

"Wild" Ben - By Sheryl Cammarata and Michelle Smith

This is a story of how life's dynamic swirl aligns fate and destiny with a twist of opportunity and spirituality . . . making a family's dream come true . . .



When one mounts an Arabian the sheer power and grace of that stride is exhilaratingly unforgettable and humbling. Equally unforgettable is the experience of the wildness of a creature in its natural habitat or "free state," like the unrestrained flight of a band of mustangs, for example. The feeling is incredulous, uplifting, and for many, a moment of spiritual enlightenment. For some of us, this connects us to something larger than ourselves, and many describe it as a spiritual experience. We all have these moments in our lives.



"Wild Ben" - It's Nice to Meet You.

For me, most of those moments have been with animals. I am fortunate to have had several unforgettable moments. A close encounter with a mighty moose in the backcountry, a domestic wolf-dog bond, my first childhood dog. I also have had several close encounters with the great winged ones, Golden Eagles. Of course I will never forget those few Arabian horses along my journey; and most relevant to this story, my experience at the Wild Horse Sanctuary and the Native Sundance site in South Dakota.

An even more profound moment was the birth of our first daughter, Madeline. At a time when we thought we could be no more blessed, she brought more "golden" moments into our lives; whether we wanted them or not!

Madeline, who's eleven, has a wonderful way with horses, in particular Arabians. Three years and 3 trainers into her horseback riding obsession she was fortunate to be offered a sponsorship opportunity by Michelle Smith, an Arabian horse endurance rider.

At eleven years old, during Maddie's second sponsored ride at Strawberry Fields in Heber City, UT we were captivated by an awestruck wild horse. I was there that we met "Ben", the wild mustang.

Though not a blueblood Arabian, this homeless young mustang had that same "draw". The intrigue was exhilarating, unforgettable and as humbling as any Arab. All of us were equally fascinated and in awe by the cool grace and calm demeanor that Ben exhibited. Michelle, our Arabian horse endurance rider felt it instantly and was compelled to bring this special horse into her "herd". As a young immature 2-year-old, he was hardly the ideal specimen for either endurance riding or 4-H training and yet all of us felt that same confidence in this "enlightened" creature.



Ben and Madeline Silverstein - Day 1.



Madeline Silverstein and Ben practicing a ground trot.

As I said, Madeline has always had a good natured way with horses that facilitated a quick and lasting relationship with the Arabs she'd been riding. She was gentle yet commanding. She appeared to have tamed a "wild" Arab. She quickly developed an enduring bond with Ben on the trails and it was clear the bond with this fascinating Mustang would be equally assured.

Her relationship with Ben has been no less binding and commanding than that of his Arabian counterparts. Ben was courteous at first, though curious, and somewhat unaware of his human leaders intentions. So, it was not safe or appropriate for Maddie to lead his first halter walks. But she possessed so many of the skills necessary once the bounds were set. So, this mix of wild and willing required patience and know-how from Michelle Smith and

her husband Michael as well as Maddie and I. When I can barely get a steady, sustained trot from Ben while lunging, Maddie can get a canter with a perfect change in direction and "link up" at the end sealed with a quick lick of his lips.

Interestingly, Ben found immediate comfort with Michelle's Arabs, Nadrah and Maddie's Arabian mount, "Taz". When Ben met the Arabians, he instantly fit right in, taking his natural place with ease, seeming to choose "Taz" to look up to and emulate. Watching Taz and Maddie from the paddock as they trained in the arena, Ben seemed anxious and willing to join in on the fun!

We started Ben with a lot of halter walks, grooming, and natural horsemanship groundwork. We went for a lot of casual walks in the "neighborhood". One day, while on an outing, an older and wiser 4-H club member came over to visit. She showed us some different training techniques. She, too, felt the power and comfort of Ben's spirit. She became instantly drawn and connected with Ben and was easily able to lay across his back. Eventually she slung her leg over and strided him lightly. Ben seemed downright pleased. He was just like his pal Taz now!



Horsepower!



Sheryl Cammarata and Ben.

Ben allowed many of the "gang" to mount and be lead around; even the 7-year-olds of our families, Danielle and Jackie. We were always prepared for that moment when Mustang Ben's wild side would explode with a vengeance. More than 6 months later - still waiting!

Now under full saddle and comfortable with bit and bridle, Ben has carried riders from 7 to 47 years old. He went on a 10-mile trail ride with his mentor, Michelle. He has trained in the arena with Madeline and even did his first trot with her during formal arena training. Never once has he bucked, reared, or kicked at any of us. Admittedly, when he felt a bit of frustrated control he would paw or stomp the ground. His nature allowed this to be quickly overcome with clear leadership and good training techniques. Never once has this gentle soul showed any sign of intentional aggression toward his trainers . . . dumb toe stepping . . . YOU BET, but no aggression!

What a memorable holiday gift this past Christmas eve was. Ben ponied 7-year-old Danielle on a neighborhood caroling adventure. He met neighborhood friends, two-legged & four-legged alike and walked aside a horse and buggy as well as a diesel pickup truck and hay trailer and not once did he misbehave! (OK, OK, maybe he strayed a few times for a quick steal of fresh grass to satisfy the memory of unyielding hunger in his wild days!)

Many experienced horse people and "seasoned" veterans had warned, or shall I say advised, that a 2-year-old wild mustang is not the safest and best option for an 11-year-old girl's 4H project. I cannot argue with that sound advice. It's what is best for most people with most horses.

But not for this wild child and her magical beast! Watch for Ben and Maddie's wild debut at the Larimer County, Colorado fair in the summer of 2009.

We are very grateful to the wonderful people at the BLM who clearly rescued Ben with the utmost care and kindness, to Michelle and Michael Smith of Trailwise Tack & Chamisa Farm, Masonville, CO and to Shannon White and Robin Davis for graciously providing the tools of empowerment and opportunity for this wildly intelligent duo!