

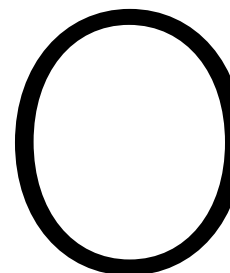


# *Wild* **AT HEART**

Aiming to buck the odds at the Mustang Million, where trainers are given 100 days to transform feral horses into obedient steeds

BY ERIC BENSON • PHOTOS BY SUZANNE TENNANT

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**O** N A CRISP fall morning in Fort Worth, Texas, Matt Zimmerman pushed his black gelding, Mojo, through a final warm-up before the second round of the Mustang Million, an annual competition in which riders from the more rugged regions of the United States show off their skills at transforming feral horses into obedient steeds. With the sun casting vivid light on the red-clay practice rings of the Will Rogers Memorial Center, Zimmerman sped Mojo into a canter, finessed him around a tight curve and navigated him forward, sideways and backward through a maze of wooden poles. As he worked the horse, Zimmerman sat perfectly erect in his saddle—back straight, shoulders relaxed, his black chaps and wide-brimmed Stetson spotless. Only a slightly pained look on his face belied the fact that something was wrong.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack! The sound rang out across the still morning. Mojo was dragging his hooves into the wooden poles when he was supposed to be lifting them clear, striking each with a resonate shudder. Zimmerman shook his head. "He's a real clumsy bugger—he hits every one," the 38-year-old Nevada-native called out to his girlfriend, Stacie Shaber, a willowy strawberry blonde six years his senior who was standing inside the ring.

Shaber laughed. She's been showing horses all her life and

knows what it takes to have a half-ton animal execute a series of intricate commands. "Really, it's almost impossible what we're asking these horses to do," she shrugged. "They say it takes 90 days minimum to get really good results with a horse. And these horses had never had a human hand touch them. When Matt got Mojo, that horse would sooner eat you for lunch than have you ride him."

Zimmerman had adopted Mojo just four months earlier from a Bureau of Land Management holding facility in Burns, Oregon, and had spent the summer gentling the horse at his and Shaber's five-acre ranch in Kuna, Idaho. But as his practice run in Fort Worth showed, the mustang wasn't quite yet gentled. Mojo may have left the range, but the range hadn't quite left Mojo.

**MOJO WAS BORN** sometime in the spring or early summer of 2010 in the arid high desert along the Oregon-Nevada border. As a foal, he traveled in a small band of eight to ten horses, foraging on cheatgrass, bluebunch wheatgrass, and salt desert shrubs while navigating a windswept landscape of vast playas, craggy ridges, and scraggly sagebrush. Mojo had no natural predators, but his life was not without peril. In the summer months, he and his

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band would often roam ten miles or more just to find water to drink. Still, Mojo was well adapted to life in the Great Basin, as his forefathers had been roaming similar expanses since not long after the early conquistadors brought their Andalusian steeds to the Western Hemisphere in the 16th Century.

For the first year of his life, Mojo was one of roughly 40,000 mustangs living free in the West. Then, in September 2011, the Bureau of Land Management caught him as part of a large herd round-up that deployed low-flying helicopters and four-by-four vehicles to chase the horses into large corrals. Over the next

year and a half, Mojo was one of the 47,000 mustangs living in government holding pens, stuck in what is often a life-long limbo between wilderness and domesticity.

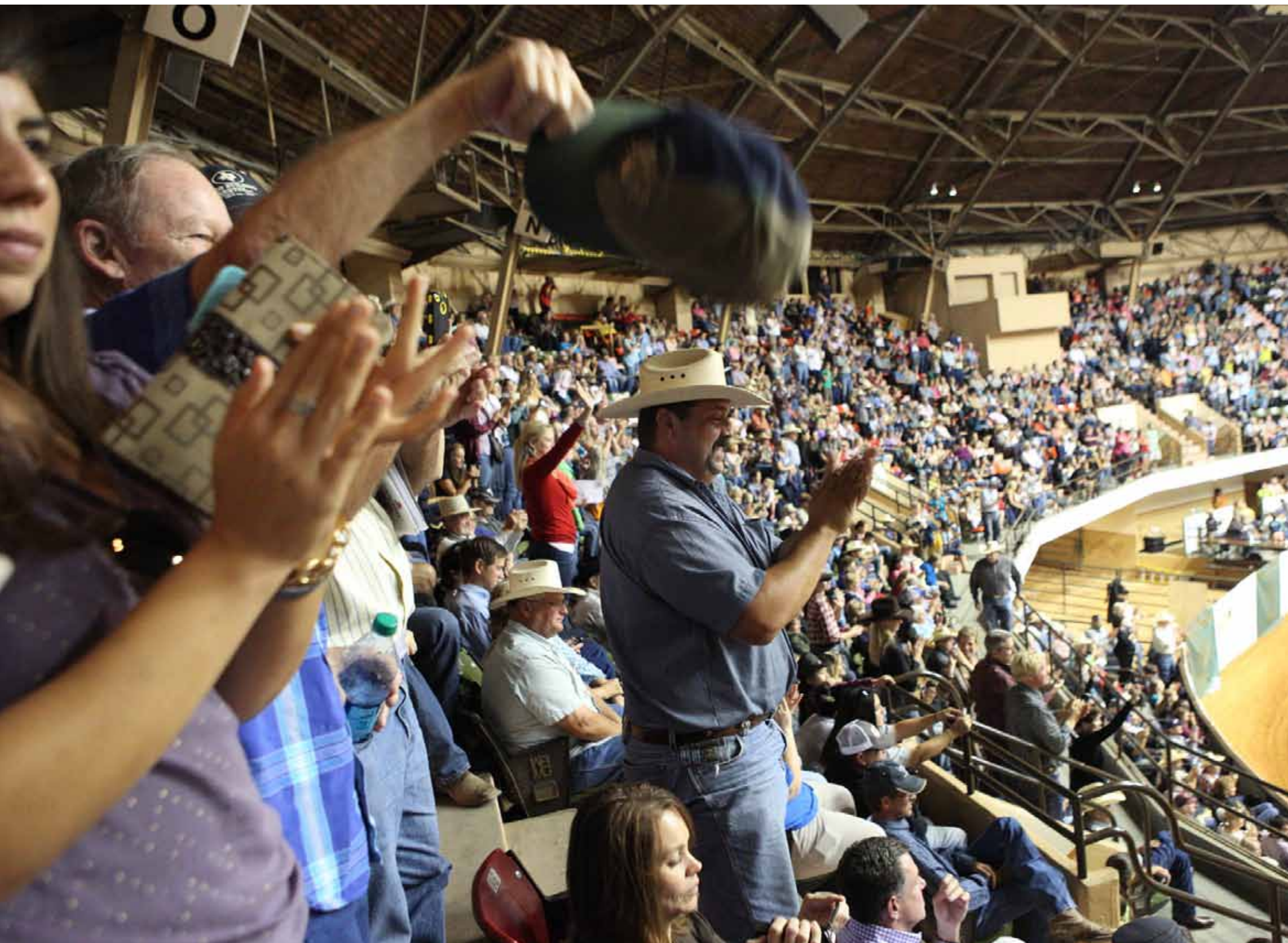
This situation pleases no one. Horse activists argue that “injuries, trauma and death are the common results of wild horse roundups” and that conditions in BLM holding facilities can be inhumane. Western ranchers allege that the BLM shirked its duties and allowed the mustang population to grow to dangerous levels, leading to the denuding of public lands on which cattle graze and wild species like antelope and elk roam. The BLM is struggling

mightily to craft a solution that placates both sides: They have been experimenting with anti-fertility drugs, instead of round-ups, to keep the wild horse population in check (so far with limited success) and they are seeking to find owners for as many incarcerated animals as they can. Everyone agrees that the status quo—which costs taxpayers more than \$40 million per year—is not working.

The Mustang Million was created as an out-of-the-box, showbiz solution to this bureaucratic boondoggle. Mustangs had long been considered the junkyard dogs of the equine world, rangy mutts of poor genetic stock that were essentially untrainable. In fact, between 1900 and 1950, more than 1 million mustangs were slaughtered and turned into glue, clothing, violin strings and pet food and, by 1959, there were fewer than 20,000 left. The brutal treatment of the animals pushed a Reno secretary named Velma Johnson, better known as “Wild Horse Annie,” to spearhead a campaign to save the mustang. In 1971, largely due to Johnson’s efforts,

Congress passed the Wild Horse and Burro Act, which designated the animals “living symbols of the historic and pioneer spirit of the West” and made it illegal to kill or harass them on public lands.

In 2007, Patti Colbert, executive director of the Mustang Heritage Foundation—a nonprofit that works with the BLM to facilitate the adoption of its horses—saw an opportunity to pick up where Wild Horse Annie left off. Inspired by ABC’s “Extreme Makeover: Home Edition,” Colbert alighted on a reality-TV-ready concept: The Heritage Foundation would give 100 trainers 100 days to gentle 100 mustangs. At the end of the 100 days, the trainers would show off their now-tamed horses, and the public would buy the horses at an auction. The first “Extreme Mustang Makeover” was held that same year at the Will Rogers Memorial Center, and soon spawned a series of regional Makeover competitions. This year, the national event was renamed to reflect its record \$1 million in total prize money.



**I FIRST HEARD** Zimmerman tell the story of his near-fatal accident two hours after meeting him in Fort Worth, when he whipped out his phone to show another rider an X-ray of his fractured pelvis and snapped left femur. It happened in the summer of 2011. Zimmerman had been riding a horse on his Idaho ranch at a slow trot when it responded to a whoa! command by simultaneously throwing back its head and digging in its hind hooves. The awkward maneuver caused the animal to flip onto its back, crushing Zimmerman against the ground and thrusting the hard, knobby saddle horn through his rib cage and into his chest cavity. Zimmerman was medevaced to the hospital in Boise and spent 11 touch-and-go days in the ICU. "I was laid up from August to December," he told the other rider. "The cool thing was, I could bounce back."

It had been unclear if Zimmerman would ever walk again, let alone ride, but less than a year after his accident, in June 2012, he competed in a regional Extreme Mustang Makeover competition in Albany, Oregon. Zimmerman made it to the finals, riding onto the dirt of the Calapooia Arena with Katy Perry's "Firework" playing in the background. As the pop star sang, "Do you know that there's still a chance for you/Cause there's a spark in you?" Zimmerman dazzled the crowd, capping his comeback by standing on the back of his horse while waving a car dealership-sized American flag with his left hand and cracking a leather bullwhip with his right. He placed first.

The Oregon win should have given Zimmerman plenty of momentum heading into the Mustang Million, but his life since then hadn't been easy. A year ago Christmas, he and his wife separated, and it was now a struggle for Zimmerman to see his two young daughters. Then, while Mojo was in the early stages of his training, Zimmerman caught more bad luck. One day in July, a ranch horse kicked Zimmerman just below his right elbow, snapping a bone in his forearm. He lost time with Mojo and his mobility during the lead-up to the competition was badly hindered. The evening before I met him at the Mustang Million, Zimmerman tore off the plaster cast over his still-healing arm. It had been his third cast in two months.

When Patti Colbert and I spoke about the Mustang Heritage Foundation's mission, she made a point of describing how training a mustang could be a healing process. "These wild horses are branded. They're displaced. They're highly sensual, highly reactive, highly PTSD. And if you put one of them with somebody who understands what it's like to be taken from your home, or somebody who understands what it's like to be stressed in that way—it's incredible. I'm telling you, that's the good Lord at work." Colbert was talking primarily about a program that matches combat veterans with wild horses, but it was hard not to see the battered Zimmerman and the reeling Mojo present in her words.

After their flawed practice run, Zimmerman and Mojo walked out into the John Justin Arena needing a near-perfect performance to stay in the running for the finals. They cut a striking profile. "Showing is showing off," Shaber said to me when I commented on Zimmerman's spotless appearance. "You need to look pretty and you need to act pretty." Zimmerman sat with what he called his "English woman at a tea party" posture and seemed to have complete control of his animal. He encouraged Mojo to sidle up to a gate. He coaxed Mojo into executing a perfect sidestep over to a wooden wall. He calmly guided the horse through a figure-eight pattern.

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