

One hundred years ago over two million wild horses roamed free in the western United States. Today that number is fewer than twenty five thousand. Some of those wild horses are right here in Geauga County. A few months ago two friends decided to try something new. Both have been around horses their entire lives, but never have they owned a wild mustang. Some could say this is a checkmark off their "Bucket List", others say they are just plain crazy. Dilly, a four year old mare (a female horse), and Dante a three year old gelding (an altered male horse), had just gone to a trainer who specializes in gentling wild horses and were both available for adoption. Both a rich caramel-brown color with long sun bleached mane, large hooves, and a stout stature, Dilly and Dante adjusted to their new surroundings. Human contact was not something they were used to, nor was being in a barn with a roof over their head. Dante and Dilly were starting a new life and two Geauga County residents were jumping feet first into an exciting journey with their new wild horses!

The wild mustangs are descendants of the Spanish, or Iberian, horses that were brought to the Americas by Spanish explorers in the 16th Century. The name "mustang" is derived from the Spanish word, *mustengo*, loosely meaning "ownerless beast" or "stray horse". Native Americans and the early Pioneers took advantage of these horses speed, stamina, sturdiness, and stocky structure which made them less prone to injuries and great for long journeys. They tamed these horses and used them for transportation, hunting trips, and carrying supplies. Over time the U.S. Government stepped in to manage these herds of wild horses. There are currently approximately 34 million acres of land where today's wild horses roam. Most public land covers areas of Montana, Idaho, Nevada, Wyoming, Utah, Oregon, California, Arizona, North Dakota, and New Mexico. In the wild, herds roam the land living off of wild grasses and drinking from water sources such as streams, lakes, and rivers. According to the American Wild Horse Preservation Organization, over 270,000 wild mustangs have been removed from private and public land across the U.S., since 1971. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages these wild herds and controls removal (for adoption) of these wild horses. While there is plenty of controversy on removing wild horses and the BLM itself, many organizations and trainers work hard to find these wild horses loving homes. The wild mustangs are not on any endangered list and herds are constantly reproducing, causing the BLM to round up wild horses each year and move them from free roaming horses to domesticated pets and riding horses, in private homes. Online and public auctions take place where pre-approved adopters can buy these wild horses, sometimes for just \$150. The BLM has set rules in place requiring a special setup for both picking up your new wild horse and where the horse will live when you get it home.

Since these horses are used to roaming free, it does take some adjusting for them to accept living in a domesticated setting. A holding pen consisting of a large circle of high steel-pipe gate fencing panels is usually required when bringing a wild horse home. You can not just put them into a closed in stall like most domestic horses live in, or expect them to stay in a pasture with minimal fencing. Wild mustangs take patience, trust, and time to adjust to their new lives and surroundings. Dilly and Dante started their new lives in the care of experienced trainers who work with wild mustangs on a daily basis. They brought Dilly and Dante to Ohio and started "gentling" them. This is a term used for the early stages of a mustang when they learn how to be handled by humans, accept touch, leading, being groomed, having their feet trimmed, and being tied. The next step is "backing", which is when they learn to wear a saddle and eventually carry a rider. Many people would be amazed at how quickly these wild

horses adjust to their new lives. Once they trust their handlers, they would do just about anything for you and many people who have worked with mustangs would agree.

Dilly and Dante became “tame” in just a few short weeks. Within four weeks both horses acted like any other horse in the barn, enjoying attention, standing quietly for baths, having their feet trimmed, walking right onto a horse trailer, and enjoying afternoon naps in their new stalls. Two weeks later they were carrying riders like it was something they had done their whole lives. Dilly and her owner have already been enjoying trail riding through the woods, crossing bridges and streams with ease. Mustangs are very versatile horses and are known to participate in nearly every style of riding that domestic horses partake in. Jumping, ranch and cow work, trail riding, pulling carriages, games, barrel racing, dressage, and so many other styles of riding can be enjoyed with wild mustangs. They quickly adapt to their new lives and are known for being very sensible horses. They don’t seem to be spooked or startled by the same things the average horse would be afraid of, an ironic trait considering they grow up roaming free on the land.

There are events and contests created specifically for wild mustangs. The Extreme Mustang Makeovers take place all across the U.S. offering cash prizes for trainers who can transform their wild horses in just 100 days to become masters of their disciplines. You can visit www.extrememustangmakover.com for examples of these spectacular transformations. The Mustang Million Event offers \$1 million dollars in prizes on a national stage for a select number of mustang trainers trying to prove their mustang is the most talented mustang that year. This televised event covers the journey of riders who have a limited amount of time to put together a demonstration of their wild horse’s talent and training. One year a trainer had their mustang sitting in a convertible car while he drove it around the arena. Horses jumped through fire, did patterns bridleless using only voice and touch commands, and a variety of truly remarkable tricks while competing for the grand prize. Events like this encourage others to give wild mustangs a chance and open their homes to these special horses. Many would never know these wild horses are competing all over the country against breeds that were bred specifically for certain styles of riding, and winning. Just this month a young girl went to the U.S. Equestrian Federation Pony Finals (jumping) in Kentucky to compete among the best show ponies in the country, with her BLM Mustang, who has been winning in the very competitive world of “hunter” style jumping horses.

Some say that mustangs are living symbols of our American Heritage. Many of those who have added a wild mustang to their family can’t imagine their lives without the love they have for their mustangs. For the two Geauga County residents, they are already hooked and enjoying their new companions. They have both learned to be more patient and trusting while working with these wild horses. These ladies are well on their way to enjoying all of the Bridle Trails Geauga County and the Cleveland Metroparks have to offer, on the backs of their wild mustangs.

Follow Dilly and Dante’s progress in a follow up story, later this summer. For more information on adopting a Wild Mustang visit www.mustangheritagefoundation.org -and- www.blm.gov/adoptahorse/