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Gentleness, not breaking, used to train mustangs

BY FRANK X. MULLEN JR. • FMULLEN@RGJ.COM • MARCH 23, 2010

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Willis Lamm, a wild horse advocate who trains mustangs at his home in Stagecoach, has a mixed relationship with the Bureau of Land Management.

"As activists, we're always beating up on the BLM over range issues," he said. "We want the (roundups) to stop, or at least be scaled down, but once the horses are brought off the range, we want the (BLM's) adoption program to be successful.

"It's about what is best for the horses."

Lamm, a retired fire service officer, runs Least Resistance Training Concepts and trains other "mentors" in the best ways to turn a mustang into a ranch equine. He has adopted wild horses and burros from BLM holding pens and from Nevada's feral horse program.

"These horses aren't going to cooperate just because you give them food," Lamm said. "You have to develop communication and trust. These horses are real social animals. You're not going to bully them and be successful.

"They are smart. They have an excellent survival mechanism. They have to think through things. You don't get a more pure horse than a wild horse."

In his front yard, Lamm and other horse mentors lead mustangs through an obstacle course made of platforms, cones and hoses. Some horses take to the course fast, others balk at the experience.

"You have to earn their respect," he said, adding that there are no pat answers in working with mustangs. "They have a variety of different personalities. If I can get that brain to work with me, they'll give everything they are worth."

His philosophy of working with horses is similar to the relations he'd like to see between activists and the government agencies responsible for the mustangs' welfare.

"With wild horses on the range it doesn't have to be all or nothing, overrunning the range or gone from it entirely," Lamm said. "There's room for everybody."

He said the BLM's current plans to move thousands of mustangs to preserves in the Midwest and East is contrary to the spirit of the animals.

"A wild horse is wild because of its environment," he said. "They are shaped by natural forces. Put them in Ohio, they are just pasture horses."

The agency, he said, should avoid the expense of Eastern pastures and make use of the Western lands already available and designated for their use. He said better range monitoring should be emphasized and

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adoptions promoted.

"We need to get the horse program right side up," he said.

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