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## The Mustang Challenge

By Danee Rudy

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### I. The First Encounter

On January 9, 2008 trailer after trailer winded its way into the Bureau of Land Management Mustang holding facility in Ewing, Illinois. My husband, Davin, and I were accepted into the Midwest Mustang Challenge and despite arriving early we joined the already long line to pick up our mustangs.

For the challenge, 50 plus trainers worked with a wild mustang for 100 days. We then competed against each other at the Midwest Horse Fair in Madison, Wisconsin in a in-hand and ridden course. The courses included basics every horse should know, like picking up feet, loading into a trailer, leading at a walk and trot, and backing through obstacles. We had to be able to walk, trot, canter, and back up under saddle, riding over bridges, going over rails, and I was sure they would have something scary to ride past. We also had two minutes of freestyle and the top ten returned for an additional four minute freestyle including props and music. This was a journey into the unknown for me. I worked with plenty of young horses and started many under saddle- but those horses were touchable!

We were handed slips of paper with numbers on them- numbers identifying our new partners. We found their pen and searched neck tags to find our new projects. The horses swarmed like bees over the mere site of humans near their pen. My husband's horse was easy to spot- the center of the herd is the safest, and every time the black horse tried to make his way in, he was met with pinned ears and bared teeth. It was unanimous amongst the rest of the herd- if a horse were to get eaten that day, it would be him. My horse seemed much more dominant and was among the few horses that seemed to have a tiny drop of curiosity about the two-legged species.

These horses' exposure to humans was mainly for shots, branding, and castration. If a human ever got in the pen with them, it was to move or separate them. The horses were loaded into a squeeze chute and sent into our trailer. I bubbled with excitement as we headed back to Pennsylvania.

At a fuel stop on the way home I quietly snuck in the trailer and peeped over the slam gate at the two scared muddy equines. My heart pounded... so did theirs! Although they were coward in the back I started to put my fingers through the gate. They reacted as if I pointed a gun at them. *This may be harder than I thought.* It took some self control to not fix on them with big eager eyes. If anyone walked within fifty feet of the trailer the horses reacted. I received my first lesson as to what 'wild' really means. Once daylight found the horses at home and settled in, we climbed in the pens for the first real encounter. I would walk towards my horse slowly and if he turned as much as an ear at me I would walk away. He caught on quickly so I soon expected to see both his eyes before I would retreat. Within half an hour he would look towards me and stretch his neck in my direction whenever I approached.

My husband's horse was not so easy. Fear kept him totally fixated on the tall stranger in his pen, so he needed a different method. Davin would get as close as he could, being sure to look down and away and not appear threatening. If the horse felt too much pressure, Davin would walk away. The idea was to get closer each time, but the big black horse wanted no parts of it. Even when Davin was far away, the horse would remain fixated and ready for flight. Any stimulus was enough to cause him to bolt. We soon realized how challenging this terrified horse would be.

I was soon luring my horse towards me a step or two. What an awesome feeling to have a wild animal draw towards me with an inquisitive expression. He became more confident by the minute. We played on and off throughout the day and soon after darkness fell that fateful moment happened when he reached out and touched my hand for a good curious sniff. My brain said I should retreat before he does, and he had been touching my hand for almost a full minute, but I couldn't bring myself to move. In that moment the universe consisted of the moon, this mustang, and me. It was like I never touched a horse before. I finally backed away slowly as he watched. Prey animal and predator engaged in the first step towards trust.

## II. The Ups and Downs

When a horse knows nothing it is pretty easy to see your progress! 'Rave' was consistently suspicious. Initially I worked on being able to approach and rub on him. I then started throwing ropes across him and sending him over rails and a

tarp. By day eight I had a surcingle on him.

Davin's horse was difficult. Simply climbing into his pen caused him distress and by day fourteen Davin still could not approach him. Although he hated to do it, Davin finally roped the horse, wrangled him, and started to approach him. If the horse retreated, Davin would physically contain him. When the horse quit fighting, Davin gave him slack. Davin finally was able to rub on the gelding and with that first touch he immediately calmed down. It seemed to take for ever, but the entire session lasted less than ten minutes. Despite the difficulty, we both felt something special for this horse and had very high hopes for him.

By day fifteen, Rave would walk, stop, and back when I did. He loaded in the trailer, was saddled, and I even trimmed his front feet. To ride a horse they must take instruction from their back, so I wanted him comfortable with me working around the saddle area. I spent lots of time leaning over him. I sent him ahead of me so I could give direction from beside his girth area. A part of me was very nervous about mounting this horse, as his flight response was far beyond that of the horses I typically work with.

My husband hardly spent any time with his mustang. He would go to the barn, pet him, and return ten minutes later. It drove me nuts! He only had 80 days left and all he could do was catch the horse, move his hind quarters around, and lead him a little. But I soon realized how well my husband read the horse- Son got calmer and started to like domestication. All that time doing nothing was exactly what he needed.

My early attempts at bellying over Rave were not promising. He stood with ears pinned and nostrils wrinkled, or bolted off. I kept returning to ground work- more trust, higher levels of communication, and more desensitization. I could pull on a rope wrapped around his flanks and, instead of bucking, he would side pass towards me. I prepared Rave for riding in every way I knew, yet when I put my foot in that stirrup he would sneer at me- I am positive he was cursing!

I found his three quirks were anything involving his ears, his hind feet, and me sitting on him. It was day 34 before I successfully sat on Rave while my husband led him. We did the same with my husband's mustang, and he was surprisingly great- once he realized he wasn't on the menu, he had become a very willing partner.

Life exerted itself and the horses had off more days than we wanted. By day fifty my Mustang only had three unassisted rides at walk and trot. I couldn't help but look at the websites of my competitors and found that most all of them were riding by day 20, many by day 10, and some by day 4! I started feeling pretty inadequate- like there was some aspect of horsemanship I was totally lacking.

My husband's mustang hit another brick wall in his training- he seemed confident, sweet, and willing, but under saddle he was evasive- very evasive. We continued looking for a physical explanation and one day we found it- his entire pelvis was crooked and had apparently been that way for a very long time. Our hearts sank as we realized that not only would this horse not compete at the Challenge, but he would never be more than a trail horse for a light rider.

Thankfully, my mustang progressed quickly. Rave was doing a leg yields within a few days of riding, and by day 66 we were starting half passes. Because he was a 'clean slate' it was easy to teach him to go off my seat. We would practice with the reins on his neck. Our canter departs improved until we could pick up a balanced canter from the walk just by moving my inside hip forwards. Only two days before leaving for the competition I gathered up all my nerve and pulled off his bridle- I walked, trotted, and cantered around the paddock with just a rope around his neck. What an accomplishment! I started feeling that I had a chance at this competition after all.

### III. The Competition

As I watched other trainers practice it was obvious there was stiff competition- many horses could be ridden bridle-less and it seemed everyone's horse could bow or lay down except mine. Some horses even jumped over fire. Rave disliked the seating areas, and he hated people standing near the fence- he was scared.

I was able to watch most of the in-hand class on Friday. Trainers and horses that were very impressive while practicing, came in and made big mistakes. That was somehow comforting as I was reminded we all were dealing with inexperienced horses.

Despite my own nervousness, I felt that on the ground my horse would have enough confidence in me to follow my direction- I was right. The first task was to trot a serpentine through cones- most horses only walked. Rave picked up his trot immediately, and never broke gait. Next was picking up all four feet. The trainers who ground tied their horses ended up longing at the lead rope, spooking their horse and turning bad to worse. I knew the trainers that did well kept their leads, but I decided to trust my horse. I dropped the lead and picked up the front foot, putting it between my legs like a farrier. When I went for the hind foot he started to swing away. Without ever touching his lead rope, I motioned him to come sideways one step towards me and he did. He then stayed perfectly still as I handled his other feet. Instead of turning left to go to the trailer load, I side passed him towards me, lined him up, and he jumped

into the trailer without issue. For the back up obstacle, I guided Rave backwards by the tail instead of using his halter. He nailed his pivot and we trotted to the next cone. Our course was flawless!

The ridden course was in the larger arena and Rave was petrified. He spooked once and swapped leads, and wouldn't walk onto the bridge. I had to dismount and lead him onto it.

I knew we completely blew our chances of making it to the finals. Despite some disappointment, I was happy with Rave's performance.

My husband's horse ended up having a crooked pelvis and sore back (the reason for his evasion under saddle), so Davin could not ride him through the course. I returned to watch the rest of the competition, and was surprised at how many horses were just as spooky as mine. I was ecstatic when they announced my name as one of the top ten.

During the finals freestyle the scoring starts over. The house was packed at an 8,000 capacity. I tried to stick to my routine, but I could barely steer. I was holding the canter together with scotch tape. I planned to drag some stuffed feed sacks, but he wouldn't get close to them. I felt horrified. But suddenly I was struck with the clarity that I made it to the finals and that was good enough- I am an official Mustang Challenge finalist! What more could I want? I planned on buying this horse and I wanted a good relationship with him- I jumped off.

I sent Rave around me while he dragged the bags- the audience cheered. I asked him to come sideways towards me. I backed him by the tail. They cheered again. I ran with him, sending him over a line of jumps. The crowd went wild. I then side passed him over some barrels towards me. That was harder for him as he had to be rational and guide himself. He was really connected to me and had his confidence up, thankfully, because shortly afterwards I ran out of things to do on the ground! I hopped back up and jumped the jumps and even jumped the barrels. The crowd was hooting and whistling. I left the arena delightfully uplifted. I had fun with my horse, and the crowd had fun too.

People ran to us in tears. I knew it was a big moment for my horse and me, but I didn't realize how touching it was for many of those watching. I didn't know it then, but for over a month we had fan mail rolling in from spectators who were moved by our performance and who understood why I had dismounted. I really thought I had tenth. Other trainers rode bridle-less, walked under tarps, did reining spins, roped cows, jumped jumps and drug objects without having to dismount! I was astounded when I placed sixth. Friends watching thought I should have been third. It was sweet but I thought they were biased. When the break down of the judging was released I saw that Ken McNabb, one of the three judges, did indeed place me in third!

The entire experience was incredible and I hope to do it again someday. Helping a Mustang was great, the competition was a blast, and the recognition sure is nice, but the best part was the great relationship I've been able to establish, *and keep*, with this amazing horse!

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