

To the heart OF A MUSTANG



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LAST ISSUE I INTRODUCED YOU TO MY WILD MUSTANG ARIES. HERE IS PART TWO OF HIS STORY.

Most people who work with wild horses will tell you, once you get your hands on them, the rest goes very quickly. In the weeks that followed our first touch, I had to repeat the same routine each time. I'd stand in front of Aries and hold my hand out about my chest level, palm facing him. He'd lower his head until his forehead was at the height of my hand, and I'd close the distance and rest my hand on his head. Once he was better with this, I began to rub more of his head.

Aries was very protective of his nose. Every time I would run my hand down the front of his face, he

would curl his nose away from my hand and turn so that I could no longer touch him. He refused to let me touch his nostrils at all. The chin was fine, but not the nostrils. During the long months of not being able to touch him, I'd examined his face and body very closely. I noticed a pattern of scars around his muzzle, including one big chunk missing from the right upper lip. Had he gotten into a fight with another stallion? Had a predator grabbed him? Whatever the case, his nose was off limits.

I spent a lot of time hand walking. We would explore all over the ranch, walk up and down the roads, and walk through the horse playground with bridges and tires and logs. I did as much with him in hand as I could. Showed him tarps and kiddie pools, ground poles and mounting blocks.



Aries taught me to never go into the arena with a plan. If I said, "Today I am going to get the saddle on him," Aries would invariably show me seven other areas that we needed to address first. If I went in with a rigid plan for the day, I'd be dismissing all the information Aries was giving me. I learned to just go in and start and see where the work took us. The day I taught Aries to trailer load, he hopped in quite quickly, so the session was over within 20 minutes. I decided to try putting a bareback pad on with a girth for the first time. The day was going very well, why not try? And Aries wore that bareback pad with pride. So in one day, with no plan, I taught Aries to load in a trailer and wear a girth for the first time.

It took six months to touch Aries and just two short months after that, he wore his first full saddle. And he didn't protest, just wore it. And two short months after first putting a saddle on him, on Christmas Eve 2011, I sat on him for the first time. Many people told me, "You're going too fast!" But I'd stand on the mounting block and have this feeling of, "Oh just get on already." It felt like it was coming from Aries. I started out being lunged by Lena, and over time I moved to riding by myself. I started Aries out in a halter. I didn't want to complicate his learning by using a bit. For the first month or so, I rode Aries in the round pen. We worked on walk, trot, turns, and halt. He readily went forward without a whole lot of asking. Just some clicking and a little leg. I stayed away from the canter because, even at this stage, I could not get Aries to canter when I was on the ground in the round pen or lunging, so asking for it under saddle was not a good idea.

Cantering was very scary for Aries. I think, in the wild, horses only canter to evade danger or defend the herd. For whatever reason, Aries did not like cantering. He would run wildly in the trot and then burst into a panicked, unbalanced canter for a few strides before returning to an erratic

trot. Since I couldn't find a way to help him, I just didn't ask him for it for the time being.

Once Aries became reliable in the round pen, we graduated to the outdoor arena, which was a little larger than a dressage court. Aries never once offered to bolt or buck. I could tell he was a bit unsure, but he seemed to enjoy riding, so he accepted pretty much everything I was teaching him. A couple of months after I started riding, I introduced Aries to a bit. I didn't plan on riding with it, but wanted him to get used to it. He was understandably confused about the metal thing going into his mouth, but he took it easily. I used a sweet iron bit so

that it tasted better than straight metal. Although Aries was still protective about his nose, he would let me put the bit in his mouth, so long as my hand stayed on his chin. Aries was quite easy off the leg and rein. It was clear to me he enjoyed being ridden. He seemed to enjoy the learning and figuring out what I was asking for.

Three months after first getting on Aries, I moved him to a 400+ acre ranch, and we went on lots of trail rides. He really enjoyed getting out and exploring. He never spooked at trees or birds like many domestic horses. He knew there was nothing to fear.

Another important lesson Aries taught me was that it's my job to protect my horse. Not that I wasn't protective before, but with Aries I had to be very careful who I let handle him. He is sensitive and responsive. He reads every signal a person gives off and will react if he thinks he should. And there are also people he doesn't like. Over time, there have been a few people who I have had to tell not to approach him because he didn't like them. I felt bad, but Aries was very clear. Ears back, body tense. "I don't like that person." If I were to let them take him anyway, that would be breaking his trust in me. It's our job as horse owners to protect our horses and keep their trust by listening to them.

Wild horses are, what I like to call, pure horse. They don't have a whole lot of human-created baggage. Once you earn their trust, they will follow you through fire. But to say they are a "clean slate" is not accurate. Wild horses in America are rounded up by helicopter and driven at a dead run across miles of rugged, rocky terrain. Then they are run into pens and separated from their family bands. They are



“...It’s
my job
to protect
my
horse.”

packed into trailers and hauled to holding facilities where they are sorted, branded, and the studs are castrated. It’s a gut wrenching process to witness. And what astounds me every time... these horse who have experienced nothing but life threatening terror at the hands of people are still willing to trust... still willing to take a risk and make contact with a human being.



About 4 months after first sitting on him, things started to go wrong. One day, while tightening the girth, Aries just exploded, bucking frantically. After he calmed, I took the saddle off and replaced it. No bucking. I rode. No bucking. A few days later, it happened again, wild frantic bucking after tightening the girth. I stopped riding him. I knew there was something wrong, and now I was terrified to get on him. He felt like an unexploded bomb, ready to go at any moment.

Ultimately, I discovered Aries had developed ulcers. He probably got them originally when he was rounded up, and because of the increase in work we were doing or because of a change in feed, or some other mysterious reason, the ulcers resurfaced. When he would react to the pain from the ulcers, there was no calming him, no reasoning with him. His wild instincts for self-preservation would take over and for him it was life or death.

Once I confirmed it was ulcers, Aries began treatment and recovered very well. But some damage had already been done, to both of us. He was very nervous about the saddle and more specifically the girth. I spent months with just a bareback pad and fluffy girth trying to reacquaint him to the feeling. He would allow the pad and girth, but was still very clearly worried about having the girth drawn under his belly and secured, even very loosely.

And still this horse had not let me in to his heart. He trusted me to a point, but I could tell he was holding back. It wasn’t until the summer of 2012. His ulcers were healing, and I was doing a lot of body-work and massage therapy with him. One day, while scratching his shoulder, his upper lip pursed, and he started to twist his head like so many horses do when you find their itchy spot. He leaned into my hand and just let go and groaned, clearly enjoying being scratched. I’d been scratching and petting this horse for months and **NOT ONCE** did he show any sign that he enjoyed it. He would just stand there and take it. But that day there was a change. It was also around this time that Aries started to let me touch his nose.



It had been a full year since I first touched him, and he was just **NOW** allowing me to touch his nose without pulling it away.

Over the following months, he got more and more generous with his nose. He began to explore with his nose. I was told that one sign of confidence and trust in a horse is when they investigate things with their nose. Almost a year and a half after getting him, he finally trusted me enough to surrender that last little bit of himself.

I think there is something unique about wild horses that is rarely if ever seen in domestics. They have a settledness about them. They know who they are. With some domestic horses, you can easily upset them and make them doubt themselves. Crush their sense of



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self. Sadly, many, many horses end up with lots of self-doubt because their confidence has been broken somewhere in life. But horses that grew up wild know who they are and you can feel it when you’re with them. Once Aries opened up to me, he felt totally different.

When people first meet him, they are usually struck by his powerful presence. He has a quiet power to him. He always felt that way to me. But once he started to trust me with his heart, this soft side came out. He is quite loving and very protective. When I spend time with him, I feel like he’s always watching out for me. It’s in the quiet moments when we are alone that he allows himself to express and receive affection openly. He will rest his great head against my arm, or place it over my shoulder, just being there.

In November of 2012, I spent a month in Australia learning from Manolo Mendez. I had met Manolo when he cliniced in California and jumped at the chance to learn more. He gave me some great advice on how to help Aries. When I went home, I used my new knowledge to teach Aries how to carry himself with more balance and help him continue to progress. I had not ridden Aries since April 2012. Even after it was clear the ulcers were pretty well healed, his distress about the girth

cluded me in that Aries wasn’t ready to ride again yet.

Manolo’s in-hand work opened this horse up even further. By teaching him how to carry himself better, he felt more confident about moving. He actually felt more IN his body. Cantering had always caused anxiety for Aries. But now he was starting to canter peacefully. His muscles still had to change, which would happen over time, but his MIND was there. Aries kept getting more and more open, more and more trusting.

The To the Heart of a Mustang project has been one of my greatest challenges. Aries has forced me to really examine what kind of person I am and who I want to be. The saying ‘the horse is a mirror for you’ applies doubly for wild horses. Sometimes that mirror is harsh. Some horses will ignore your moodiness, but a mustang will react to what your heart is telling them. And you might not always like what you see. It’s humbling and eye opening to gentle a wild horse. There is no better feeling in the world than when a wild, free spirited horse chooses to give you his heart. It’s a gift and an honor.

One day late in December of 2012, I was standing on a mounting block, just playing with Aries. A friend had



asked me to show her how to get a horse to step up close to a mounting block. As I stood there stroking his back and talking, I got that feeling again... that feeling I got before I first sat on him. ‘Oh just get on already!’

I looked down and smiled. Aries was ready again.

