

Windward Stud

The Windward Stud, near Purcell, Oklahoma, was established by Frank and Robin Merrill in the 1970s, initially as a horse breeding operation. At one point they had no less than 17 stallions at the stud, breeding hundreds of foals for racing, shows and cattle cutting.

Business is comparatively sedate these days. Three years ago the Merrills went into partnership with the Cowan Ranch of Montana and now the focus is on producing performance horses for cutting, reining and other western riding disciplines.

“We want to be closely involved with the horses’ upbringing, and produce the best stock possible,” explains Robin.

Yet this is still a high-octane operation, with state-of-the-art training, housing and veterinary facilities. A continuous supply of calves are leased to train young horses in the art of cutting – separating a calf from the herd, originally for purposes such as veterinary treatment, but now a competitive and highly lucrative sport in the USA.

As well as ‘real’ livestock, the training barn is the home of a computerised ‘cutting critter’ – a dummy calf suspended from an overhead track, which can be programmed to move in a variety of ways and challenge the young horse. Arena dimensions exactly replicate those of the Will Rogers Coliseum in Fort Worth, Texas, home to all of the major cutting championships.

“We try to produce 15 to 25 horses each year, and it is very much a family operation,” says Robin. “We had eight horses entered in the national cutting Futurity this year and as well as our trainer they were ridden by myself, my son and my daughter.”

Windward Stud also plays host to a number of shows and events, and maintaining its immaculate appearance is clearly a matter of pride to the Merrills. While pasture management is contracted out, the in-house team use John Deere equipment both around the estate and in the stables.

A 575 series tractor with folding roll bar is used to deliver bedding to the low roofed indoor stables and to aid in mucking out, while Robin is never without her faithful Gator or JD quad bike to get around the pastures, move bales or inspect stock. Long grassy avenues of trees are kept tidy, using a compact tractor and trailer to transport tools and load up leaves and clippings. On a facility of this size, having the right equipment is crucial.

“We have a long relationship with John Deere,” says Robyn. “My friend’s father was a JD dealer, so he looked after us in the early days of the business, and now we get great support from PK Tractors who are in Purcell. There has always been great excitement when a new tractor arrives on the stud!”