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Participants get two hours to saddle, ride untamed horses



Photo by: Sam Green/Cortez Journal

As the horse bucks, Russell Beatty works to calm him down during the wild horse saddle training.

By [Jim Mimiaga](#) Journal staff writer

At the Colt Starting Challenge Friday, a crowd of 40 watched the variety of styles used to gentle an untrained horse.

The new competitive fair event features six trainers who are introduced to an unbroken horse they have never met.

They are given two hours to halter, saddle, and ride the horse in a small pen while being judged on using natural horsemanship techniques.

“Our event speeds up the process of gentling, and is useful for problem horses as well,” said announcer Cristy Beatty. “We’re promoting these trainers and offering a service for the public.”

The event begins, and the audience gets to observe six professional trainers simultaneously as they each attempt to control unruly steeds, some racing around their pen.

Contestants take turns giving play-by-play instruction of what they are doing over a PA system.

Methods vary

At first skittish and panicked horses instinctively flinch and flee from the trainers. Then gradually they give in to trust, some taking more time than others.

Russell Beatty, a nationally known horse trainer, and host of the event, has obviously been here before. He takes the casual but firm approach with Pearl, and quickly halts her. Then the work begins. A habit of crowding is immediately dealt with and within 10 minutes the horse gives Beatty a nice buffer while on a rope lead.

“Noticed how I did not sneak up; that looks like a predator and will scare her off,” he says.

Contestants at nearby pens have thrown out lumber, tarps, hay bales and other items to condition the horse to a work site. Others use just their coats, rods with flags, or only their bodies to urge the horses this way and that.

In pen five, trainer Boone Mooneyham is rounding up Melissa Ramsey’s horse, Lil’ Bit, of Dolores.

He first needs to “get the horse to respect me by looking me in the eye. I don’t halt until I get respect. It makes it easier in the long run.”

“He’s doing a great job,” Ramsey said. “I train horses but this one is a bit young for my experience. He’s acts immature and emotional like my toddler, but much bigger. He will be broke in two days, then I can take over training after that,” she said.

Within 40 minutes, Mooneyham has persuaded Lil’Bit its OK to simulate ranching chores around him. The quick-learning mare only slightly flinches when the trainer drops off piles of lumber near her, suddenly whips tarps around, and marches back and forth as if on the farm.

Mooneyham is a fast worker, and the horse is responding now, looking at him for the next move. In little time, he lies his large frame over the horses’ back, and then releases just before she starts to buck. After 50 minutes the young horse is warming up to a saddle.

Affordable option

Ramsey, of Lewis, said she jumped at the chance for a professional to train her horse, and the \$200 fee is affordable.

“Normally it would be a month of training time, really expensive ” she said. “I am training myself and my horses to work in the field of therapeutic riding.”

In other pens two horses have given into panic and are wildly bucking and running around their pen, quite a sight up close. Hefty trainers laugh it off and seem to enjoy occasionally getting “horse-checked” into the pen fences.

“They used to just saddle them up fast and ride the buck out of them,” says Laurel Davidson, of Dolores. “Natural horsemanship is better, easier on the horse, and safer.”

She wants her horse Pen Becket to be broke for trail riding, one of the toughest, says trainer Sophia Cherkashina, of Grand Junction, Colorado.

“On a trail ride, there is so much that can happen,” she says. “So I train the horse to always look to me for guidance, to know there is peace with me.”

Davidson appreciates Cherkashina’s lack of props or ropes.

“She uses body movements and is calm. She’s a true horseman, not a cowboy who works a horse after its been trained,” she said.

On Saturday each rider rode their horse through an obstacle course in the arena. After the previous day’s lessons, the mostly gentled horses seemed willing to accept a rider guiding them over a tarp, weaving through vertical poles, walking through zig-zag poles, roping a barrel, and dragging a pole.

Judges announced Vic Sundquist as the winner and a belt buckle was awarded.

“I try and reach the thinking side of a horse rather than the reactive side,” he said of his success. “I don’t try and force a reaction. I want them to make the right decision.”

His horse, Tiger, had a pushy attitude.

“He was a dominate horse and did not want to do what I wanted at first,” Sundquist said. “He did exceptionally well in the obstacle course once he figured out I was the boss.”

The second place winner was Lanny Leach, of Dragoon AZ, working Sansa, owned by Michael McFarland of Dolores. Third place went to Sophia Cherkashina of Grand Junction CO.

The Colt Starting Challenge emphasizes the national trend away from bronc riding to break a horse.

“Notice how the trainers control the horse by pressure and release, and giving them resting periods and space, not by feeding them treats or being aggressive. That’s natural horsemanship,” Cristy Beatty said.

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Photo by: Sam Green/Cortez Journal
Boone Mooneyham works on saddle while training a wild horse at the Montezuma County Fair.



Photo by: Sam Green/Cortez Journal
Lanny Leach works on controlling the horse he was training at the Montezuma County Fair.