

# Mustang makeovers

## 200 wild horses from Nevada begin journey from feral to friendly

By **Pamela LeBlanc**

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Monday, March 31, 2008

ELGIN — Two hundred wild mustangs stamp and snort, eager to escape the 18-wheelers that have carried them on a two-day journey from rural Nevada to Central Texas.

With a clank and a rumble, the door at the back of one of four tractor-trailers rolls up. Fifty horses pause, curious. Then they charge down a ramp, pushing and shoving their way into a series of holding pens at Southwest Stallion Station, one of the largest equine breeding farms in Texas.

For the next two months, the mustangs will get used to pasture life. Then they'll be handed over to volunteer trainers, who will have 90 days to transform the horses into riding companions as part of a competition designed to showcase these icons of the American West. Afterward, the gentled horses can be adopted by the trainers or will be put up for public auction.

It's called the Extreme Mustang Makeover. Last year the Mustang Heritage Foundation, led by Bertram cowgirl Patti Colbert, found homes for about 100 mustangs through the program, which culminated last fall with a competition and auction in Fort Worth. This year, the program expands to five contests across the country, including one featuring these yearlings, unloaded last week outside Elgin.

"This is a blue-collar horse," Colbert says of the mustangs, glorified in countless Westerns and the namesake of Ford's favorite muscle car. "For us to give them a format where they can become stars is so cool."

Most of these yearlings are the offspring of mares rounded up on public-held lands in Nevada. Some were born in holding pens, but they haven't been handled or touched. They have been vaccinated and the males gelded.

The Mustang Heritage Foundation now needs prospective trainers, both amateur and professional, to take over. But it's more challenging to break a wild mustang than a typical domestic horse. They're more wary and have a stronger fight-or-flight instinct. It takes experience and special skills, but the investment can transform both horse and human.

"I tell folks it's kind of like going to the animal shelter. You may not know the history of the dog; you may even be seeing a coyote. But just because they don't have their papers doesn't mean they're not quality animals," Colbert says.

Colbert has worked in the horse industry for more than 30 years, teaching riding lessons and working for the American Quarter Horse Association. She and her husband, Joe, now run Colbert Ranch in Bertram. As the horses streamed off the trucks last week, she practically vibrated with enthusiasm.

"Look at the buckskins!" she hollered as a trio of dun-colored horses with black manes and tails trotted down the ramp and kicked up dust in a holding pen. The mix also includes bays, sorrels, appaloosas and a palomino. "I have a horse disorder; my addiction is horses," Colbert acknowledges.

Mustangs are descended from domestic horses brought to America by early Spanish conquistadors. By 1900, more than 2 million feral horses roamed the southwestern United States. They're known for their hardy dispositions and majestic appearance.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management protects and manages the animals under the Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act of 1971. The agency estimates that 29,000 wild horses and burros roam public rangelands in 10 states.

But overpopulation is a problem. Mustangs living on federal lands cannot be sterilized there or hunted. The horses have virtually no natural predators, and herd size can double every four years. The land cannot support all the horses, and several thousand must be rounded up each year to keep herds from overpopulating and starving to death. Those animals are offered for adoption or sale.

"We've got to get America to understand that neutering is appropriate to the management of these horses," Colbert says. "The unwanted horse situation in America is huge."

The Bureau of Land Management created the Mustang Heritage Foundation six years ago to boost adoptions of wild horses. Last year was the first for the Extreme Mustang Makeover, with 100 trainers competing for \$20,000 in cash prizes. Horses are judged based on body composition and skills such as walking on a lead and getting in and out of a trailer.

In most cases, the results are impressive. A trainer in last year's contest revved a chainsaw and whirled it overhead as he rode his mustang around the show ring to demonstrate its fearlessness. The top horse landed \$50,000 at auction, and most sold for about \$3,000. That's much more than the \$125 untrained mustangs sell for when bought directly from the government.

More than 218,000 wild horses and burros have been adopted nationally since the Bureau of Land Management program began in 1973. The agency screens bidders to try to keep horses out of the hands of people who plan to sell them to be slaughtered. "But a challenge that the BLM has had is they've got many more horses than applicants," Colbert says.

The Mustang Heritage Foundation is funded through corporate sponsorships, donations and government grants. Southwest Stallion Station is donating hay and feed for the yearlings during their two-month stay, and the foundation pays for use of the facility.

Mustangs are easiest to train when they are young. Yearlings such as those unloaded in Elgin last week are smaller — 600 or 700 pounds — than the 1,100 or 1,200 pounds an adult mustang can put into challenging a trainer. And they respond better to training techniques than older horses.

Colbert, who arrived the morning the horses were unloaded with "Mustang Sally" blaring from her truck's stereo system, adopted a mustang two years ago. Migo is now used as a recreational riding horse at the Colbert Ranch. "To give an animal a good home makes a better animal and a better person," Colbert says.

Gayle Graham, business manager of Southwest Stallion Station, adopted a mustang, too. She and her husband, veterinarian Charles Graham, who owns and operates Southwest Stallion Station, adopted a dark bay named Maze at last year's Extreme Mustang Makeover auction.

The horses all carry a coded freeze brand on their necks that identifies them as wild mustangs. "That's kind of our Coca-Cola brand," Colbert says. "It differentiates them from all other horses."

For now, the yearlings in Elgin have been divided into smaller groups and released into pastures. They'll be handled as little as possible until they are claimed by trainers in late May. So far, about 40 people have turned in applications to train them.

"They're in excellent shape, even better than I expected," says Tyler Graham, manager of the facility. "We're off to a really good start."

Behind him, the mustangs frolic, happy to be free of the trailers and roaming grassy fields once again.

### **Adopting a mustang**

To apply to train one of the 200 yearlings available through the Mustang Heritage Foundation's Extreme Yearling Makeover, fill out an application at [www.mustangheritagefoundation.org](http://www.mustangheritagefoundation.org) and mail it to P.O. Box 703, Bertram, TX 78605. Applicants must have a trailer to transport their horse and adequate facilities to keep it. Selection is based on experience, and applicants can train up to four yearlings. Horses are assigned through a lottery and must be picked up May 23-24.

Trainers will have 90 days to train their animals before the Extreme Yearling Makeover, Mission: 007 in Fort Worth from Sept. 18-21, where more than \$20,000 in prizes will be awarded. Trainers are reimbursed \$200 for each horse they train. They can keep the horse at no cost or put it up for public auction at the Fort Worth event.

For more information, go to [www.mustangheritagefoundation.org](http://www.mustangheritagefoundation.org) or call (512) 355-3225. For more information about the Bureau of Land Management's Wild Horse and Burro Program, go to [wildhorseandburro.blm.gov](http://wildhorseandburro.blm.gov) or call (866) 468-7826.

[pleblanc@statesman.com](mailto:pleblanc@statesman.com); 445-3994