

Ariat International Founder and President Beth Cross has found success by focusing not only on the task at hand, but also her dreams for the distant future.

By Barb Kastens, Editor

It's hard to believe, walking into Ariat International today, that the company's humble beginnings were just a short 16 years ago. Ariat headquarters in Union City, California is on the southeast side of the picturesque San Francisco Bay area. The space is impressive by any standards, with high, warehouse-style ceilings, attractive offices and spacious product development areas for the creative people that it employs.

Ariat began as many businesses in the equine industry do, with a simple conversation and an idea. Beth Cross and her original partner, Pam Parker, were classmates at Stanford's Graduate School of Business. The two went on to be colleagues and consultants for athletic footwear makers Reebok and Avia. They were shopping for a horse at a local stable one day and heard grumblings from some of the trainers there about how uncomfortable their boots were. A light bulb went on, and a plan to launch a brand of footwear that would answer the needs of this unique industry was set into motion.

Their choice of the word Ariat was calculated—it's an Italian word, meaning "perfect performance"—and that's exactly the philosophy that the company was based on. But not just for one side of the industry. From the beginning, Cross has manufactured products for both English and Western riders. In January of 1992, she rented a table on the third floor of the Denver Merchandise Mart, and started selling with just two products: an English paddock boot and a Western lace-up roper, each in a choice of black or brown.

"Riding is an athletic sport, and people wanted performance footwear," Cross said. "The designs are different between English and Western products, but the underlying requirements are similar—stability, cushioning and durability." She added that the intent from the start was to meet and exceed customer expectations in technology and



Ariat Founder and President Beth Cross is a well-known face in the equine trade industry.

quality.

Returning from Denver-WESA that January, Cross gave birth to her first son the same day that Ariat started shipping product. The company was operating out of her home. In the months and years afterwards, the footwear brand was established and the operation was moved into a 1,000-square-foot combined office and warehouse. Even in those early days, Cross had an eye toward the future. She believes that there should be two sides to every good business plan.

"I'm always thinking ten years ahead. That's the dreamer. My key job is the ten-year vision and sharing that with our retail-

ers," she said. "The other part is focused on the next ten minutes." Using that philosophy, Ariat's foray into apparel in 2002—exactly ten years after the company began—was no accident.

"The goal all along was to be head-to-toe, and apparel was a natural direction for us," Cross said. "We believed the technology would be valuable to every product we made."

Signs of that technology are in everything that the designers at Ariat create. About four years ago, the company began making men's Western shirts. In true Ariat style, they did it a little bit differently than anyone else had done it before. By adding a vented gusset under the sleeve, they eliminated the problem of riders' shirts coming untucked when they raised their arms. Fabrics offering protection from the sun and cool mesh linings are other features of these beautiful garments.

In 2005, they introduced a line of belts featuring "GripStrip" technology that prevents the belt from sliding from side to side. Recently, Ariat has developed a line of men's work boots that have what they call "U-Turn" technology. Created specifically for men who have a high instep and have trouble "making the turn" when getting into or out of their boots, this footwear line has an elasticized gusset in the back that allows a forgiving bit of stretch.

The technology they use for their children's boots takes a bit of a different angle. Because children's feet don't necessarily need the comfort features that adults do, Ariat decided to focus on the fact that kid's feet never stop growing. Its designers came up with "Wiggle Room" foot beds that can gradually be removed to make the space inside the boot larger, and grow with the child.

All of these things and many more set Ariat apart from companies that design with only style in mind.

"We entered the market focused on riders' *Continued on page 14*