

Changing Ground

Innovative competitions across the United States are putting adopted horses on center stage and helping to change the horse industry's conversation about equine rescue.

By CHRISTINE HAMILTON

TRAINER MATT KOCH'S COMPETITION schedule early in 2019 painted a picture of equine diversity. February found him in the finals of the National Reined Cow Horse Association's World's Greatest Horseman in Fort Worth, Texas. In one of the stock horse industry's most respected tests of Western performance, he rode to a sixth-place finish on This Cats Sinful, his 2012 Quarter Horse mare by WR This Cats Smart.

Two weeks later, Koch competed at the Battle on the Rockies at the National Western Event Center in Denver, Colorado, during the Rocky Mountain Horse Expo. Open only to horses either up for adoption or that had been adopted through one of 10 participating Colorado horse rescues, the inaugural event offered \$8,000 in added money and a chance to win a saddle from Colorado Saddlery in Golden. Koch competed in the open on Sargent Pepper, his adopted gray gelding—previously a feral horse from the Appalachian Mountains in eastern Kentucky.

With a training barn full of horses, what would lead Koch to adopt?

"I needed a horse I could just *ride*," he explains—one without the pressure of being a client's competition horse. "When we moved to Elizabeth, Colorado, I needed a go-to using horse, a turnback horse, or a horse to help out with everyday ranch work and roping."

A couple of fellow Colorado trainers—Jason Patrick and Scott Winfrey—suggested Koch look at horses up for adoption at Harmony Equine Center in Franktown, Colorado. Operated by the nonprofit animal welfare organization Dumb Friends League, the center rehabilitates, trains and rehomes horses that either were seized by law enforcement in abuse or neglect cases, surren-

dered by their owners, or brought in from other adoption organizations.

Koch found himself hauling home two grays: a broke Quarter Horse-type gelding named Zane, and Sargent. Then 4 years old with just 45 days of riding, Sargent had already failed one adoption situation because of his tendency to bolt. But Koch found the gelding smooth to ride, which was important for long days in the saddle, and thought he could work through the horse's fears. He now calls Sargent an "equine ATV," but it took time and patience.

"He'd just get scared and try to save his life and flee from situations," Koch says. "We had to get him over that. The other day I was in the crowding alley bringing calves up the chute, and there were calves crawling underneath him. He just stands there and takes it now."

When Koch hauls Sargent to shows as a turnback horse, the gelding often gets attention.

"People go, 'So, you go from riding horses that you've won \$100,000 on to riding Sargent Pepper?' 'Yep,'" Koch says. "It's nice riding him most days because I don't have to think. If he doesn't do something 100 percent correct it doesn't really matter. Just go do your job, Buddy."

Koch heard about the Battle on the Rockies from the folks at Harmony Equine Center. He entered Sargent and ended up third overall in the open; his wife, Brianna, rode Zane and won the overall non-pro. There were about 60 entries total.

"It just sounded like fun, actually," Koch says. "You get to go do something at the horse rescue deal and it's low stress, and you kind of show that these [rescue] horses, they're still useful."

It's a feel-good story about a horse finding a good home and a new competition to show off horses like him.



Reined cow horseman Matt Koch adopted his ranch gelding, Sargent Pepper, from Harmony Equine Center in Franktown, Colorado. The previously feral gelding came from the Appalachian Mountains in eastern Kentucky.



New rescue horse events like the 2019 Battle on the Rockies in Denver give adopted former rescue horses and their new owners places to compete, as well as showcase horses up for adoption. Rebecca Johnson uses her formerly feral mare, Minnie Moo, in everything from feedlot work to roping; they won the overall open division.

But it also points to a growing change in how the horse industry sees rescue organizations and rescue horses—shifting from places where you find problem horses to places where you can find a horse to fit a need.

Many people point to competitions as crucial to making that change possible. Why? Because they put the focus on what many rescue horses need most—to get better broke.

SEEING BEYOND A “THROWAWAY” HORSE

Ask Garret Leonard, director of Harmony Equine Center, why he and other organizers felt the need to put together a competition like the Battle on the Rockies, and he ticks off several reasons. At the top of the list is exposure—putting rescue horses in the public eye.

“We have horses that need to find homes,” he says. “We are promoting what horses can be and do, and that one of these could be your next horse. There are not a lot of places for rescue horses to be able to go show. Having an event and on this stage—at the National Western Complex in Denver—is great.”

Sponsored by The Right Horse Initiative, the Colorado Horse Council and the Colorado Unwanted Horse Alliance, the Battle on the Rockies invited

10 Colorado horse rescues to participate. The horses entered were either at or had been adopted through one of those 10 organizations. Classes offered included ranch riding and trail in open, non-pro, youth and adoptable divisions. The latter allowed the rescues to showcase horses up for adoption.

“It’s also a chance to show in a pretty stress-free environment,” Leonard says, adding that a horse show is brand new ground for most rescue horses as well as for many people involved with the organizations, from trainers to volunteers and adopters.

But perhaps the most important reason is something that can be true of any competition or show—they push people to get horses better trained.

“[Competing] is going to tell people where they need to work with their horses,” Leonard says, “and that’s critical to their success. A trained horse has a place.”

Getting help with training has always been the point of rescue horse competitions, says Jennifer Taylor Williams, executive director of the Bluebonnet Equine Humane Society based in College Station, Texas. Few rescue organizations can afford the training that many horses need. That’s why the most common format is a professional makeover

challenge, in which trainers volunteer to take in a horse, work with it for a specified time, and then compete on it at an adoption event.

“The [Extreme] Mustang Makeover people really started it [in 2007],” says Williams. “If there were other, non-Mustang horse rescue training challenges then, I didn’t know of them. One of our board members at the time said, ‘You know what? If they can do that with Mustangs we can do something similar with rescue horses.’ We decided to give it a try.”

The first Bluebonnet Rescue Horse Training Challenge fielded only a handful of entries, but it steadily grew. Now in its 11th year, Bluebonnet added a second challenge for 2019. The event puts a big dent in the average 90 to 100 head that Bluebonnet manages in foster care at any given time.

“Now I hear about a ton of [rescue competitions] because it works,” Williams says. “It’s an amazing way to get horses trained. For us, the horses that get shown under saddle usually get adopted.”

“It has helped to show professionals and the public that some of these horses are just unlucky. They see something beyond the ‘throwaway’ horse. There but for the grace of God go any of our horses.”

What Williams would like to see more of are rescue competitions that include non-pro and youth divisions, as did the Battle on the Rockies. The Bluebonnet Equine Humane Society challenges have always offered amateur and in-hand classes.

"I don't see a lot of the training challenges doing non-pro divisions," Williams says. "In our case, we have fosters all over the place, and it gives them a chance to show off what they do with the horses they foster."

She points out that not all horses need a professional trainer, and amateurs make up the majority of future homes for rescue horses.

"The need for savvy recreational riders is paramount," she says, and competitions can help to push people toward becoming just that.

FINDING A WIN-WIN

Nexus Equine, an adoption organization based in Edmond, Oklahoma, is filling that need by targeting youth for its new competition.

"Youth are the future of the equine industry. Collaborating with youth in helping 'horses in transition' will only help to grow and perpetuate the conversation for generations to come,"

says Tim Lindsey, chairman of the Nexus Equine board of directors.

Nexus partnered with Oklahoma's state 4-H program and Heritage Place, a leading racehorse auction facility in Oklahoma City to host the Oklahoma 4-H Equine Makeover presented by Nexus Equine. Eligible 4-H members took a Nexus horse home for 90 days and then returned with it to compete for a \$1,500 scholarship; Heritage Place hosted the makeover events, providing arena space and stalls. The competition offered two separate rounds with 10 horses in each round, one in summer and the other in the fall.

Chloe O'Connor, 18, from Duncan, Oklahoma, applied soon after a friend tagged her in a post about the new event on Facebook. She was accepted for the first round.

"It was something I've always wanted to do, a training makeover challenge," she says. "When it came through 4-H, I was like, go for it! It was my last year in 4-H."

The horses varied in age and ability, so Nexus paired horses with youth based on the youths' experience. Competitors found out their assignments on the day they picked up the horses. After two weeks with the horses at home, they had to turn in specific goals to accomplish

with their horse. During the 90 days, they also had to keep health and financial records and regularly check in with Nexus personnel.

The final competition was based on how well they accomplished those individual goals. They also had to write an essay on what they learned through the experience.

Chloe's horse was slightly different from the others', and Nexus organizers called her ahead of time to make sure she would be on board. All the Round 1 horses were in good health, but the gelding they wanted to send her, Big Red, had recently come to Nexus with a Henneke body condition score of 2, or very thin.

"I agreed to take him," she says. "When I first met him I was in shock. I sat there and counted all his ribs, his hipbones were real prominent, and his face was sunken in. He looked awful. He didn't have much energy. For him it was more a bring-back-to-life challenge."

Chloe's horse experience included jumping, ranch sorting and rodeo queen competitions. Now she found herself learning how to feed and condition a severely malnourished horse. Big Red was reported to be an off-the-track Thoroughbred abandoned in a pasture with several other horses for about three years. With



LEFT: Chloe O'Connor's 2019 Nexus Equine Oklahoma State 4-H Equine Makeover assignment was the off-the-track Thoroughbred gelding, Big Red. She had to condition and slowly start feeding the abandoned gelding, who initially had a body condition score of 2. **RIGHT:** Because the malnourished gelding could not be ridden, Chloe's makeover groundwork included teaching Big Red to hold a paintbrush in his mouth and bob his head to brush paint on a canvas.

little forage, he'd eaten tree bark, which ruined his teeth and ulcerated his lips, making his lip tattoo unreadable.

"I couldn't do much physical activity with him; he barely had the energy to hold himself up," Chloe says. "When we picked up our horses, they gave us instructions on how to care for them, their feed and vaccinations and stuff. Mine were a mile long! I thought, 'They're handing over a horse that hasn't been fed to a kid! It was scary and exciting.'"

While other competitors' goals included things like halter-breaking and first rides, Chloe's goals included simple groundwork and desensitization, and to closely monitor gradually re-introducing forage and grain to Big Red's system.

"When I interviewed with the judges to set my goals, I made a joke about teaching him how to paint. Then I got to thinking about that, and that's one of the things I worked on," she says. "I taught him to hold the paintbrush with his teeth and then move his head up and down on the canvas."

Chloe finished as a finalist in the competition. The youth had the option to adopt their horses or return them to Nexus, and she decided to keep Big Red. As he gets stronger, she plans to ride him. The experience—including getting the gelding through colic after his first quarter-cup of grain—solidified her desire to become a veterinarian; she's currently a freshman in animal science at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma.

"It was an amazing opportunity, and I've grown from it in myself and in my horsemanship skills," Chloe says. "If you win or lose, you have the opportunity to impact a horse in a positive way. He has a chance to be the horse he was supposed to be now."

Round 2 was still in progress at press time, but Nexus plans to hold a 2020 makeover. Next year they'll have one summer event with 20 horses.

"We've been so impressed and excited about the talent and determination and



Matt Koch rides his adopted horse, Sargent Pepper, through the trail course in the 2019 Battle on the Rockies in Denver, Colorado.

work ethic of these kids with these horses," Lindsey says. "The state 4-H was on board from the get-go, but they had some reservations as to how successful it would be, and they've been blown away. They are thrilled with how it's gone and the results."

Not all of the youth kept the horses they worked with, but that's not a problem, Lindsey says. Regardless, "that horse is 90 days further along than it was; it's a win-win."

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

One big benefit that rescue competitions have fostered is promoting collaboration. Stereotypes and differences of opinions often have kept horse rescues at odds with the larger horse industry and even among themselves. Regardless of differences, focusing on them has sometimes hindered getting help to horses in need.

"We need to be able to partner and collaborate with other organizations," says Rita Hoch, founder and chief

executive officer of Nexus Equine. "We're not going to agree on everything, but that's okay. We need to partner on what we do agree on."

She points to Nexus' collaboration with two horse industry stalwarts in Oklahoma 4-H and Heritage Place as an example.

"We came together to promote these horses and kids," she says. "The kids want to further their horsemanship skills, and these horses now know new things and are more adoptable."

At Battle on the Rockies, Leonard pointed out that one goal of their event was to get state horse rescues to work together.

"We're trying to become a family where the rescue groups work together," Leonard says. "To get rescues together, to do things where we all get along, is not easily achieved. Here [at an event like Battle on the Rockies], it doesn't matter where a horse came from,


everyone is cheering for what the horse can do. That's what matters."

By early fall, Matt and Brianna Koch had added two more adopted horses to the Koch Performance Horses barn.

"I had a bunch of younger help this summer, and I went [to Harmony Equine] looking for younger horses these guys could learn on," Koch says. "I picked out a 2-year-old filly that moved around good in the pasture and we brought her home. They've been riding her, and she's wanting to be a real good horse."

"And Oliver, our little boy, was needing a pony and Harmony happened to have one. Now we have 'Sugar the Pony' also. If they have the [Battle on the Rockies] again, we've got all kinds of horses to go in it."

He pauses and adds with a smile, "We can use them, and they fit in just fine."

And that's the point. 

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