

Athens Review, Athens, Texas

August 6, 2010

Gettin' ready to 'dance'

Horse and trainer get ready for Supreme Extreme Mustang Make-Over

Jean Riggs

The Athens Review

Athens — Editor's Note: The following interview with Ray Weathered is the third of four 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 at the moment of the interview.

The big dance is scheduled for Aug. 13 and Aug. 14 in Fort Worth. However, it won't be your traditional dance between two humans dancing to music on a dance floor.

Local horse trainer Ray Weathered and his 6-year-old Mustang, Katahdin, from Cedar Mountain, Utah, have accepted the invitation to dance.

The Supreme Extreme Mustang Make-Over is actually a dance contest with the winners taking home \$100,000. It is also being billed as the World's Richest Wild Horse Competition in history.

Tickets for the big event are available online at www.extrememustangmakeover.com/supremeextreme.php

Ray and Kahtadin have had 90 days to prepare for the competition. They will be among 83 other Mustangs competing for the cash.

Weathered explained that the analogy is appropriate.

"Training a horse is like learning to dance," he said. "One partner has to lead, and the other has to follow. The winning combination is when the trainer leads, and the horse follows."

Although the leader suffered a minor setback when the other Mustang he adopted, a black mare from Lost Creek, Wyo., broke his right wrist with a swift forward strike of her front hoof.

She was quickly eliminated as a partner, and Weathered focused his attention on the gelding, Katahdin, who is coming along just fine.

"Respect without fear," said Weathered. "That's the key to developing trust."

Katahdin has come a long way in a short time. He and Ray practice their "dance steps" everyday.

"Anything you teach a horse on the right side, must then be taught on the left side," explained Weathered.

“That is the way their brain works. But you can't teach them anything until you get them to thinking, instead of just reacting to the lessons, you are teaching them.”

This long, tall Texan is calm, patient, soft-spoken, but insistent that the Mustang learns to listen, and follow his lead.

“You want that horse to be thinking about you at all times. If his attention drifts, you snap him back. It might make him mad, but he is thinking about you, and what you are doing. And that is where the respect and trust are established.”

The transition during the past 80 days has been amazing. No longer does Katahdin have to be coaxed and held in a stock while he is being saddled. He stands patiently in the middle of the round pen while Ray grooms him, fly-sprays him and saddles him.

Ray puts him through his paces without a rope attached to his halter. Katahdin has learned to follow the lead of his trainer.

With less than 10 days to the big dance contest, Ray and Katahdin were preparing for the first real ride with Ray on his back. As I sat and watched the two doing their usual morning warm-up, it was apparent the two had developed a real partnership.

Katahdin was glistening in the sun like a pretty, shiny, copper penny. He has really filled out, and his coat and body-conditioning is beautiful. He stood patiently as Ray rubbed the saddle pad on first the right, then left side, in preparation for the ride. Next came the saddle and the bridle.

Ray worked flexing him left and right, releasing the pressure with the slightest give by the horse.

“Horses learn from the release of pressure,” explained Weatherhead.

Then he ran a rope through the bridle, over the saddle, and left it taunt.

“Now, he is going to teach himself vertical flex. When he wants released from the pressure, all he has to do is lower his head. That way, when you pick up on the reins, he should lower his head, which makes for a safer ride.”

So Ray took a break, and we just chatted as we watched Katahdin teach himself vertical flex.

“When I first came out of the Army, I took a job at a Thoroughbred Farm in Maryland. One of my jobs was to take the stallions to the breeding area where the mares were kept,” Ray said. “There were two stallions on the farm that had killed their handlers. One had killed two handlers, and the one I was leading to the mare had killed one handler and injured several others.”

He described the big chain hooked to the halter, and the spike that was put up the nostril to control the animal.

On one such occasion, he had led the stallion to the mare, and when he reared up, the spike came out of the nostril.

“That stallion looked at me, then looked at the mare, then reached over and grabbed me by the collar of my coat, and was shaking me around like a rag doll,” Ray said. “I shucked out of that coat, and ran for the door, thinking there has got to be a better way to make a living.”

It was time to ride. As Ray prepared to mount, he smacked the saddle, smacked his hind-end, yanked on the stirrups, jumped up and down by his side, stepped into the stirrup, and waited to make sure it was safe. Then, he swung his leg over, and he was mounted.

During all the maneuvers, Katahdin jumped or spooked a few times, but he never ran off. As Ray mounted, Katahdin stood perfectly still. Ray began to gently bump his sides with his boots (no spurs) to teach him to move forward.

There were a few spooks, but always in place, because he trusted Ray – trust without fear. When Ray dismounted again, the horse stood absolutely still.

Another 15 minutes of ground work elapsed, teaching Katahdin to walk over a tarp that was spread out on the ground.

If you were waiting to hear about a bucking bronc ride, you will have to go to the rodeo. That is not the way this trainer breaks his horses. When the work is done, Ray leads Katahdin out to a grassy area, and sits with him as he grazes. This is Katahdin's reward for a job well done.

"You know it is going to be tough to get him where he needs to be for the competition with only 10 days to ride, but that is my fault with this broken wrist. He has so much 'try' in him that he deserves a chance to win. I am going to see to it he gets it."

They will be doing the Texas Two Step all the way to Fort Worth.