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Youth Ranch Horse Mentor Matchup

2026 Recap



Denver, CO – Ten talented Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming residents, ages 14-21 years old, competed for the scholarships under the guidance of top equine professionals in the Youth Ranch Horse Mentor Matchup during a record-breaking Opening Weekend of the 120th National Western Stock Show. Select youth expanded their horsemanship skills and industry knowledge throughout three days with industry leaders. They competed in four ranch phases included Ranch Trail, Ranch Riding, Reining and Cow Work.

Micaiah Culbertson from Greeley, CO clinched the championship title under the expert mentorship of Bub Poplin of Fruita, CO. With a total of 298 points, Micaiah Culbertson won the Reining and Cow Work phases on her gelding, Special Rest aka Wallace. Micaiah stated she and Wallace have a special bond led by clear communication, leaving little room for confusion between the two. After graduating college, she hopes to sign on with a cow horse trainer in Texas in hopes to one day operate her own training operation. Entering this competition, her goal was to increase her knowledge as a rider and she expressed her immense gratitude for the industry professionals for donating their time to the program to help youth progress in their journey.

Kaitlyn Snyder of Riverton, WY claimed the 2026 reserve championship, supported by mentor Drake Johnson of Wray, CO. Kaitlyn won the Ranch Riding portion, adding to her cumulative score of 294 points. She has owned her equine partner, Billie is Smooth, for almost five years and credited his consistency and versatility as some of his shining attributes. Kaitlyn currently rides for the Ranch Horse Team at Central Wyoming College and plans to start her own performance horse facility after graduating with a degree in Equine Science and Equine Management. Through the program she was excited to surround herself with the best in the business and looks forward to passing newfound knowledge to others.



Micaiah received a \$2,000 scholarship and Kaitlyn received a \$1,000 scholarship from the National Western Scholarship Trust. Other youth competitors included Katie Cassiday, Megan French, Audrey Griffith, Austin Harris, Landyn Kath, Autumn Manuelito, Ailey Paxton and Sarah Wamsley. The list of influential mentors included Naomi Bancroft, Karen Banister, Gabe Garrison, Mark Guynn, Nancy Nemmers, Chase Trahern, Kyle Trahern and JD Yates.

These youth represent the future of the equine industry through their commitment to learn and excellence on horseback. The passion demonstrated by competitors and coaches alike symbolizes the dedication of the entire equestrian community.

Written by Carly Johnson, 2026 NWSS Equine Management Apprentice
Photos by Performance Horse Photography

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