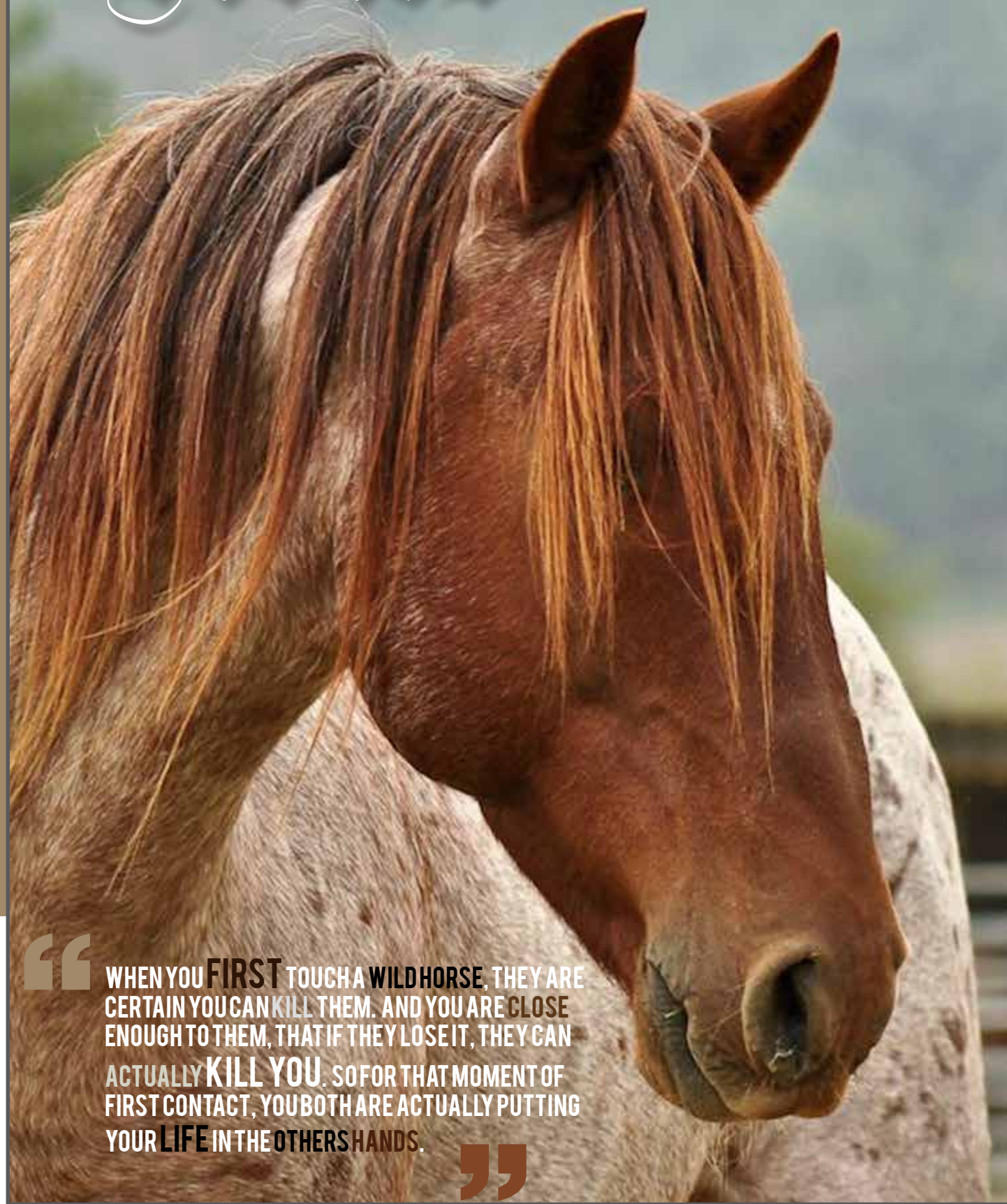


“Aries”



“WHEN YOU FIRST TOUCH A WILD HORSE, THEY ARE CERTAIN YOU CAN KILL THEM. AND YOU ARE CLOSE ENOUGH TO THEM, THAT IF THEY LOSE IT, THEY CAN ACTUALLY KILL YOU. SO FOR THAT MOMENT OF FIRST CONTACT, YOU BOTH ARE ACTUALLY PUTTING YOUR LIFE IN THE OTHERS HANDS.”

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To the Heart of a Mustang:

Lessons from a

Wild Horse

Written by
KATHRYN BARRETT
HEARTOFAMUSTANG.WORDPRESS.COM

To gentle a wild horse is a unique experience. You can touch them with ropes and brushes and bamboo poles, but when you touch them with your hand, they can feel your pulse. They know you are alive, and it changes them. My friend and mustang trainer, Lena, put it best. “When you first touch a wild horse, they are certain you can kill them. And you are close enough to them, that if they lose it, they can actually kill you. So for that moment of first contact, you both are actually putting your life in the others hands.” This was exactly what I felt when I first put my hand on the forehead of my twelve year old wild mustang, Aries. Time actually stood still for that moment. Both he and I held our breath and trusted the other.

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MARCIE LEWIS
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Back in October 2010, I visited the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) Wild Horse and Burro Corrals to select a wild horse. The horses from this region have diverse origins with a lot of draft, morgan, and quarter horse influences. But unlike most other wild mustangs in the United States, these horses have a gene marker for “Old Spanish” blood. According to a genetic study, the Twin Peaks mustangs have the “D-dek” marker gene that is also found in Kiger mustangs, a type of mustang that has strong Spanish roots. So running wild across northern California are horses that look like they belong in the fields of Andalusia.

I was out to find a mustang that would be the star of a film project I was planning. I would publish weekly videos following the gentling and training of a wild horse. American Mustangs are a threatened breed. Because of various political circumstances, their future as part of the American West is not guaranteed. If they are not continuously protected, this unique and iconic treasure will be gone. I wanted to share the story of one horse so that people would see how incredible mustangs are and would be moved to help secure their future running wild. I called the project To the Heart of a Mustang. I had no way of knowing how perfect that title would be.

I saw over 1,000 horses that weekend in October, but one horse in

particular caught my attention. He was with a group of stallions that were being held separately for possible release. This red roan stood proudly and looked for all the world like an Iberian horse. I was told that because he was part of the turn-out group, I could not have him. But I was set on getting him.

When selecting a wild horse, you can't get up close and touch them or get to know them. The only information you can go on is how they interact with the other horses, how they look, and most importantly the feeling you get from them. It really comes down to just knowing that that is the horse for you. I was told I couldn't have him, but as I drove home, I picked out his name: Aries.

Several months passed, several phone calls were exchanged. The BLM was not going to return all of the stallions, so it was possible Aries might stay. January 2011 came and was about to go when I got a call. This fiery red roan was staying. He was mine.

It still took several more months of agonizing waiting before I was cleared to retrieve my beautiful new mustang. Getting an older mustang was a dicey proposition. Each horse is unique and sometimes even young mustangs don't gentle very well. So getting an older mustang was a big risk. But I just knew. I knew he would be fine. On Friday, May 13th, 2011, a friend and I drove all night to pick Aries up.

We left at two in the morning, set to arrive at the corrals at 8 am when they opened. I was picking up Aries and a young two year old gelding who would later be named Dakota. I was going to gentle Dakota and find him a home and keep Aries for myself. When we arrived at the corrals, the horses had already been separated from the rest of the herd and were waiting in a holding pen. Once all of the paperwork and contracts were signed, we backed the trailer up to the opening of a chute. The two horses were sent through the chute where their neck tags were removed before they were loaded into the trailer. No halters. Just bare horse. We hauled them loose in a small stock trailer. This is the safest way to transport a wild horse, giving them as much freedom as possible.

It would be six long hours before we arrived home. About 30 minutes away from the barn, Aries let out a huge kick against the side of the trailer. He was good and ready to be out of there. We backed the trailer up to the edge of the pens where he and Dakota would live, and once we secured the fence panels to the sides of the trailer, we opened the trailer door and let the horses out into their new home.

ARIES WAS WILDER THAN ANY MUSTANG I HAD EVER WORKED WITH. He was wild, but sensible. He didn't try to throw himself over fences or charge me, but he wanted

nothing to do with me at all. When I'd come into the pen, he'd watch me like I was a lion- his face stoney, body rigid, and he never let his guard down.

I kept Aries in a small paddock with an attached round pen, both with six foot high fencing. The BLM requires that all mustangs be housed with six foot fencing until they are gentle. When I'd work Aries in the round pen, I couldn't get very close to him, so I had to get creative about working with him from a distance. Some days I would just go sit in his pen and read a book. In the beginning, he would stand on the far side of the pen. To anyone watching, it would have probably looked like he was just taking a nap, resting one hind leg, tail swishing at flies. But he was in no way relaxed. He'd have one eye and one ear on me at all times. I could see him glance at me from the corner of his eye. I was always the center of his attention whether it looked like it or not.

OCCASIONALLY HE'D WALK AROUND BEHIND ME AND SNEAK UP, STRETCHING HIS NOSE OUT TO GET A WHIFF OF MY HAIR.

A wild horse forces you to do a lot of things that we take for granted with a domestic horse. One of the most important lessons I learned by working with Aries was to reward "the thought." When I was trying to explain to him that I wanted him to yield his hind end away from me, crossing the hind leg underneath, I released the request if he even shifted his weight in the direction I wanted. When asking for something like a step, we forget how many little steps there are that lead up to that big step with the leg. By rewarding the thought or the smallest movement, I gave Aries validation that his thought was correct well before he ever moved. This gave him confidence that he was reading my requests correctly, and our communication began to build. He began to respond to me like we were communicating instead of like I was a predator out to kill him.

HE WAS SO AWARE OF EVERYTHING, ALL THE TIME. Being wild for over a decade, his instincts and senses were very sharp. Nothing got past him. In some ways this was a challenge, but it actually made working with him quite simple. If I was clear and direct, Aries would give me exactly what I asked for. The trick for me was to be absolutely clear. There are times where I would be unsure about how to ask Aries to do something... how do I get him to change direction through the circle? He could sense this indecisiveness and this made him go on alert. But all horses are this way. **THEY CAN SEE WHAT'S IN YOUR HEART** as well as what you are saying with your body. If those two messages don't match, it's unsettling for the horse. Again, a wild horse will force you to be congruent in your thinking where as a domestic horse may just ignore your mixed messages.

If I was unfocused, he wouldn't work



“...I KNEW THAT WHAT I WAS ASKING WOULD NOT HARM HIM, BUT ARIES THOUGHT THAT IF I TOUCHED HIM, HE WOULD DIE..”



with me at all. He would just evade me. If I was clear and happy, he was quite willing to pay attention and try to figure me out. On more than one occasion, I realized I had been outsmarted. I learned that when I walked into that pen, I had to leave everything else outside. Aries was so intently focused on me that he saw and felt everything.

After 6 months, I could work Aries in the round pen left and right, he would yield both his hind quarters and his shoulders away from me, change direction, walk, trot, and halt. All without ever touching him. I introduced ropes to him as well. At first he was terrified. I would casually toss a rope over him, and he would bolt out from underneath it. But I just kept calm and repeated the process until he realized there was no danger. He got to be very good with ropes actually. I could toss coil after coil of rope over him, and he would just stand there, watching me.

I NEEDED TO GET HIM COMFORTABLE with ropes not only because his new life would involve them, but also because I knew I would need a rope to help me touch him for the first time. It's a tricky thing asking a horse to do something they don't want to do and it has to be done carefully. I knew that what I was asking would not harm him, but Aries thought that if I touched him, he would die. Aries had no confidence in

himself nor confidence in me. Allowing this predator to put her hand on him was just not something he felt he could do. My friend Lena and I worked with Aries using a rope to gently, but persistently, keep him focused and build his confidence. Every time he'd try to flee, we would let him go, but kept the rope on him so we could get his focus back again. I had to let him get away if he felt he absolutely had to. If I had held him there that would have broken all the trust I'd spent six months building. Gradually, he fled less and less and didn't run for as far or as long when he did feel the need to escape. And finally, he did it. Lena was the first to actually touch him. When I got my turn, I approached him from the front. **HE LOWERED HIS BEAUTIFULLY SCULPTED HEAD AND LET ME PLACE MY PALM RIGHT OVER HIS STAR.**

If you'd like to see the full video series, please visit my blog: heartofamustang.wordpress.com - To view Aries's first touch, look up Episode 18.

Check the next issue of Baroque Horse Magazine for the second half of this story. 🐾

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Alison Goward | EMAIL: emrt.ali@bigpond.com | MOBILE: 0407370206 | WEB: www.emrt.net.au