





Wild horses IN THE BIG HOUSE

A successful program at a Nevada prison places wild horses in new homes and helps the inmates who train them set new priorities in their lives.

By Laurel Miller Photography by Matt Theilen



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DAVID DUDO, AN INMATE AND PARTICIPANT IN THE WILD HORSE TRAINING PROGRAM, GROOMS SOME FOALS BEFORE ADOPTION; AN INMATE WARMS UP HIS HORSE PRIOR TO THE BIDDING; SETTING UP FOR ADOPTION DAY.

David Dudo gently and methodically runs a currycomb over a little chestnut colt's fuzzy winter coat—neck to shoulder, withers to flank. Five scruffy weanling foals surround the strapping man, who wears a faded chambray shirt and navy-blue beanie. The youngsters impatiently nudge Dudo, 38, both curious and eager for the attention he's lavishing upon the colt. One of 1,419 inmates at the Northern Nevada Correctional Center (NNCC) in Carson City, Nev., Dudo is serving a 14-year sentence and has virtually no prior experience with horses. In fact, he'd never laid eyes on any of these foals prior to today, and it's only his third day as part of NNCC's landmark Stewart Conservation Camp Wild Horse Training Program (WHTP), located on the prison's farm. Dudo seems almost childlike with awe, as thrusting, velvety muzzles compete for attention from his currycomb.

"I get my first horse on Monday," he tells me enthusiastically. "On my first day, I saddled up, picked feet, and got on a horse." He glances at the colt, which gazes at him with unwavering eye contact. "You want some more, Buddy?" he asks.

The Wild Horse Training Program is a self-supported state entity that works in a cooperative partnership between the Bureau of Land Management and the Nevada Department of Corrections. Launched in 2000, the WHTP—like all U.S. wild horse prison programs—receives "estrays" (unmarked horses found on non-federal public and private lands) and wild horses (unbranded, free-roaming animals found on federal public lands) collected by the BLM. Nevada contains approximately half of the nation's wild horse and burro populations, which is estimated to be around 38,500. Recent studies show that this number exceeds by nearly 12,000 what the BLM has determined can sustainably exist with other public rangeland resources and uses.

Most have been rounded up by helicopter and then processed—vaccinated, freeze branded, trimmed, and, if need be, gelded. Surprisingly, mares aren't in great demand for the program, and burros only come through occasionally, as they're slower to reproduce.

This NNCC program is largely funded by horse auctions it holds in February, May, and October. An adoption is also held every August in conjunction with the Western States Wild Horse and Burro Expo, held at the Reno Livestock Events Center. The inmates, most of whom have little to no experience with equines, are taught safe horsemanship and how to groom and pick feet. They each receive a wild horse (program veterans who have demonstrated an aptitude sometimes

train two animals), which, by the end of each four-month training period, will be started under saddle, trailer-broke, desensitized to a variety of potentially frightening stimuli, and put up for adoption.

Although their numbers are limited, agricultural prison industry programs can be found throughout the U.S. and vary widely depending on state laws and budgets. Prison farms produce everything from beef and dairy cattle to goats and water buffalo, and some facilities train service dogs. Studies have shown that animal-assisted programs lower recidivism rates, provide inmates with valuable work- and life-skills, and teach them compassion and nurturing.

Nevada's is not the nation's first wild-horse program (Colorado and Wyoming



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A WILD HORSE ENTERS THE CUSTOM CHUTE USED FOR VACCINATIONS, HOOF-TRIMMING, AND SHOEING; A BIDDER WATCHES THE ADOPTION PROCEEDINGS; UNTRAINED MUSTANGS IN THE PRISON'S HOLDING FACILITY; HORSE ADOPTION INFORMATION.

were the forerunners), but it's perhaps the most successful. The program emphasizes "least-resistance" training based on techniques developed by the late Tom and Bill Dorrance, the late Ray Hunt, and Pat Parelli, that focus on thinking like a horse (a prey species) and utilizing humane methods to start and train them. This method is firmly rooted in equine behavior and prioritizes positive reinforcement for the animals. It's a widely popular method in horse-training today for its non-coercive methods and communication strategies. As it turns out, practicing these techniques helps inmates get their lives back on track, as well.

Program Director Hank Curry, 62, says that "to train a horse effectively, you have to think like a horse. The same goes for working with inmates."

Curry didn't know much about inmates when he started the job but was optimistic that he'd be working with lots of Nevada cowboys. Yet 95 percent of the program participants had never ridden. Demographically, the prison population at NNCC is approximately 70 percent Caucasian and 30 percent Native American, Hispanic, and African American.

"Working with inmates has changed me. It has to," says Curry, who is the son of renowned horseman Bronc Curry. "You learn a way of looking at people...better, mostly. They have their own society in

here, and they have to live by it or they don't do well. The biggest changes I see are in a lot of the older guys. They mature in this program, develop a sense of pride, and a willingness to take constructive criticism positively. They learn what self-satisfaction is. If they can train these horses to be the best they can be ... they can do the same for themselves."

SINCE THE PROGRAM'S BEGINNING, more than 200 inmates have participated in the program, and more than 750 wild horses and a handful of burros have been trained and adopted. Curry runs 60 to 70 horses a year through the program—roughly 20 animals per each training period. Between 14 and 18 horses are typically offered at each auction. Most, if not all, of the animals sell, usually for between \$800 and \$1,100 each. Every dollar of profit goes back into the program.

"The prison is an overflow facility for trainable horses, generally between 2 and 5 years of age," explains Heather Emmons, Public Affairs Specialist for the BLM's Nevada State Office. "While the majority come from Nevada, sometimes they're from other states. Our main concern is getting animals placed in good homes, and the BLM sees the prison program as a tool to do that."

Emmons points to a lower return rate back to the BLM on horses people have

adopted through the prison program as testament to its success. For every horse adopted, the BLM pays the prison a \$1,000 training fee per animal.

The average cost to put an inmate through the program, including care of the horses, varies. Each inmate earns a wage of 60 cents an hour, and can top out at \$2.50 an hour working 40 hours a week. Half of those earnings go back to the prison for room and board, as well as toward victim's restitution payments. The program also relies heavily upon donations of tack, boots, and jeans for the inmates.

For an inmate to be accepted into the program, he must submit an application after case workers review his file to make sure he's an appropriate candidate. ("If they're still getting into trouble in prison, they're not going to get anything out of the program," says Curry. "It's all about the individual and his wanting to change.") Most program trainers are incarcerated on charges related to drugs, DUIs, or fraud, and while none are in the throes of addiction, the prison requires counseling prior to release for all inmates with a history of drug or alcohol abuse.

"Many inmates struggle with low self-worth, poor impulse control, anger management problems, and weak communication skills," says Kathleen O'Meara, chief psychologist with the California Department of Corrections and Reha-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FLAGGING A BID AT A RECENT HORSE AUCTION; THE GRAND ENTRY, LED BY ALEX BARAJAS AND FRED WINKLER; INMATE AND HORSE TRAINER FRED WINKLER.

bilitation. “Combining a horse/inmate training program with substance abuse treatment [if needed] could tremendously enhance the rehabilitative potential.”

An inmate must have his birth certificate and Social Security card on file, and his occupation prior to incarceration is also considered. Men may be moved from other NDOC facilities into the program for good behavior, including some former medium-security inmates such as Dudo.

“People feel like they’re adopting a piece of living history.”

Says Curry: “I prefer that they’ve been around livestock, and I like construction workers or guys who have played team sports; they understand long hours and hard, physical labor. Ideally, we want someone who plans to stick with the program for the duration of his sentence. If a guy doesn’t get the concept behind least-resistance training or put his all into it, I tell him to move on.”

Proof of the therapeutic effects of working with horses is in the WHTP’s recidivism rates. Current research shows that just 15 percent of the 200 men who have participated thus far have returned to prison following release, as compared to a 25 percent recidivism rate for all Nevada

DOC facilities. California has a 73-percent recidivism rate and the average national rate hovers around 60 percent, says O’Meara.

ON ADOPTION DAY, the stands are filled with more than 150 attendees, many of whom are from the surrounding communities.

“A lot of people show up at our adoptions just to watch, because they like seeing what the inmates have accomplished,” says Ranch Manager Tim Bryant, who is in charge of the Stewart Conservation Camp’s 1,000-acre working farm.

Some inmates, like 34-year-old Alisandro “Alex” Barajas, have something of a fan club amongst regular adoption goers. One of the Wild Horse Training Program’s greatest success stories, Barajas had trained 12 horses in 22 months at the time of our meeting in February. Although he grew up riding “mail mules” in his native Mexico, he had no other experience with equines. Charming and gregarious, Barajas has become a solid horseman, a skillful trainer, and is one of the program’s biggest proponents. On Adoption Day, I watch him lead the Grand Entry (a drill team performance featuring the trainers) on his horse T-Bird and carry the American flag. His pride is evident in his erect posture and broad smile.

When it’s time to bring T-Bird back into the arena for bidding, Barajas has

the rangy chestnut smoothly sidestep and back up, then he stands on the horse’s back. T-Bird comes to him when he beckons from across the arena. The bond between inmate and horse is obvious, and the audience erupts in applause and whistles. Glancing around, I see I’m not the only one wiping away a tear.

I ask Bryant why people would want to purchase a wild horse that has only 120 days under saddle and has been trained by an inmate rather than by a professional trainer or clinician.

“People feel they’re adopting a piece of living history,” he explains. “But they also love and support our program. They’re looking for a reliable ranch, endurance, or pack animal.”

Some of the horses are adopted by the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, Calif. Others go to the Border Patrol, pack stations, the army, or non-profits. For the last two years, the Marine Color Guard has ridden a handful of horses trained by the program in the Rose Parade.

There’s no “typical” day in the program. It’s so accelerated that each day brings new challenges and develops new skills. In general, Curry will give a lecture or demonstration or show a video on teaching techniques or safety. Then the men spend the rest of the day working with and caring for their animals. Inmates devote considerable time to a number of activities, including



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: INMATE TONY ARDIZZINONE DEMONSTRATES HOW TO TRIM HORSE HOOVES IN THE CUSTOM-DESIGNED CHUTE; AUCTIONEER TONY BARATTI; THE INMATES TALK TO PROSPECTIVE BUYERS BEFORE A RECENT AUCTION; PROGRAM DIRECTOR HANK CURRY.



grooming, desensitizing the horses to stimuli such as rain slickers or loud noises, longeing and other round-pen work, changing gaits, exposing them to cattle, learning to carry a pack saddle, working with a rope, dragging two-by-fours, opening gates, and other ranch work.

In addition to Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming, there are also similar programs in Kansas and Utah. But none are as well-regarded as the Carson City program, as inmates are allowed to spend large chunks of time working with the animals. Other programs may fail to properly employ (or even use) least-resistance methods or don't offer counseling in tandem for substance abuse or other issues.

Chief Psychologist Kathleen O'Meara has studied NNCC's horse program for possible replication in California.

"Horses are flight animals that survive in the wild through reacting to real or perceived threats, and many inmates identify with [that instinct]," she says. "The pairing of inmates with horses offers tremendous potential for addressing the psychological causes of the offender's problematic behaviors, and also counteracts the impact of a dysfunctional prison culture that reinforces behaviors unproductive to readjustment in the community. Learning the value of positive reinforcement contrasts, for many inmates, with the negativity or violence many of them experienced in their developmental

years. They learn that horses become willingly responsive without ever having been abused or mistreated. An inmate who has never received direction and guidance in his own life can learn to provide that for his horse."

Bryant says he believes the NNCC program has been successful because "we have the support of our director and all of our wardens. Hank [Curry] is a key component, obviously, but the residents of Carson City and the vicinity, as well as non-profit horse groups are also behind us."

Still, most of the people I talked to—O'Meara, employees of the BLM, Tim Bryant, adoptees of WHTP horses, current inmates, former inmate and current horse trainer Thomas Smittle, and an equine behaviorist and veterinarian who has lectured at the prison—agree that Hank Curry is the backbone of the program. Even if the insight inmates gain from working with and bonding to their horses—and each other—is what ultimately leads to change, Curry's combination of skill and genuine concern for the horses and inmates and his desire to see them succeed are crucial to its success.

When I mention the accolades to Curry, he demurs: "The men and these horses are what make this program successful."

AS THE ADOPTION WINDS DOWN, I ask Barajas how he copes with seeing his horses sold.

"I got pretty upset seeing my first one go because we had really bonded. But I also look at it as something I've accomplished ... and I want them to have a good home," he says. "Overall, working with horses has really changed for the better how I relate to and treat my family."

Will he continue to train once he's released, I ask? He smiles, but is matter-of-fact about his prospects.

"I'd love to keep working with horses," he says. "But I'll probably have just enough money to take the bus to wherever I need to go for work."

In his years working for the NDOC, Curry has learned that even the best, most well-intentioned program members have a tough road ahead of them, especially if they wish to pursue horse training as a career. "I advise them that it's a tough trade, especially if they don't have family support or finances," he explains. "They need to have equipment and animals. Most of them end up doing construction."

What's more important is that once released, inmates take the lessons they've learned from working with horses and incorporate them into their daily lives.

There are exceptions. Former inmate Thomas Smittle, 42, a thoughtful and articulate Comanche-Yaqui man, founded Confidence Training Concepts in Lancaster, Calif., following his release in April of 2011; his third stint in prison.

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He is already well-regarded within the local communities and with horse rescue programs.

“The program saved my life and humbled me in general,” says Smittle. “It made me think about how I’d lived my life up until that point. I grew up around horses, and being incarcerated, I felt more comfortable working with animals than people—there’s less drama. Hank must have sensed something in me he could cultivate. He’s been a great mentor; I continue to call him whenever I have a question about an animal I’m training. Right now I’m focused on working with BLM horses and Lifesavers, a wild horse rescue.”

AS I’M GETTING READY to depart,

I pause to observe the scene: Successful bidders are loading their new horses in trailers, and vehicles leave dust clouds in their wake as they head down the dirt track leading to the prison’s main road. What must it be like for the inmates to watch them, knowing that leaving by their own free will isn’t an option?

I spot Harry Hamman, 39, who at the time had just completed his first 120 days as a trainer after transferring into the program from the High Desert State Prison outside of Las Vegas. A memory of riding a horse at Boy Scout camp is what led him to apply.

“[Horses] test you and teach you patience,” he says. “You have to learn to speak their language. It’s completely different from how I’ve always done things... The way you act with horses is a metaphor for how you choose to live: If you get angry and frustrated, it doesn’t help you or the animal.”

One of the inmates told me that he had to “get right” with himself before he could “get right” with his horse. Perhaps special programs like this will help inmates get right with society, as well. 🐾