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Aubrey Graham and Datesfreedom at the 2026 Retired Racehorse Project Thoroughbred Makeover
Joe Nevills Photo

A Life-Changing Makeover: Former Racehorse Goes From Bail Pen Pipeline To Show Ring

Pulled out of the bail pen pipeline after a blue-collar racing career, Datesfreedom tested the Eventing and Show Jumping disciplines with trainer Aubrey Graham at the Thoroughbred Makeover

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By Joe Nevills

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There are war horses, and there are horses that have been through true battles, and Datesfreedom checked both boxes on his way to the 2026 Retired Racehorse Project Thoroughbred Makeover.

The New York-bred 7-year-old gelding by American Freedom raced 53 times and won 10 of them over five seasons of racing, spending his entire career in New York, and winding down in the claiming ranks at Finger Lakes.

He was an honest horse on the track, doing his best work at the route distances in the claiming ranks, and preferring a stalking trip before finding his best run in the final furlong. Despite spending the bulk of his career with a claiming tag on his head, Datesfreedom was claimed just twice, picked up both times for $8,000.

By the end of the 2025 racing season at Finger Lakes, though it was clearly time

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for Datesfreedom to move on to his next phase of life after the racetrack. He was listed for sale by trainer Michael Ferraro via Finger Lakes Finest Thoroughbreds, Inc.; a non-profit organization that assists racing connections at the upstate New York track in listing their retiring Thoroughbreds online for sale to non-racing homes.

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As reported by the Paulick Report in January, Datesfreedom was one of three horses purchased by New Jersey-based Marcos Quinones, with the stated intention of training him as a trail horse. Though Quinones jumped through every hoop to the satisfaction of the trainer and the organization, Datesfreedom and his two fellow Finger Lakes grads soon ended up at H & R Horses, a training/sales barn in Hillsboro, Ky. The others were soon listed at the the Bowie Livestock Auction in Texas with a “ship to slaughter” date, but Datesfreedom remained at the Kentucky farm.

Finger Lakes Finest purchased Datesfreedom from H & R Horses for $2,500, and sent him to quarantine with Stall 13 Thoroughbreds, a non-profit facility in Lansing, N.Y., led by executive director and head trainer Aubrey Graham. The gelding stepped off the trailer just as the calendar flipped to January 2026.



Datesfreedom
Stall 13 Thoroughbreds

"The poor thing, they shipped him in a blizzard that was coming in, so I asked them if they had a blanket for him, and they had one that was like two-thirds of a blanket – it kind of had one side eaten out – but he actually didn't look terrible," Graham said. "He was well taken care of on the track. He hadn't lost a ton of condition by the time he got to me."

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This year's Thoroughbred Makeover permitted horses to have had their final race or workout as far back as July 1, 2024, while serious training beyond basic groundwork could begin on Dec. 1, 2025. With Datesfreedom first coming into Graham's care from a potential bail pen situation just 10 months before the Makeover – practically nine after the horse's three-week quarantine period – the pair were at a significant handicap when it came to preparation.

It was that time in quarantine, though, that made Graham realize she might have a Makeover prospect.

"He did fantastic and just showed he had a wonderful personality," Graham said. "As he trotted around quarantine, he also showed he was quite athletic and and was going to be good at a lot of things.

"The biggest thing besides waiting to make sure he didn't have any infectious diseases, worming, and things like that, he did have some extremely severe scratches from getting into something, probably a wire or a hay string on the back of his hind pasterns," she continued. "So, we treated those as best we could out there and then got him back into the main barn near the end of January, and then got him going for his first rides and first shows a couple of months later. Then, it's just kind of been bringing him along in eventing and show jumping."

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Beyond Stall 13, Graham specializes in training off-track Thoroughbreds through her Kivu Sporthorses, meaning every horse in her program receives a foundation in the eventing disciplines: dressage, show jumping, and cross country. If a horse shows an affinity or distaste for one of the disciplines, she focuses her training on a horse's strengths.

Datesfreedom was one that cleared the bar for all three, prompting Graham to enter him for the Makeover in both the Eventing and Show Jumper competitions.

"He's got great movement, he's nicely built, he's uphill, he's a Yes It's True horse (through his broodmare sire), which is a line that I really like," Graham said. "They're athletic, they're quirky – quirky in personality, not quirky under saddle. He's all work under saddle."

On top of his later start in training, living in Upstate New York means winter tends to stick around longer than most parts of the country. Thus, opportunities to gain valuable experience at horse shows were not as plentiful as they would be for

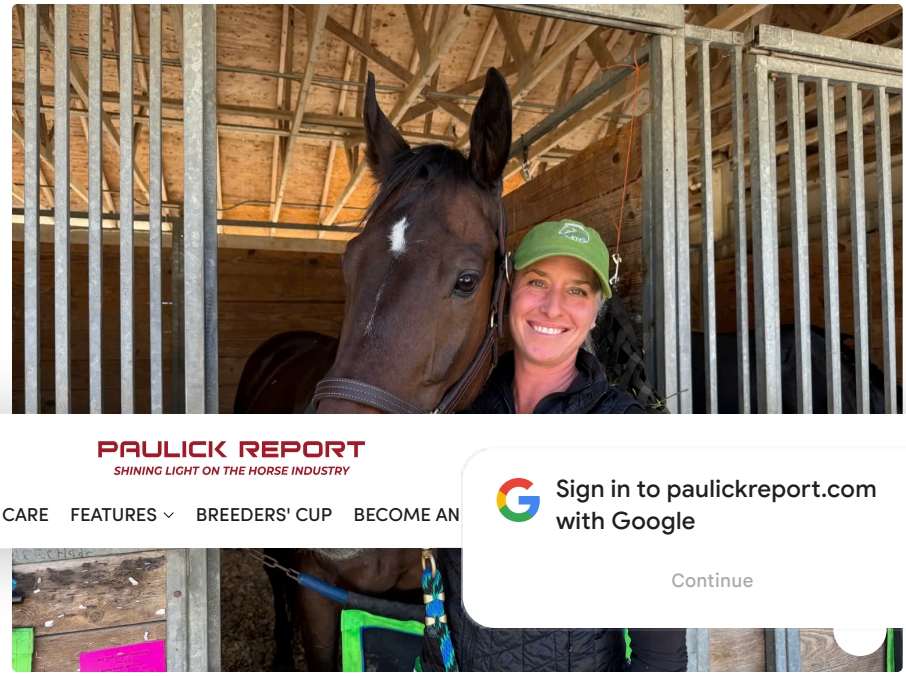
other Makeover competitors in southern states.

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Graham said the horse had no problem making up for lost time.

"I just took him and hacked him around, and he did his first cross country fences at a really quiet trot in a foot-and-a-half of snow over some logs, and just showed that he's just brave as the day is long, and he has said 'no' to absolutely nothing thus far," she said. "I put him at a ditch, and he goes, 'Cool, that's a ditch, great.' You look at bigger jumps, whatnot, and he kind of goes, 'I took that.' So he's really come along fantastic.

"He's naturally brave over cross country fences," Graham continued. "I think he'd make a hell of a fox hunter, a really nice event horse, and he could do show jumping or dressage. There's no limit to what this horse could do. Throw a western saddle on him, and he could do stuff too, but I really think he'll cook up the levels."



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Graham described Datesfreedom as a horse with an active mind that can

sometimes cause him to create mischief if he gets bored. But when it's time to get to work, the gelding is a fast learner.

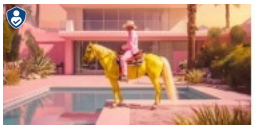
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"I taught him to jump the day before he went to a horse show," she said. "They were very baby horse show crossrails, and it was winter, and I had a free spot in the trailer, and I was like, 'Well, he should probably go and get off-property because in upstate New York, again, it's been snowing, it's been cold as hell. He'd popped over logs outside, but he hadn't ever seen poles.

"So, we set up a baby grid (an arrangement of jumping poles) and spent 30 minutes teaching him what poles are, and then put him through the grid and incrementally increased it," she continued. "The next day, I took him to a little indoor jumper show where he did crossrails and then did the two-foot, and he was just like, 'Okay.' He didn't move, didn't fuss around, and then he proceeded to go around bravely over the crossrails, figure it out, figure his feet out, and have a blast. I was like, 'All right, this thing has a brain. There's a lot cook cooking in there, and that's kind of how he's been with everything."

Datesfreedom began his time at the Makeover in the Eventing portion of the competition. Eventing at the Makeover is a two-part discipline, in which competitors are first judged in a dressage portion. Later, the horse and rider go through a round of jumps, including a handful of show jump fences preceding a cross-country course that includes different terrain and water hazards, in addition to more jumps. In addition to clearing the obstacles in the second portion, the horse and rider are judged for form and horsemanship throughout the course.

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The pair finished 24th of the 41 horses to complete both parts of the Eventing competition. The following day, Graham and Datesfreedom contested the Show

Jumping discipline, where they finished 42nd of 57 to complete the course.

"He laid down probably his best dressage test he's done," Graham said about his Eventing performance. "This is the great thing about the Makeover is it's a nice, early in their career test. You take the temperature of things. He came out in a big environment with kids running around and judges in the box, and cars driving by, and just focused and did his test. It's probably not the best test of the day, but I don't care. For him, it was the best one he's done."

The pair came back out later in the day to contest the jumping portion. By Graham's own words, the two played "pick-up sticks," during the show jumping portion of the event, knocking down a few rails, but they made up for it in the cross country, where Datesfreedom was brave and willing across the obstacles.

The cross country portion ends with an open show gallop over a large uphill expanse of the Kentucky Horse Park's steeplechase infield, and Datesfreedom was able to show a bit of the speed that led him to the winner's circle so many times.

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"I like to let the horses realize that we're not just going to hold them back here, we can also go forward, so when we land off the last fence, I just put my hands forward and said, 'Let's go, and he's like, 'Really?'" Graham said. "So, he just set into a really lovely gallop, and it's great because you can start to feel he's got 3-4 more gears in there. It's uphill, but I'm not gonna keep him at some nice easy four-beat gallop, I'm just like, 'You show me what you want to do.'

"He pulled up really easy," she continued. "I just sat up and half-halted with my leg, and he was like, 'Okay, cool,' just carefully cantered down the hill and was done. I'm really proud of him. And despite the poles, who cares? That's easy to fix in the long run."

The long run, though, will be a road for someone else to travel. Datesfreedom was listed as adoptable heading into the Makeover, and he will have a new home following the event. After arriving at the Kentucky Horse Park from upstate New York, the gelding will leave on a trailer toward Idaho, where he will embark on a

career as a mid-level eventer.

“The hope is that we’ve given the foundation that will let us get him somewhere where he can now have a regular career, as opposed to being a speculative thing,” Graham said. “He comes with contracts that he can always come back, and the safety net that he’s got a whole program of people behind him, which is great.”

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About The Author

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Joe Nevills is the Paulick Report's bloodstock editor. He is an Eclipse Award-winning writer, and creator of the Haiku Handicapper series.

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