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Building trust and respect

Athens man prepares for Supreme Extreme Mustang Makeover

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Athens — Editor's Note: The following interview with Ray Weathered is the second of three in a series. The writer, Jean Riggs, is a long-time horse enthusiast, who in parts of the writing discusses her own experiences with Weathered.

Ray Weathered of Athens is set to compete in the Supreme Extreme Mustang Makeover which takes place in Fort Worth, on Aug. 13 through Aug. 14. There is \$100,000 in prize money for the winners.

Just a few days into the training, the black mare broke Ray's right arm with a quick strike of her front hoof. After a 3-week delay, the training continues, but with the sorrel gelding.

At this day of the meeting between Ray and myself, we are taking Katahdin out for his first ride. I trailered one of my horses to his place, saddled him up, and was ready to ride.

As I watched Ray and his brother Tim Weathered from Mabank prepare the mustang for the ride, I had to reflect on all the things one takes for granted when getting ready to ride their trained horse.

First, Ray led the Mustang to a stock stall. It is just big enough for one horse, like putting a calf through a chute. Getting him into the stall took a lot of work and patience.

Tim had the lead rope, applying constant pressure to move him forward. Ray had his training stick to gently tap and urge him forward. Katahdin was confused, scared and resisting.

Slowly, one reluctant step at a time, and success!

Next came the removal of the flat halter used for catching, and on with a knotted rope halter for better control of the horse.

Horses, are typically very head-shy. Multiply that by about 100, and now you have a wild horse. They do not like their ears being handled, their faces touched, or movement over their heads.

Patience leads to trust. It is a process that not everyone is cut out for, but these brothers are real pros.

During this entire time, there was not one harsh word uttered, no raised voices, no jerking, pulling or hitting – simply allowing the horse to understand, and learn to trust these humans who mean him no harm.

Next came the bareback pad which is basically a saddle pad with a girth strap.

Putting the pad on his back was not too traumatic but cinching the girth strap was another story.

Still in the stock, with Tim holding the rope, Ray used a long tool with a slight hook on it to reach under the horse and bring the cinch under his belly. It took a couple of tries, moving very slowly so as not to spook an already nervous horse.

Ray slowly cinched up the pad, inch-by-inch, allowing the horse to get used to the pressure, and the feel of a strap under his belly.

While Katahdin settled into his new gear, the rest of us mounted up to get ready for the ride.

“The competition will be somewhat similar to that of the Extreme Mustang Makeover,” explained Ray Weatherad, “which requires the trainer to ride the horse through a series of obstacles, and complete basic maneuvers, such as a walk, trot and lope, stop and back.

“It will also include a horsemanship and trail riding component, as well as a challenging cow work sequence.”

It is obvious that Ray has a long way to go, and little time to get there, but extreme patience, persistence and experience are his keys to success.

Ray and Tim Weatherad rode two of Tim's mules experienced at “ponying” another horse.

Tim looped the lead rope around his saddle horn, and left for some road, trail and obstacle work.

Katahdin responded very well, accepting the lead rope and the other horses and mules riding along side and behind him.

Tim's 13-year-old granddaughter, Madison, joined us on the ride. We rode on black top, sandy roads, gravel roads, also riding through ditches, around “horse-eating” mail boxes, barking dogs and trash cans.

We rode through meadows, trails, trees, up and down steep gullies, through water, belly-high weeds, and then back to Ray's place.

It was hot, and it was humid. But, Ray and Tim are cool as cucumbers answering and chatting on their cell phones several times during the ride.

Ray has several obstacles set up outside the arena that challenged Katahdin before he was returned to the arena. Of all the obstacles, walking over and through a pile of old tires proved to be the most challenging.

Each time, he was led through the tires by Tim on his mule.

“The first few times there was a lot of resistance, but steady pressure and patience...waiting on the horse...not making him accept the challenge is the goal,” said Tim.

Then, suddenly, Katahdin figures it out, and he walks through with no resistance. Success – for both the horse

and trainer.

After a few more successful passes, we moved back to the arena. Did I mention it was hot?

Well, the training for the day was not over. Back in the arena, with Tim still on his mule, he worked with passing ropes and other obstacles over the mustang's head.

Fear was eventually replaced with trust, and the lesson was almost over for the day. Now, all Ray had to do was to remove the bareback pad, and exchange the rope halter for the flat halter, so that Katahdin goes right back to where he started, in the stock. The resistance this time was greatly reduced.

After the tack process was complete, it was time for Katahdin's shower.

Afterwards, Ray led Katahdin out into the open field, and worked with him for about five minutes. He was able to conquer the mustang's fear by petting him on the head and ears.

"The trust and respect is building each day," Ray said. "And, with each day comes more opportunities for a Supreme Extreme Mustang Makeover."