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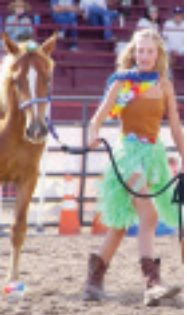
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MEEKER MUSTANG MAKEOVER

By Kristin Jacob

The cool, damp post-summer storm morning gave way to the brilliant afternoon sun as horses entered the arena at the Rio Blanco Country Fairgrounds in Meeker, Colorado for the freestyle portion of the Meeker Mustang Makeover.

Spectators were awed as horses went through flames; did complex routines with tarps; umbrellas, and ropes, and were ridden bareback while loading cattle or other horses as well as themselves without hesitation into trailers. What these horses did would likely not be able to be done on even a gentle, old kid's horse, but these horses were only 120 days out of the wild!

It was the first year I was invited to judge the annual Meeker Mustang Makeover (MMM), and standing there behind the bucking chutes, with the hot afternoon sun illuminating the arena, I was filled with such deep reverence for what each of these horses was unquestionably willing to give to its rider/handler. The connections that many of these horses had with their trainers transcended the physical and exemplified the harmony and connection we all strive for in our relationships with our own horses.

The Mustang is an icon of the American West and symbolizes a pioneering spirit that captivates people worldwide. To maintain healthy public rangelands, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages populations of wild Mustangs in various regions across the West. As part of this management, some of these horses are gentled and go on to find new lives and careers in just about every discipline from working ranch horse, to dressage, to trail/pleasure horses for the recreational rider. Events such as the MMM are critical to raise awareness about the Mustang and to show off the incredible willingness and versatility of these horses. The MMM creates a conduit from the BLM, through talented trainers, to the public who has an opportunity to purchase the horses who compete in this event during an auction held at the culmination of the competition.

Trainers get involved in events such as the MMM for various reasons. Some trainers, such as 2023 MMM winner Clara Phillips, had competed in several prior Mustang competitions. Clara said that she got involved with the MMM through her stepdad, Eric Pflueger. He had won the year prior and convinced her to join in during the 2023 season. Clara said she had also won her first Trainer Incentive Program challenge in 2021 and had made it a personal goal to prove that that win was not a fluke. Other trainers, such as Sydnee Julian, were first-time

Mustang trainers. "Over the last couple years, I have shifted my focus to exploring horsemanship in a way that the horse can understand. I am most interested in working horses in a way that translates from the ground into the saddle. When I was invited to take part in MMM with a group of friends that have been a part of the Mustang community for years, I saw it as an opportunity to challenge myself and put my horsemanship skills to the test. Stamey is the first Mustang I have gentled and worked with from the ground up."

How Is the Event Organized?

The MMM is an annual event which has run for 6 years. Mustangs for this event come from a wide variety of herd management areas across several states; trainers select horses by draw. A goal of the MMM is to educate and produce the next generation of horsemen. Two divisions are offered: an In Hand Youth Trainer division, ages 10-17, and an Under Saddle Horse (3 years and older) division for trainers ages 15 and over. Trainers receive their horses the last Saturday of April and have 120 days to gentle and work with their horses. Trainers are encouraged to work with a mentor, if they choose. Additionally, the MMM hosts two Mustang handling clinics in Meeker, Colorado with professional Mustang trainer Steve Mantle of Wheatland, Wyoming.

On the morning that trainers receive their horses, Steve does a starting demo with an untouched yearling and with one of the three-to-five-year-old under saddle horses. The goal of the clinic is to give trainers help to get started with their horses and to show newer trainers what you can get done with the horses in the early stages of working with them. It additionally gives the MMM a couple of backup horses as potential replacements in case any of the trainers' horses become sick or injured within the first 30 days.

The second clinic the MMM offers is the Back on Track clinic, held 30-35 days after trainers have received their horses. The MMM additionally works with the BLM to offer the Back on Track clinics across the country. This clinic is to help trainers and adopters get their horses "back on track" and to help



Moments from the 2023 event. (Photos courtesy of Meeker Mustang Makeover.)

trainers overcome some hangups they may be having, to evaluate what the trainers have accomplished, and to validate the progress of the horses. Steve said, "Some folks just get so close to making it to the top of the hill and just need a little help to get over the top and find out how good it is on the other side." The Back on Track clinic also aids to renew the excitement that is present on the initial pick up day when the horses are received by the trainers.

Some of the challenges trainers face directly relate to training. Lucia Vanoplinus said one of her biggest challenges with her horse Cedar was leading. "Cedar had a good understanding of pressure, and he understood how to lead well, but he had some anxiety about being away from his friends, and he didn't like when I would lead him away. We spent a lot of time working on making positive associations in other areas and he leads great now." Other challenges trainers faced were more mental. Clara Phillips humbly said, "I figured out pretty quickly that my horse, Ruidoso, had a good mind and was willing to work with me. And because I knew he had such an outstanding mind and such great potential, I put a lot of pressure on myself to make sure he got the best chance possible. I only wanted to do him justice. I wanted to do well not only because I wanted to but because Ruidoso is one of the special ones, and he deserved it. That in itself felt like all the pressure in the world." Sydnee Julian shared some wisdom about the process, saying, "Seeing other competitors' progress and what they were accomplish-

ing with their horses sometimes made you feel behind. It was important to remember each of these horses are individuals and that as trainers, we are all in different spots in our journey. It's easy to get caught up in the competition aspect, but it was important for me to slow down and work the horse where he was at."

This year, with new blood and ideas, the MMM is introducing the Kids Camp event where young trainers can get individual help with their horses, as well as with other horses, to give them more confidence and to show them what is possible to achieve with their horses. The MMM is very fortunate to have Rouven Krouser, who initiated and spearheaded the creation of the Kids Camp, along with other board members, Deirdre McNaab, Elizabeth Pearce, Cindy Rhode, Jane Turnburke, and John Rogers to name just a few who will be hands-on helping with the Kids Camp, and all events associated with the MMM. Steve said, "We at the MMM want to make these events a very special time for the adopters and a great experience, but our focus is on the horse, and helping them to make changes and have this event turn into a positive adoption for them with a good home and new purpose."

Although \$15,000 in prizes and scholarships and half the proceeds from the sale of each trainer's horse are awarded to trainers, there is a much deeper reward to participants, which became evident to me as a first-time judge and attendee of this event. The weekend kicked off with the Mustang Mingle on

Mark Your Calendar!

Meeker Mustang Makeover – August 24th

meekermustangmakeover.org



Above: Clara Phillips and Ruidoso, winners of the 2023 MMM Under Saddle division, Right: Clara and Ruidoso and Sydnee and Stamey riding out on their Mustangs. (Photos courtesy of Clara & Sydnee)

Friday night. Food and beverages were provided by the Rotary Club of Meeker. The floor opened up for dancing as trainers, their families, and those who worked tireless hours to bring this event into fruition socialized, visited, and caught up with each other. During the Mustang Mingle, All the trainers were invited to the stage to introduce themselves and their horses. The honesty, humility, and emotions that poured out of the trainers elucidated the moments of challenge and personal growth, of extreme joy and triumphs, and of the connection each trainer had made during their 120 day journey with their horse.

The Big Day

The morning kicked off with the In Hand Yearling division followed by the Under Saddle division, shown over a course designed by the judges—Steve Mantle, Bridget Strang, and myself. Prior to the event, riders were given instruction to be prepared to ride through and around various objects at gates of their choosing; demonstrate a rein back/back up, lateral movements such as a side pass and turn on the forehand; ride through or over objects that simulate features one may encounter when riding outside the arena or on the trail; and show off acceptance of ropes, dragging objects, and flapping/noisy objects.

The goal was to provide a positive and safe experience for both riders/handlers and their horses and to allow rider/handler to really show off areas in which their horse shines and to provide a positive training experience in areas that their horse may be lacking confidence or experience. To do that, each obstacle was designed in a manner that included options ranging in difficulty so that riders/handlers could choose the best option for where their horse was in their training. Rider/handlers were judged on their horsemanship—a rider choosing the less difficult option but performed with feel, correction flexion, mental calmness, and engagement of the horse received a higher score than a more difficult option done in a hurried manner or a manner that did not promote continued learning or confidence building in the horse. The Under Saddle division included a

cattle working section and was judged on the horse's confidence and quietness when around and working cattle with emphasis on low stress stock handling.

The youth In Hand Yearling handlers demonstrated their horses' gentleness and acceptance of grooming, including spray bottles and picking feet, working around ropes and slickers, and being led or sent through barrels and gates, over bridges and Liverpools (to simulate water crossings), and over logs or downed timber. Some of these horses were so connected to their handlers I believe they would have followed them at liberty around the entire course.

The Under Saddle Horse division riders showed their horses at the walk, trot, and canter; demonstrated rideability through barrels and a pole bending pattern; during the opening and closing of gates; over bridges, water features, logs/timber, a small jump, and side pass over a pole. Options for showing your horse's gentleness included a station with a slicker and another with a rope and roping dummy. Very evident was the time that many of these trainers put in to getting their horses to accept these things from both their left and right sides and with switching eyes. I believe the general public could have safely climbed on many of these horses and that, due to the quality of training and exposure, many of these horses were more broke than the majority of the pleasure/recreational horses that I see at boarding stables.

Clara Phillips noted that, "Through this experience, I didn't work Ruidoso any differently than I would an untouched "domestic" horse. I've concluded that Mustangs are horses in their rawest form. They are forced to survive off instinct, thus their flight or fight responses might be higher, and they don't have any "dullness" put into them by being cared for by humans. I found that my timing and my feel had to be more exact in the beginning, but I also found I could halter break my horse without ever touching him. Gentling a Mustang turned into a game of: can you move your hind end that way if I step this way? Can you move your shoulder this way? Can I draw

you into me? Can I send you away from me at a walk? And then the halter was on. I found this is how I want to work all my horses, working on all the tiny pieces and building towards the larger picture. Mustangs taught me that horses truly live in the present and that we do a disservice to our horses when we make excuses for them. You hear it frequently, 'my horse is a rescue,' 'my horse was abused,' 'my horse is a Mustang,' etc. I think MMM does a great job of showing how capable these horses are of doing a job. Despite being wild 120 days ago, most of these horses were gentle and most of them rideable. The youth horses looked to be ready to move on to the next steps in life! I was impressed."

Let the Fireworks Begin!

I've traveled to horse shows across North America and Europe, seen top level performance horses compete in many of the English and western disciplines, and competed at the Grand Prix level in show jumping. The freestyle portion of the MMM stands out to me as a highlight and right there at the top with some of the best competitions (and most incredible things I have seen done with horses). Each rider/handler was given seven minutes to go through a pre-rehearsed routine to show off their horse's strengths and their creativity. Each routine was set to music to create an electric atmosphere and engaging performance. Horses went through fire; were covered, dragged, and rode across tarps; worked other stock; laid down and were ridden back up; were ridden without a bridle; and performed beautiful lateral/classical dressage movements.

But there was another level beyond what I often see performance show horses do for us. I feel many performance horses are trained to such a level they become machines for their riders' egos and are a kind of like living robots. What stood out to me was the majority of the horses in the MMM freestyle event had been worked with in a way that exemplified the Tom Dorrance quote, "First you go with the horse, then the horse goes with you, then you go together."

Sydnee Julian said that particular quote stuck with her through the whole experience, and that is what got her through the competition weekend. "You never really know what to expect at any colt's first show and I was proud of how my horse, Stamey, handled it all. We took turns filling in for each other, we held each other accountable, and it felt like a working partnership," said Sydnee.

That level of togetherness of horse and rider/handler was well beyond what I see at the high-level shows I regularly attend and is what I believe is one of the highest levels of horsemanship; if asked, I believe the unity between some of these horses and riders was strong enough that, in theory, they could have been ridden "up a telephone pole or down a badger hole." Sydnee said of her partnership with Stamey that, "We threw a lot at these horses, I mean, more than most 120-day colt starts. The way my horse looked to me when he was unsure was

incredible. On top of that, I was just proud of how dog-gentle he became, by the end I was confident he was ready to go do a job and that someone else could manage him. My favorite experience through this was gathering cows in the mountains of Shoshoni, Wyoming. It was only his tenth ride and that's when we really got to know each other. When Stamey realized there was a job at hand, it was game on. He gave that weekend his all." Experiences such as what Sydnee gave Stamey were apparent on the day of competition in the level of confidence and connection between horse and rider.

During the awards ceremony, emotions were high as riders beamed with pride irrespective of how they placed in the event. The day concluded with an auction of the horses who competed earlier in the day. Half the proceeds went to the trainers and the other half went back to the non-profit MMM event run by community volunteers and supported by local ranches and businesses. There was a bittersweet feeling one might feel at a commencement or graduation. As the sun set behind the grand stands and a coolness crept into the air, the 120-day journey that these riders/handlers had embarked on with their horses came to an end. Horses were auctioned off to both in-person and online bidders from around the country. Some riders/handlers would not work with their horses, who had grown from wild and cautious prey animals to become their noble and trusting partners, ever again.

But alas, as one chapter closes, another begins, and the sun rises another day. These horses would ship off to their new owners to continue their learning and build on the incredible foundations that each of their trainers had given them. Lucia Vanoplinus said, "The deepest reward from working with Cedar is getting to see him be so happy in his new home with his new owner; it makes me very proud." Clara Phillips' horse, Ruidoso, winner of the 2023 MMM Under Saddle division, lives part-time in Virginia and part-time in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. His new owner has said "he is the most incredible animal [he's] ever been on." Although Clara parted ways with Ruidoso, she will always carry the rewards of working with him. "One of the greatest rewards I got from this experience was the opportunity to create a deep bond with such a special animal. This was my fourth Mustang competition, and I have never felt such a deep level of pride and joy as I did with Ruidoso. I still can't wrap my mind around how much that horse was willing to give me, and I will forever be grateful for my time spent with him."

Looking Ahead

The 2024 Meeker Mustang Makeover will be held Saturday August 24th and is open to the public. Applications for 2025 will open January 1, 2025 and will close April 1, 2025. If you are considering becoming a trainer and have interest in the incredible journey of working with a wild American Mustang, please contact Shanna Lewis at MeekerMustangMakeover1@gmail.com or call her at 970-846-9834 for more information.



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"The main attraction—Tripper and Abe, two sagacious senior horses at Mindy Bower's Uh Oh Ranch, love a good scratch; however they make better doors than windows when watching Marny Belt work on saddling her Mustang in the round pen. I have learned so much just by being able to observe how the Mustangs think, move, react and work. They are such honest horses that present an unbiased reflection of your soul and current skill level. Mustangs are very quick learners that absorb what you're doing right just as much as what you are doing wrong. Trainers have to be so aware, and our timing has to be on point, making these horses the perfect teachers. I can't wait for the Meeker Mustang Makeover at the end of August! It is so fun to see the culmination of hard work between Mustang and trainer. Hope to see you there!"

What Were They Thinking?



Angelina Bouzarelos watching Marny Belt (on the cover of this issue). Angelina just graduated from Grandview High School and will attend Colorado State University in the fall. She has been studying under Mindy Bower for four years. She won the youth in-hand division at the 2023 Meeker Mustang Makeover and is competing again this year in the Under Saddle division. Photo by Mindy Bower.