana couple turns a passion into business



Renee Daniels-Mantle and Kail Mantle lease "safe gentle horses for inexperienced riders."

Horses and profits are two words that are rarely used together. But the husband and wife team of Kail Mantle and Renee Daniels-Mantle of Three Forks, Montana, has combined their love of horses with business savvy and entrepreneurial enthusiasm into a unique, growing – and profitable – business.

They lease horses. More specifically, they lease horses to guest ranches, outfitters and "snowbirds" who want a horse to enhance their Montana experience at their summer cabin.

"Our product is safe, gentle horses for inexperienced riders," says Renee.

It's a niche that Kail's father identified back in 1965. He knew of a big lodge near his Wyoming home that owned a herd of horses for summer use, but fed and maintained them year-round. It would be cheaper, the senior Mantle convinced them, to lease horses for the summer rather than own them year-round.

The lodge agreed. The family business was born. Kail took the reins by first running a trail ride business in South Dakota, which proved to him how hard the "retail" end of the business could be. That stint introduced him to his future wife, and in 1995, he and Renee took their 14 horses to Montana and tried their hand at running cattle.

The cow-calf business was break-even at best, but leasing horses to recreational users looked promising. They sold the cattle in 2002 to concentrate totally on the horses. "Financially, it was the best move we could make," Renee explains.

Today, Mantles own more than 400 horses and serve clients throughout Montana, Idaho and Utah. Kail's sister runs a similar company, Wyoming Horses, in Pavillion, Wyoming.

Mantles buy broke-to-ride horses, aged 5 to 7, at horse sales, from individuals and through a buying network they've developed. Kail uses his cowboy's eye to size up the temperament of the animal that he thinks will work well for their purposes. Then he or Renee spend some saddle time on every horse they buy. They must be convinced that the horse will be a good match with all types of recreational riders, with an emphasis on the inexperienced rider. They'll also let the horse "settle in" at their ranch for a month or so to observe its overall health and fitness.

Once a horse passes muster, it's freeze-branded and becomes a profit center in the Mantle herd until it's ready to retire based on age, which could be up to 22 years.

Beginning in mid-April, Mantles start delivering horses for summer duty at guest ranches and to individual users. They'll check on every horse at least once, including deworming them in August. The horses are shipped back to the Mantle's ranch at the end of August, when they're reshod. Many then go out again to outfitters for fall elk hunts and return to the ranch by December 1. Their shoes are removed, they're dewormed again and put on pasture till it's time to work again in spring.





Mantles were named national finalists in the Farm Bureau Young Farmer and Rancher competition. Their proficiency was rewarded with a Case IH DX33 Farmall tractor. Renee says the tractor represents a "great incentive" by Case IH to encourage young people to get involved in agriculture.

An old-west horse drive

Over winter, Mantles move the horses through a string of pastures that culminates 35 miles away from their ranch. They turned the challenge of getting the horses back home from a chore into an old-west style horse drive.

A maximum of 20 guests pay to participate in the two-day drive that includes running more than 400 horses down Main Street in Three Forks. Townspeople and the media turn out to watch the spectacle. "It's our biggest marketing event of the year," Renee explains.

Mantles rank the drive as one of three phases of their business. Along with it and leasing, they also purchase horses for individuals looking for a specific type of horse. "We've perfected the art of buying horses because we go through so many of them," Renee says. They'll give the potential new owner ample time with the horse prior to confirming the sale. "We want to make sure it's the right horse for them," she says.

Even though Mantles' horses provide

recreation for others, for them, the animals are strictly business; albeit a business they have a great fondness for. This has led to their active involvement in farm groups including Farm Bureau when that organization created an equine committee that advocates maintaining the status of horses as livestock.

"We love horses, and we make our living with horses in an agricultural environment. They are an agricultural commodity and not companion animals," Renee says.

Their involvement led to them being named as national finalists in the Farm Bureau Young Farmer and Rancher competition. Case IH awarded them with a new DX33 Farmall tractor for their efforts. They equipped it with a loader and a few other accessories including a grader blade and a posthole digger.

"We had no idea we needed a tractor like this until we got it," Renee says. "We use it for everything from cleaning corrals to mowing to putting up fence. It's great.

"It's also a great incentive from Case IH to encourage young people to get involved in agriculture and see farming or ranching as a way of life. Especially for a state like Montana, that's very important," she adds.

Among their achievements, Kail and Renee say having a strong, healthy herd is one they hold highest. "We've created and maintained a very strong, healthy herd of horses," Renee says. They eschew most vaccinations, drugs and supplements in favor of good pastures and simply letting them "be horses."

"Horses have been living without human intervention for millions of years. I've got to believe they were doing a few things right," Kail says.

Kail and Renee also pay close attention to financial details, maintain a detailed branding system and make full use of the Internet with a website at www.montanahorses.com.

"Everything's moving in the right direction for us," Renee says. "We're going to keep doing it." ■

