

Steven Drysdale and Sage

Why did I choose a mustang as my first horse? I had heard about wild mustangs and the BLM's adoptions and various programs to control the population. I had thought about adopting but it just didn't seem possible.

After my experiences with my girlfriend's horses: 1) I broke his leg (he is repaired and is doing well), 2) the second one I rode was a nutcase. I decided I wanted a horse that was tough, durable, street smart, having good common sense, without human made psychological issues.

I had talked extensively to the wild horse reps in attendance at Equine Affaire, in Springfield MA. Not long after, Casino, (the nut case: fun to ride but a little whacked), colicked and had to be euthanized, the subject of Mustang came up once again. My girlfriend, Cindy, assured me that she would help me as necessary and said that she felt it would be possible for me to adopt and train a wild mustang without the potential for creating a psychotic or dangerous animal.

I started to watch the BLM's internet adoptions, I had even registered. I learned about halter gentled horses and prison saddle trained horses. I felt that internet was too risky without meeting the horse in person, and the prison programs were too far away, transportation would certainly be an issue. Eventually I learned of the halter gentled horse program thru the BLM links.

Thru her online horse bulletin board she frequents, Cindy noticed that someone posted about gentled Mustangs available for adoption in New Jersey. She contacted the poster, Kim Dore, on the bulletin board who put us in touch with Robin Ravello of USWHBA. We then placed an inquiry about what I was looking for: a horse that was nearly mature and of age to ride, with a large enough build for my 6' frame, and would be reasonable for a beginner to adopt. My biggest fear was getting a horse that was incapable of going for a fun and reasonably brisk ride or one that was so forward that I couldn't get it to settle down for a relaxed, leisurely ride.

I viewed the horses online that were up for special adoption at Cream Ridge NJ. I then spoke to Robin about which of the 2 adult horses would be suitable for me. Before long, we had made arrangements to travel from Cape Cod to New Jersey to meet Sage, a 6 hour drive.

I first saw Sage in with a group of younger, smaller horses; she was larger, as she was 5 years old. Robin spent a lot of time with me answering my extensive questions very patiently. She explained the gentling process and how it prepares the horse for a new owner who will finish the training themselves. I led Sage around the property and was

surprised how calm, willing, and compliant she was. I, the novice, got to walk her down the street, with cars driving by, accompanying Robin and Cindy who were on horseback. I was impressed with her willingness and eagerness to go off the property and her comfort level in doing things that I was told she had never done before.

Returning to the barn, I was told that although Sage had a saddle and bridle she'd never had a rider nor weight on her back. Robin demonstrated her compliance with picking up all 4 feet with only a light tap on her foot at the hairline: we were both very impressed. She was saddled and bridled, and very impressively showed no anxiety. Robin demonstrated the plastic bag test...instead of becoming afraid; she stuck her nose in the bag, hoping for a treat. I thought: wow! This is a wild horse???

After sleeping on it, we returned to the barn where Robin demonstrated a first ride on a smaller mustang, also named Sage. It was completely uneventful and made me gain some confidence. I was mentally preparing to set up the same scenario at home.

We left the farm after filling out the adoption paperwork with plans to return, with trailer, one week later to pick up Sage at Rick's Saddlery in Cream Ridge NJ.. I was scared to death, but confident I could do this.

Once Sage came home we found that she was further along than expected or anticipated. I had been under the impression that the mustang would be gentled to the point that we could approach the animal w/o fear of danger, put a halter on her and lead her. I was pleased that Sage had more training than I'd hoped!

She was essentially a domestic horse in behavior and personality. I was shocked and pleased with the ease that she took to training. With a small amount of longing, that was new to me, she understood direction: forward, back, to the side. There was no rearing, something I feared from a wild animal. There was no challenging a human of authority. I had been apprehensive of there being a battle of wills, there were none? While we did have our stubborn moments, they were easily corrected and seldom repeated.

Within a week and a half I had her saddled, bridled and weight laid across her back. She took it confidently, like it was old hat, I proceeded to the first ride, in a paddock, was shockingly uneventful. The only real issue I noticed was her trying to balance my weight. She was able to take direction from reining and my legs. I had expected several spooks and maybe 1 unscheduled dismount: it never happened. She was only very slightly hesitant to move forward and overall she was eager to comply.

She follows what I call the rule of 3s. First time she is compliant but a bit awkward. Second try with more confidence and deciding what it is that she is doing right. The third time she understands what's expected and from there she perfects it.

She has had some amazing accomplishments in the 3 months since I adopted her. Since that first ride I have taken her on extensive trail rides both with other horses and by herself. She has competed in her first gymkhana earning 2 4th place ribbons in a division of 17 horses, 16 were domestics. She has also done a Parelli group Playday: a poker run with obstacles: dragging a log, water crossing, a steep hill, thru the woods ride and egg and spoon while weaving thru cones. She aced it all! The second half of the Playday was a trail race! While her time was not so good, she did her race solo, and her egg and spoon was done bareback: a first for Sage, and me, and she did it perfectly. I would call that a great success.

She has had an 18 wheeler pass her on a roadside: with no response, she has eaten ice cream during a trail ride, and enjoyed it, she has given lead line rides with 8 and 10 year old children and then their terrified mother, has had no trailering issues while travelling with 2 domestics, dealt with our assisting a screaming 8 year old after his bike accident out in the woods, barking dogs, fireworks, motorcycles and miscellaneous other trail perils: all with thought, grace, and bravery. Even when she's not sure, she does as asked.

She has mastered walk, trot, lope and gallop with traditional cues and voice commands and she takes whoa to heart...I have to remember to pay attention! She finishes her rides with a good spray down with the hose, while ground tied, even in her face.

I think I made a great choice in my decision to adopt a mustang. I think it s going exceptionally well. I would do it again and I highly recommend others to try it: especially a horse that has been halter gentled. I have not once felt threatened or endangered by this horse. I have experienced awe and pleasure in her stellar work ethic and her striving to do whatever it is I ask of her. (Including her trip into the breezeway of the house!)

Many thanks to Robin and Mike of the USWHBA for their patience, explanations, reassurance for myself, and mostly for the great foundation that that they gave Sage. They have the ability to create a safe and exciting horse.

I would like to thank the BLM for caring enough about these animals to attempt to place them into homes and supporting this halter gentled horse program. This program makes an adoption success much more of a reality to a novice like myself. This is an experience I am likely to repeat and can sincerely recommend to others.