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Katahdin hits the jackpot

Ray Weatherhead competes with horse in Supreme Extreme Mustang Makeover

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The Athens Review

Athens — Editor's note: The following is the last of a 4-part series of interviews by Jean Riggs with mustang horse trainer Ray Weatherhead of Athens. The writer discusses in parts of the report her own experiences with Weatherhead at the moment of the interview.

Katahdin, a horse owned and trained by Ray Weatherhead of Athens, and 99 other Mustangs adopted last April, hit the Jackpot.

They were rescued from a fate of "long-term" holding.

Once a Mustang reaches the age of 6 years-old, they are deemed unadoptable, and are given a numbered freeze brand, and sent to long-term holding.

Since horses live to be well into their 20s, and some into their 30s, the reality of long-term holding is spending many, many years in a holding lot. That is the reason the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Extreme Mustang Make-Over Program (for 2 - 4 year-old horses) decided to give these 6 year-olds another shot with the Supreme Extreme Mustang Makeover.

A total of 100 trainers were accepted from hundreds of applications to be allowed to bid on these Mustangs. The auction was carried live on RFD-TV, and with prize money of \$100,000, this is The World's Richest Wild Horse Competition.

The typical Mustang adoption fee is \$125. However with this being an auction, some of these horses fetched a great deal more money, some over \$3,000. Horses and trainers came from all over the U.S. to bring their Mustang to Fort Worth last weekend for the competition.

Eighty of the Mustangs came to compete, along with Katahdin and local horse trainer Ray Weatherhead.

There were four rounds of competition. The first two were conducted on the morning of Friday, Aug. 13.

On the Basic Trail Course, the trainers rode their Mustangs through an obstacle course.

The first time Katahdin and Ray were announced, a mention was made of the horse's training being delayed because of Ray's broken arm (which he still has in a brace), and the fact his first ride was only 10 days before the competition.

Everyone was amazed at the calmness of the horse, and how he and Ray worked as a team with the trust and respect they had invested in each other.

They scored very high on this event.

Judges for this event were all well-known trainers, clinicians and horse people in their own right. Among them was Craig Cameron, who had just recently adopted a Mustang from Paul's Valley, Okla.

Craig had devoted two of his regularly-scheduled shows on RFD-TV on the selection, adoption and training requirements for a Mustang.

I asked him how his Mustang was doing.

"He's doing just fine," Cameron said. "It's coming along real good. I am thinking about doing another show on him to document his progress."

Then I asked him what he thought of the Mustang Make Over events.

"You know, it's just a lot of fun for the trainers, the horses," he said. "And the spectators really enjoy watching the results of only 90 days of training. These horses are tough and wild and much older. It's just fun for everybody, and the horses are the real winners."

Later that afternoon, the second round of competition began. This was Basic Riding Skills that required the horse and rider to respond to instructions from the announcer to walk, trot, lope and stop the horses.

No one would have ever guessed the limited number of times Katahdin had been ridden based upon his performance.

As the next round of events were scheduled for the morning of Saturday, Aug. 14, Katahdin was bathed, groomed, fed and allowed to rest in his stall until the next morning.

My friend, Glynda Wolf and I stopped by the BLM, Extreme Mustang Make Over booth to purchase a T-shirt. The lady behind the desk asked me how "my man" was doing.

I looked a little puzzled, and she asked if I was with the man that just had 10 rides on his horse. I replied to the affirmative.

She went on to say how impressed they were with him, and the fact that he gave his horse a chance to compete.

Before we left for the day, I stopped by to visit Ray, his horse, Katahdin and his fans in the barn. One lady, introduced simply as Mary, was busy on her laptop.

I was telling Ray about the encounter with the BLM folks and was still puzzled how she knew I was there to cover him. Mary spoke up, and said she had loaded all the articles I had written on the event to Face Book, and had forwarded them to the BLM Extreme Mustang Make Over site.

She said the BLM had posted a link to my articles for the Athens Daily Review, and that was how they knew of me and my connection with Ray and Katahdin.

Saturday morning brought two more rounds of competition. The first was the Maneuvers' Competition that incorporated reining-horse patterns.

While Katahdin and Ray did not have time to perfect the "flying lead change," they turned in a very respectable score.

The final round of competition was Cow Work.

"This ought to be interesting," Ray said. "Katahdin has never even laid eyes on a cow."

I offered to rent a cow suit and hang out in the stall. Ray laughed saying, "Somehow, I don't think it will help."

This is a timed event, and there were many that timed out, or their horses were terrified of the calf.

Again, no one would have ever guessed that Ray and Katahdin had not worked with cows, as he completed the task with time to spare.

It was bath time for Katahdin, and his time to rest up for the evening event, while everyone waited for the scores to be posted, and the top-20 horse-and-rider teams to be named.

At 4 p.m. all the trainers gathered on the arena floor to hear the placement announcement, and for the top-20 to draw for order in the Free Style Competition.

We all waited in the stands with our fingers crossed, and kept our hopes high that Ray and Katahdin would make the cut.

As each "hip number" (number painted on horse and tag on rider) was announced, we kept waiting for the announcement to come over the loud speaker: "Our next finalist is Hip Number 71."

It never came. Ray and Katahdin had finished just out of the Top-20 at number 21.

What a remarkable experience. But it did not end there. Ray said that all the horses that did not make the top 20 were going to be turned loose into the main arena for one last run with the herd.

At 6 p.m., the National Anthem began playing, the gates opened and thundering hooves of the American Mustangs rang out as they ran full speed into the arena. They were so impressive. Our hearts were beating loudly, and with great pride as the horse that took the lead was none other than Katahdin.

Everyone was cheering this phenomenal sight, and we were cheering Katahdin.

All of these horses were winners, and they are all rolling in the green, some in the money, but all in greener pastures.

No longer were they destined to a long-term holding pen, but to a long life with a loving family as a riding or ranch horse.

Each mustang now holds the special title as competitors in the Bureau of Land Management's very first Supreme Extreme Mustang Make-Over.