

## Mustangs A Family Project

We are a family of eight living in western Washington. About two years ago, several of our children became interested in owning and training horses. We contacted the Backcountry Horsemen organization, and were referred to Tom Moore and Vonnie Halvorson who are volunteers with BLM.

They invited us over to see their 20 mustangs at their farm about 25 miles away. We noted that their horses were tamed, affectionate, and well-mannered. Tom showed Martin (age 13) some basic training tips and techniques for using the round pen to help gentle and desensitize newly acquired mustangs. Thirteen-year old Martin was hooked! After months of yard work and various odd jobs, he had finally saved enough to purchase a 6-foot high by 40-foot diameter round pen, and also built a small barn with heavy-duty gates and fencing leading into the pen.



In April 2002, we attended our first BLM adoption event in Canby, Oregon, to observe the selection and bidding process, and also to confirm that our application and facilities were acceptable. The following month, we traveled to the BLM adoption in Yakima, Washington, intent on adopting our first mustang. We ended up coming home with two wild horses! One was a 4-year old sorrel gelding that Martin called Dan, and the other was a yearling filly that our daughter Margaret (age 9) named Sagebrush. The yearling, even though easily spooked, was halter-broke in a few days.

The gelding was a different story. Probably because of his age, it took more than two weeks before Dan would let anyone even touch him. Martin, at times, was discouraged, but kept working with the horse in the round pen. He used a plastic bag tied to a long stick to help the horse overcome its fear of new and strange things, as well as a lunge line to “send” the horse away. When Dan began to tire of running in circles and lowered his head, we knew he was ready to approach Martin and begin to form a relationship with him.

By the third week, Martin was able to handle all four feet. After a month, the horse was ready for a saddle and trips outside the round pen on nearby trails. Only once did Dan really surprise us, when Margaret casually dropped a lead rope near Dan’s feet. The horse mistook the coiled object for a snake and immediately began to spin, buck and stomp the unwelcome intruder. Martin,



who was on Dan's back at the time, likened the whole experience to a good ride at the county fair. Dan was ridden all summer long and, by Thanksgiving Day, Martin's 90-year old great-grandpa was riding him. We also decorated Dan with tinsel and rode him in the Christmas parade of 2002. In March 2003, Martin enrolled Dan in a roping-training program. The trainer noted that the horse had excellent ground manners and adapted well to the strenuous regime.

In April 2003, we adopted our third mustang at the BLM adoption in Canby, Oregon. We named him "Starbucks." He is a 3-1/2-year-old dark bay with white stockings on all four feet and a star pattern on his forehead. We thought at first that the horse would be a difficult challenge. When first off-loaded into the round pen, the horse was terrified and attempted to climb out of the enclosure. After a long session with the lunge line, however, Starbucks quickly settled down. It was interesting to note that our young mare, Sage, quickly let the newcomer know that she was in charge. After several days of training, Starbucks was ready for a saddle and short trail rides.

Several people have been impressed with Martin's ability to work with animals and have asked for his assistance with difficult or problem horses. Martin has observed that it is harder to work with abused domestic horses or horses with bad habits than it is to work with a wild one. However, he enjoys the challenge. Martin especially appreciates mustangs because they are sure-footed, balanced, smart and free of pre-existing problems that required unlearning. Our entire family is very impressed with these animals; they're great horses and faithful friends.

We have had many funny experiences with the horses, including the night Sage somehow got a stainless-steel bucket handle stuck in her long tail. The clanging of the bucket against the metal round pen made quite a racket and quickly got our attention.

One evening, during Christmas season 2002--barely six months after adopting the wild horses--the kids put on a play in the backyard. Our mustangs, Dan and Sage, were joined by a neighbor's horse and served as "camels" carrying the three wise men through the woods to a nativity scene. There was an angel standing on top of the barn blowing a trumpet, plenty of singing, lights, sound, and great acting, and yet the horses took it all in stride and were a featured attraction. This was all put on for about 50 friends and neighbors.

The horses are doted on much of the day by our own kids as well as the neighborhood children. They all brush, ride and feed them and muck out the barn. They are also a good opportunity for the children to learn responsibility and a great challenge.

- Adopter Testimonial -