

Hard Work Pays Off

Wild horses, grizzlies, kids and cowboying at Josh Senecal's Mission Valley ranch.

By Rebecca Colnar Mott

Tourists speeding along Highway 93 north of Missoula, Mont., through Mission Valley never realize that cowboy country lies a mere two miles west. Hang a left at the stoplight in Ronan, make a few turns, follow the dirt road where it ends at the Senecal Ranch and you'll find Josh Senecal working a colt and two adorable rural kids lugging around wiggly puppies. Park at the old barn and you'll be greeted by bearded Josh coming toward you with a Wade saddle and a good snaffle bit on an impressive gray stud colt in training.

"I traded this horse for a puppy!" the 37-year-old exclaims, swinging up onto the saddle and heading for the indoor arena.

In country where four-wheelers often replace horses, Josh might be considered an anomaly. He grew up on a 350-cow ranch in Avon, Mont. "All I ever wanted to do was cowboy from a young age. Everyone told me you couldn't make a living that way, but I'm stubborn, and I wanted to do it."

His father lost their lease on the ranch when Josh was 12, so he worked for other ranchers until he was 15. At that time in Avon, a kid would finish school in the summer, live and work with a rancher for three months, and return to school with enough money to buy school clothes. That taught him the value of earning a living. He started building houses at age 15.



PHOTOS COURTESY JOSH SENECAI

"What I learned building houses served me well," Josh says. "It's good to branch out with your experiences and gain more tools of the trade. I did excavation work for five years until I was 23 and owned an excavation company which I had for more than three years in Bozeman."

A pretty blonde college student, Sarah Krantz, caught his eye and he married her in 2007. Right after that the economy tanked so the young construction worker doubled back to his cowboy lifestyle and worked for the MZ Bar in Belgrade. At the same time, Sarah finished her water and soil science degree at

Montana State University. After she graduated, the couple returned to the Mission Valley to take over Sarah's family ranch. They moved into a house that they remodeled while they helped with ranch chores.

"We worked with her family for five years, then bought a ranch of our own," Josh says. While they worked for his in-laws, they received two percent of cattle and equipment for every year they stayed, which came out to 10 percent. Their starter herd was 35 cows.

One of the reasons Josh and Sarah were able to purchase the ranch was because he rode colts for other people while also buying, training and selling their own horses. Helping to boost income, Sarah works as an artificial insemination technician and sells bull semen for ABS.

"We got the downpayment for our ranch from all the extra horses I rode," Josh says. An older neighbor was willing to work with the couple, owner-financing her ranch so they could realize their dream at a young age. "In the six years after we left Sarah's family ranch, we grew to 200 cows, although we cut back to 150 in spring 2022 because of the drought."

When they bought the place, Josh started custom calving cows. "We started with 35 head, but we calved 250 head of cattle on top



LEFT: Josh steps into a leadership role as president of the Northwest Counties Farm Bureau. AT TOP: Josh Senecal, who seeks out other like-minded traditional ranchers, gathers pairs before a head-and-heel branding at Oxbow Cattle Ranch in Missoula.

of the 35 to pay the bills. In addition, I was riding 10 horses a day—100 horses per year—and training was in addition to my ranching responsibilities.”

His forté was buying cheaper horses. He says the most he ever made was training a horse he bought for \$450 and sold for \$15,000. “When working for my in-laws, I rode three to six horses daily. It would be zero degrees and I’d shovel snow out of the round pen. I love taking a knucklehead and making him a useful horse with a purpose.”

Josh’s horse-training mania peaked when he rode so many that he wasn’t seeing his

“I love taking a knucklehead and making him a useful horse with a purpose.”

family. A change was in order—plus, he was starting to hurt. “Training horses on a large scale is a young man’s game. I switched to training only my young horses, not horses for anyone else. A lot of wet saddle blankets make a good horse.”

Although area ranches are relatively small in northwestern Montana, Josh leases 3,000 acres for grazing and haying. He does at least one weeklong horseback trip into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, taking packhorses to carry hay and food. “I love taking a horse that has only been handled and saddled a few times. You load them up and take them on a trip in a pack string and they come out a different horse.”

Josh points to a weathered barn and pasture south of his home where several horses are grazing on impressively green grass. With a grin, he explains that he captured the wild horses for his birthday this year with help from his Missoula friends Bart and Wendy Morris. His buddy Justin Marmon had been talking about these horses for a year. Originating from the Kessler rodeo bucking string, the horses had pestered the Morris family on their ranch and would come and go. The Kesslers had a lease in the mountains and when that ended 20 years ago some horses were left behind. When a group of 12 bays, roans, grays, and paints came into Morris’ 80-acre field, Josh hustled over to help.

“We closed the gates and they went into another field, then into a trap with an electric fence. We edged them into a corral, let them settle, then eased them into the alley. We used low-pressure stock-handling techniques and



PHOTOS © REBECCA COLNAR WOTT

Josh “buys low and sells high” for additional ranch income. He traded a puppy for this handsome colt and says, “A lot of wet saddle blankets make a good horse.” BELOW: Carrying on the Senecal ranching tradition—even with chickens—are Tel, Rylie, Josh and Sarah.



had them loaded in less than two hours. We unloaded them at Missoula Livestock and got them signed into our names, as they were considered nuisance horses.”

Josh now owns the stud, four mares, a foal, and a two-year-old bay stud colt which have been surprisingly friendly. He plans to start working them, riding the younger stock, and letting the stud and mares produce fine young horses to raise, train, and sell.

When he opted to slow down his horse-training business, Josh bought equipment for haying and found hay leases from Polson to

Ronan, which he cuts with his mobile haying unit. In 2022, he purchased a 16-foot swather, but won’t buy pricey new equipment. He runs older equipment and takes care of the mechanical work.

The Mission Valley, which lies at the foot of the looming Mission Mountains, is grizzly bear country. Josh says that three years ago was the first time they had a grizzly problem when 100 pounds of dog food in a Costco tote was hauled 40 yards away. “We were getting ready to have a family reunion with 100 people, so I went to the CSKT Tribal Fish &

Wildlife people and they sent someone out who confirmed it was a sow with three cubs. They installed an electric fence and noise-makers and we had shells in the shotgun for noise, but the grizzlies came every night. Fish & Game trapped a couple of cubs hanging around, but they could not catch the mother so they released the cubs. One of my dogs kept the bears away for the reunion, but nobody camped; everyone got hotels. I love grizzlies but don't love them harassing us."

Josh has talked to biologists who say



they've seen dwarfed grizzlies in the area because of overpopulation and insufficient food. "There needs to be more management, and that's difficult to understand unless you live here. We must lock up our dog food, pig food, and even the animals at night. A grizzly came into a shed and tore up \$3,000 worth of salt and minerals."

Josh believes that involvement with the public is a way to change minds and hearts and that getting involved in organizations, the community, and running for office can facilitate that conversation. For the past three years, he's hosted farm fairs at the ranch, one for Mission Valley Christian School and one for Ronan Fourth Grade Ag Days. Neighbors and Northwest County Farm Bureau members showed students pigs, horses, cattle, chickens, and seed potatoes and talked about soil and much more.

"For the Ronan Fourth Grade Ag Days, I had all the classes write down a guess on how many babies the sow was going to farrow," Josh says. "What consumers are told about ranching by people on Facebook and society is negative and erroneous. Kids can see we



PHOTOS COURTESY JOSH SENECAI

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Breeding working dogs is Josh's sideline business. ▶ Sarah gets ranch-fresh eggs and home-grown bacon ready for breakfast. ▶ Packing in "The Bob" (Marshall Wilderness). ▶ Tel, nine, and Rylie, five, with special critters.



care about our animals and we explain the different uses of animals, such as pigs providing insulin for diabetics and valve stems for hearts so animals are used for more than food. It's medical, life-saving things."

He's stepped up and been elected president of the Northwest Counties Farm Bureau and hopes to grow more programs to further educate farmers and ranchers about the benefits of belonging to the advocacy organization. He was accepted into Montana Farm Bureau's ACE (Advocate, Communicate, Educate) program, which works to develop leaders and teach people with a passion for agriculture how to find common ground with people who have differing opinions.

"ACE drew me because it helps build leaders. I don't want to be on the front lines but I see a real need for ranchers to be leaders. ACE helps you deal with your fears and prepares you to step into a leadership role. I plan to run for county commissioner in 2024."



Josh has been accepted into the Resource Education and Agriculture Leadership Montana class for the next two years, which will lead to another level of understanding of politics and the natural resources industry. "I'm all about growing personally. I hate being stagnant, and I don't want to be complacent."

He and Sarah hope their children—Tel, nine, and Rylie, five—will want to carry on the ranching tradition. Tel is already helping with haying and both energetic children have a bevy of barn chores. He worries that many people don't understand agriculture, but they are the ones making laws and changing agricultural livelihoods.

"The people who support those laws hostile to agriculture have no idea of the consequences, so we need people to explain why we love what we do and show how we do it responsibly. We need to keep our way of life alive." ■

Rebecca Colnar Mott is a freelance writer, rancher, and director of public relations for Montana Farm Bureau. She says there is a risk in journalism: she came home from the Senecal Ranch interview unexpectedly with a six-week-old blue heeler/border collie puppy.