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Richest wild horse competition ever

Local man undergoes ultimate 120-day wild mustang training competition

Jean Riggs

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Athens — Editor's Note: The following interview with Ray Weatherhead is the first 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 Weatherhead.

Ray Weatherhead of Athens is hoping his investment as an adopter of the iconic American Mustang will turn into a \$50,000 win during the \$100,000 Supreme Extreme Mustang Makeover to be held in Fort Worth, Aug. 13 through Aug. 14.

The Supreme Extreme Mustang Makeover is the richest wild horse competition in history, and is modeled after the highly-successful Extreme Mustang Makeover begun in 2007.

However, unlike the Extreme Mustang Makeover where trained horses are made available to the public for adoption after the event, adoption of the competition horses was instead required prior to the event.

Only trainers were allowed to adopt these older wild horses, and their applications had to be pre-approved prior to the auction.

“Another big difference was that this group of mustangs was older, at 6 years-old, than the usual 3 to 4 years-old,” said Weatherhead. “Older horses are generally harder to adopt and are usually headed for long-term holding at this age, so the Supreme Extreme was created to add value to those older horses.”

Weatherhead adopted a 6 year-old Mustang Gelding and Mare gathered from the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) herd management area (HMA) during a televised adoption event hosted by the Mustang Heritage Foundation on April 24.

Now, he is in the process of training the wild horse to compete in the event offering \$50,000 to the winner.

A total of 108 horses were adopted, and trainers will have about 120 days to get their new charges in shape for the competition.

After bringing the mustangs to Athens and working with them for several days, Weatherhead decided to train the black mustang mare for the competition.

Those plans changed abruptly after she broke his right arm. A right-handed Weatherhead now has an additional challenge for the competition. Ray was reaching for her halter while her head was down, and a quick strike of her front hoof snapped his arm. Ray is now working with the sorrel mustang gelding.

"Katahdin is coming around real good", said Weatherhead.

You can find Ray out in his arena every morning with the mustangs.

On one particular morning, I joined Ray in the arena to watch the training techniques he uses with these magnificent, wild horses. We had spoken on the phone several times but this was my first meeting with Ray.

He is the stereotypical long, tall Texan, and a real southern gentleman. Weatherhead is soft-spoken, patient, calm and very knowledgeable of what it takes to make a great horse trainer.

Gone are the days of the wild-bronc buster, throwing a saddle on a wild horse, and riding it into submission.

Ray's techniques instill trust and mutual respect between horse and trainer, and he has been training this way for nearly 40 years.

As we sat in plastic chairs in a shady part of the arena, we were joined by his barn kitty, Missy.

The feeding trough was on the ground just inches away from our feet. If they want that feed, the horses have to get up close and personal, thus instilling the trust needed to further the training process.

As we sat and chatted about his various methods and techniques, it was as if I was listening to Clinton Anderson, Pat Parelli and Craig Cameron, all rolled into one.

Looking around the arena, there was the familiar tarp, plastic bags tied everywhere, training stick and other tools used by these popular trainers.

"We all do about the same basic training, and add our personal favorite techniques," Ray explained.

Natural Horsemanship Training is the style these pros use. Trust, respect and patience is the name of the game.

"The Bureau of Land Management is keenly interested in seeing how the public responds to his event, and these older horses," said BLM Wild Horse and Burro Division Chief Don Glenn. "The BLM has enjoyed a partnership with the Mustang Heritage Foundation that has resulted in one the most successful adoption programs in our history. And having an outlet for the older horses is yet another avenue to offer protection to these treasured animals."

Will Ray make the deadline? He hasn't given up, though he is easily three weeks behind. He is learning to do a lot of things left-handed.

I kidded Ray saying that any good trainer could work that mustang with one arm tied behind his back.

In his usual good-natured way, Ray just chuckled.

Watch in the near future for the next update to Ray's progress. We will saddle up, and take the mustang out of the arena for his first ride!