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*Article*

# A New Opportunity for Mustangs: Finding a Place for Mustangs in the Eventing and Dressage Disciplines

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**Simple Summary:** Because large numbers of mustangs reside on U.S. public lands, their management focuses on removing enough animals to prevent overuse of the land. As a result, many mustangs are kept in holding facilities for long periods before they can be sold or adopted. Most adopted mustangs reside in the western U.S., but some make their way to the East Coast as riding and companion animals. This paper explores how trainers and riding instructors who live on the east coast view the potential for using mustangs in eventing and dressage riding programs. Understanding where and why mustangs are used in these programs will help understand where mustang fit into the domestic riding worlds, contribute to successful adoptions, and help decrease the number of wild horses in holding facilities.

**Abstract:** In 2023, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) estimated that there were 68,928 mustangs living on United States public lands in 10 western states. The agency uses Appropriate Management Levels to determine the number of mustangs who need to be removed from the land. Once removed and processed, mustangs are sent to adoptions or sales events or retained in short- or long-term holding facilities. Adoptions and sales are the leading avenues for rehoming mustangs; however, the number of horses the BLM can place fluctuates annually and never approaches the greater number removed from the range. To explore opportunities for increasing the number of mustang adoptions, we conducted in-depth interviews with 23 horse trainers located on the U.S. East Coast, asking about participants' training programs, relationships with horses, perceptions of mustangs, and challenges that mustangs face in the dressage and eventing industries. Participants had varying experiences with mustangs; however, all were willing to work with a mustang in some capacity. Participants voiced the need for more satellite adoption locations on the East Coast to decrease barriers to acquiring a mustang, notably cost and time, and for expanding existing training programs to include eventing and dressage.

**Keywords:** mustangs; wild horses; English riding; eventing; dressage; wild horse management; wild horse adoption

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## 1. Introduction

As of 2023, an estimated 68,928 free-roaming wild horses occupied 177 Herd Management Areas (HMA) across western federal public lands in the United States. To achieve and maintain a thriving ecological balance on these lands, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) estimates Appropriate Management Levels (AML) for each HMA. The current AML for wild horses and burros across all HMAs is approximately 26,785 [1]. To reconcile the number of wild horses on the range with AMLs, the BLM rounds up and removes wild horses. Once removed, they are processed and sent to auctions, sales, or adoption events or retained in off range corrals and pastures. A few are released back to their original HMA [2].

The maintenance of each wild horse once they have been removed from the range costs thousands of dollars annually. Of the BLM's \$138.5 million expenditures in fiscal year 2022, 61% was used for holding costs of unadopted animals, 18% was used for program support, 9% was used for gathers and fertility control, and 9% was used on adoptions and sales [3]. In the same year, of the 20,193 animals removed, 6,669 wild horses were adopted. While this is less than the previous year when 8,600 wild horses were adopted, adoption is still the leading avenue for placing these animals [3]. Despite the management strategies in place, the wild horse population continues to expand and accumulate in holding facilities at the expense of U.S. taxpayers.

Understanding what motivates people to choose a specific horse could help increase adoptions and long-term placement of wild horses in homes. Few studies have examined what a successful adoption looks like; however, a 2012 study of adopters found that participants cited the horse-human bond as a key reason for keeping their horse [4]. Horses fall into a seemingly unique category as they are not only companion animals, but recreational, competition partner, and working animals. Examining the unique relationships between horses and humans, Keaveney [5] found themes of friendship, love, and emotional support when participants described their relationship with horses. However, Keaveney also found that conditional love was essential, meaning that owners found this relationship was something that had to be earned and that they had to be worthy of the horse's trust. Conditional love is critical, as horses are a great expense to their owner, and therefore for adoptions to be successful, a balance must be found between the owner's interest in the horse and the horse's interest in the person.

To have successful adoptions and retentions in homes, it is also critical to understand the industry in which mustangs are finding homes. A study conducted by the American Horse Council in 2005 found that the equine industry contributed approximately \$39 billion to the U.S. economy and supported 1.4 million full time jobs [6]. As of 2023, the latest U.S. data shows that the equine industry contributes \$122 billion to the U.S. economy annually. Currently 43% of the U.S. horses are owned for recreational use and 17% are owned as show horses. Trainers and instructors make up 37% of the equine-owning industry and often influence horse owners in their barns and communities [7].

Because trainers and instructors make up a large portion of the equine-owning industry, their insights could help determine where to find permanent homes for mustangs within the eventing and dressage industries. As trends and opinions can vary cross-continently, this research focused on eventing and dressage trainers specifically located on the East Coast of the U.S. The East Coast is home to the only two Concours Complete International top level three-day events (CCI5\*) in the United States: the Maryland 5 Star at Fair Hill, and the Land Rover/USEF CCI5\*. Riders and horses travel from across the world to attend these events, which are well known and revered within riding communities inside and outside of the United States. Further, the Equine Industry Survey released in 2018 by American Horse Publications found that dressage ranked second or third as the most identified use of horses by respondents nationally, and a higher percentage of respondents on the East Coast selected English as their primary discipline (e.g., dressage, eventing, foxhunting, and hunter/jumper) [8].

The purpose of this study was to understand trainers' and instructors' perceptions, uses, and experiences with mustangs on the East Coast. To achieve this, in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of these individuals to understand what opportunities may exist for mustangs within the eventing and dressage industries, and what barriers and challenges exist for those who work with them. Insights from these key individuals will hopefully help to understand where mustangs fit into the domestic riding worlds of eventing and dressage, contribute to successful adoptions, and decrease the number of horses in BLM holding facilities.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research was qualitative in design and used semi-structured interviews to understand participants' experiences and thoughts on the use of mustangs in the eventing and dressage

industries. Participants were identified through purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods.

### *2.1. Participant Recruitment*

Participants were recruited through two strategies. The first, purposive sampling, was used to invite targeted people to participate, such as well-known riding instructors and trainers, former instructors of the researchers, or other persons known from prior experiences of the researchers. The second, snowball sampling, was used to reach participants outside the researcher's targeted pool via social media posts that could be shared throughout the equine community along the East Coast.

The researchers asked potential participants to complete an initial screening form to determine if they met the inclusion criteria that included the following:

- Be 18 years of age and older
- Be a current resident of Area I: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, New York, and Rhode Island; Area II: New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and North Carolina; or Area III: Tennessee, South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida, of the United States Eventing Association (USEA) [10].
- Own their own business or be capable of making financial decisions regarding procuring, leasing, adopting, and disposition of horses in their program.
- Currently make more than 50% of their income from training and/or teaching in the eventing and dressage industries.

Those who met the inclusion criteria were emailed a link to the consent form, and upon its completion, were scheduled for an interview either in person, over Zoom, or via phone call.

### *2.2. Data Collection, Locations, and Analysis*

Interviews were conducted via zoom, phone call, or in person. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The interview guide was divided into six main sections: Introduction, Relationship with Horses, Client Base, Facility Design, Mustang Specific Questions, and Opportunities and Perceived Challenges.

The Introduction was designed to provide information on the participants' background and business structure. The next section, Relationship with Horses, was designed to understand more about how the participants view horses and how horses fit into their businesses. The third, Client Base, helped the researchers understand the community that the participants serve, what types of clients they work with, and the kinds of horses they need to find success within their business. The Facility Questions were designed to highlight key features of the participant's barn and understand the impact of their facility's design on their ability to incorporate different groups of horses. The fifth and main section of the interview was designed to understand the participants' experiences specifically with mustangs and their knowledge about who mustangs are and their relationships with mustangs. This section was divided into two tracks: one for participants who work with mustangs and one for those who haven't. The last section, Opportunities and Perceived Challenges, allowed participants to explore their own ideas as to how to create more opportunities for mustangs to be used in eventing and dressage as well as discuss challenges they have faced or seen others face when working with mustangs. (See Appendix A for interview guide.)

For analysis, transcripts were given code names to prevent responses from being associated with identifying information, assuring respondent confidentiality. The transcripts were then coded using a set of codes, including but not limited to terms such as history with horses, training styles and outlook, use of mustangs, differences between mustangs and domestic horses, similarities between domestic horses and mustangs, knowledge of mustangs, and public perceptions and responses to mustangs. This coding enabled researchers to compare the experiences shared by participants and look for patterns and differences among participants.

Once interviews were coded, those codes were analyzed and grouped into the following categories: Relationships with Horses, Knowledge of Mustangs, Training Program, Marketability of Mustangs, and Horse Qualities (Domestic and Mustangs). This analysis plan was used to understand



how these key codes worked together to illustrate the experiences shared by participants. They were further used to explore broad answers to the question of how to promote incorporation of mustangs into English riding disciplines.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The sample was made up of 23 trainers and instructors across Areas I, II, and III (Appendix B, Figure 1). There were 10 participants from Area I, 10 participants from Area II, and 3 participants from Area III. Of the 19 states in Areas I, II, and III, the participants represented 13 states. Of the participants, only 3 had never worked with mustangs, and the rest had varying experiences working with them. The structures of participating trainers varied: 19 participants considered their business to be training/lessons/showing facilities, 2 stated they were small private farms, 2 were specifically mustang training facilities, and 1 was a rescue/rehabilitation facility. Overall, participants differed widely, and they provided many insights into the inner workings of eventing and dressage facilities on the East Coast.

#### 3.1. Relationship with Horses

To incorporate more mustangs into eventing and dressage programs, it is first important to understand the relationship between trainer and horse. Some trainers, such as Summer, reported that as young riders they were drawn to the “weird ones, the young ones, or the less typical ones,” and those experiences drew them to the horses that they include in their riding programs today. Others, such as Ginger, said they had been working with mustangs since the beginning of their riding careers. Her first horse was a mustang whom she has had for 42 years. Others reported that programs such as the Mustang Heritage Foundation’s (MHF) Trainer Incentive Program (TIP) or the Extreme Mustang Makeover (EMM) brought them to working with mustangs. The Mustang Heritage Foundation runs both the TIP and EMM in partnership with the BLM; its goal is to get trainers across the country involved in the gentling and training of mustangs.

Successful working partnerships require relationships built off mutual trust and respect between trainer and horse. These partnerships help trainers advocate for their horses and assist with building communities of support. Some trainers, such as Amber, view horses as employees or work partners: “They’ve been not only a competitive sport for me and a business aspect, but also very key personal connections, because when I’m having a bad day, I can go to the barn and hang out with them.” Others see horses as part of the family. Pearl stated, “They are my pets first. They obviously are athletes. They obviously help fund businesses and do work for us. But I think it’s important that they’re pets first, and their wellbeing and happiness comes first and then their job.” Trainers also use conditional love [5] to help earn a horse’s trust and build relationships that allow the horse to thrive.

Trainers noted that the time they can keep a horse for training varies due to financial constraints and training program timelines. While 1.6 million households in the United States reportedly own horses, only 50% of horse owners have an annual income of over \$100,000. When factoring in the annual cost of owning a recreation horse at approximately \$7,800 a year for the owner, and that the average horse owner owns 6 horses, trainers must assess whether a mustang can fit into their training program’s timeline [7].

The time and effort needed to run an equine facility and manage the training timelines of various horses take an emotional toll as well as a financial one. As Willow explained, “My relationship with horses... [is] love hate because I’m here six days a week trying my hardest. Then there’s always the occasional accident, horses trying to kill themselves here and there.” To improve retention, horses must be placed in homes that suit both parties’ needs.

#### 3.2. Horse Qualities Preferred

Trainers differ in the qualities they seek in horses, whether it be for their personal herd or as a business prospect. Understanding what qualities trainers are drawn to and why helps to illuminate the horse market on the East Coast. Trainers such as Raven primarily look for a horse who is engaged

and has “bought into” the training. She explained buy-in as “a place where the horse has bought into the idea that humans can be communicated with. A horse that's interested in people, even if they aren't very educated, but they must have a natural curiosity about humans. And if they have that foundation, then we can just do anything.”

Other participants preferred specific breeds and styles that fit either their own training program requirements or the needs of their clientele. “I want to buy an athlete of a horse, and it's a little easier to evaluate a horse that isn't a mustang just because of circumstance,” Cassia stated when explaining how they procure horses for their program. “I can go and talk to the breeder, and I can know the horse's whole history, and I'm willing to spend the money on it.” Many trainers spoke of the similarities and differences they see between domestic horses and mustangs. Several reported that the comparisons shone a favorable light on the mustangs in their program. As Jasmine explained,

They haven't been screwed up which is, you know, kind of interesting, because they came at their most raw and maybe because of that they're just horses when they arrive, and they don't have all these expectations attached to them necessarily like, if somebody buys a warm blood weanling, and they have all these expectations. I think that there might be something to that compared to the other breeds.

Other trainers felt that there are few differences between domestic horses and mustangs. Heather stated, “I would say they are similar. I don't mean to discredit them, but they are just another horse.” Some, such as Brooke, think that “mustangs don't react any differently than domesticated horses with bad training.”

### *3.3. Training Program*

Training programs vary across the East Coast and are often influenced by the horses to whom trainers have access, the community they serve, and the trainers' personal goals and experiences in the industry. Some trainers' history with horses and current practices are grounded in mustangs and they prefer to work independently, allowing the horse to shape the training plan. Jade explained,

I think I like taking it slow. I like to. I like the horse to gain my trust versus me forcing myself on them. I have like 90 days, but I sometimes take 6 months. It depends on the horse. Each horse is individual. Some are harder than others, some are easy. I mean, I've had some that I've had them done in 3 days.

Other trainers take a community-based approach and use a network of trainers to work with and place mustangs. Those who use this approach note that each trainer has their own specialty and sharing the tasks allows them to help more horses and place them in the appropriate setting for the level of training they currently require. Some trainers, such as Daisy, have extensive networks to navigate the training of various horses that come through her program:

I primarily work with a nonprofit rescue that saves horses from kill pens in Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana and Tennessee sometimes up from Pennsylvania, like the Amish auctions and stuff like that. They tend to save horses that have never been started under saddle... We have several cowboys that we work with, and they're sent to get started under saddle when they're ready. As soon as they have 30 days, they come to me. I get them pretty darn green sometimes... After that is when I take them in whatever direction they're going to excel in.

Other trainers have found, through experience, that they are a good match for working with young horses, problem horses, and mustangs. These trainers tend to enjoy the process of watching horses solve problems, learn new skills, and conquer their fears. Some trainers, such as Heather, didn't necessarily seek out these horses, but found themselves surrounded by them. She stated, “I get a lot of the problem horses, the ones that are broken or people can't figure out, you know, just the weird ones. That's what I usually end up with. It wasn't what I was going for when I started my business, but it's just what found me, and it's challenging.”

A few trainers were not initially involved in mustangs, but as they began to work with and learn from them, they found their passion in the mustangs. Some decided to add mustangs to their

program; others decided to transition to only having mustangs in their program. Sierra is one of the trainers who enjoys mustangs so much that she is shifting her program to eventually be solely mustangs:

We're doing more mustang training and adoptions. I have also stopped breeding, I've only one horse in foal next year, largely because I feel like mustangs are where our calling is. To try and get awareness for the mustangs and what they can do, and where they would fit into our society out here, and so we're moving away from breeding. I'll keep a couple of my home breeds, but honestly, where I am in my life now, I have no ambitions of doing upper levels again. We like mustangs, and you know we like bringing them along and showing people what they can do.

Trainers must also meet their clients' needs to continue running their business; therefore, they must consider the impact of clientele on their horse procuring decisions. Some programs, such as Cassia's, are more low-key and focus on the smaller success of the rider: "I cater more to the sort of the people that want to just get better as riders versus the people that want to show. But I also have a couple of clients that go to shows with me and everything, and I personally compete competitively." Other barns are larger in stature and have more complex client relations to cater to, such as the facility Sage runs.

We have about 13 horses here and I run anywhere from 4 to 8 lessons a day. I'm the only instructor, this is what I do full time. My horses are pretty standard, they're in stalls. I also schedule lessons as needed and they are weather dependent because we don't have an indoor [arena]. So, for example, today I have 3 or 4 lessons this afternoon. On the weekends I typically have like 8 to 10 lessons a day. I teach both English and Western. We do very small in-house shows where I have a couple of kids who are interested in potentially showing next year. So, we're going to be looking at that as well.

Trainers must also run businesses that they find rewarding and sustainable. While training programs range in style, many participants voiced concerns about participating in TIP and EMM programs due to the fixed timelines of the programs. Trainers who oppose the programs state that they don't like imposing rigid timeframes on horses as they are all individuals. They also believe that focusing on a deadline can lead to poor handling and training techniques and leave out key elements of training when rushing to get to a competition. Amber highlighted these themes when explaining their own thoughts on how they conduct their training plans:

I think a lot of people have very structured timelines that they expect horses to achieve certain things by... we just turn out for a few months before we really do any under saddle work which, from like a training barn standpoint, isn't common because you typically want to get them going as quickly as possible. But we found that if you just work at the horse's timeline, you're going to get such better engagement from them.

The participants also discussed the potential trauma wild horses face when embarking on their journey to the East Coast. A few trainers acknowledged the impact that roundups and transport could have on individual horses and the need for decompression time for the mustangs to process the changes. Clove spoke in depth on this issue: "An integral part of our program is the premise of communication, and with an understanding of how horses learn and why they learn the way they do from a biological perspective, and how trauma affects those things. Then [we] add the people side of things."

### 3.4. Knowledge of Mustangs

Trainers vary widely regarding their knowledge of mustangs including who they are, the natural environment they come from, and the ways they enter domestic life. This range of knowledge is seen within each USEA Area and doesn't seem to be influenced by the current location of the trainer's barn. Some trainers, when asked about their knowledge of mustangs, didn't have much to say as their knowledge was "very vague." Others generally know how BLM wild horse roundups

work but outside of that, what they know is learned from friends who have done the EMM or TIP programs or adopted a mustang outside those programs.

Many of those who spoke more in depth about their knowledge of mustangs described the learning curve they experienced related to understanding the intricacies of wild horse management and adoption. For example, Sierra stated,

Okay, yeah, for the initial time we went to go do the adoption. I think the way the BLM and Forestry Service are structured, it's very overwhelming for people to understand how to adopt them, and what paperwork must be submitted and which ones you can keep for a year, and which ones you can sell immediately, and which ones are adoption incentive, and which ones are 125 [dollars] versus which ones are on the online corral. I think that turns a lot of people away. Once you go through the process once or twice, it becomes easy and straightforward, and it's a super quick process.

Other trainers shared how they use their knowledge of HMAs and herd dynamics to help them determine which horses they chose to adopt. For example, Jade mentioned, "I've heard some of those HMA horses are more reactive." This information is also used to source mustangs for training programs. Ginger explained that "Even within herds they can be built differently. So, you just have to kind of know where to look."

Many trainers described the challenges they encountered when incorporating mustangs into their programs. Some noted that they struggled to understand how to access information related to procuring a wild horse from a satellite adoption location. Others faced obstacles with tracking down the title of a mustang once the horse was purchased and brought to the trainer's facility. Raven explained their difficulties regarding these issues: "I have the Mustang and I've been trying to get her title; it was 2021 that I got her, and I still don't have her title [in 2023]."

Further challenges noted by some participants were accessing accurate information about wild horses in general, such as navigating the adoption process and understanding the relationships between different wild horse groups (e.g., Bureau of Land management, Mustang Heritage Foundation, United States Forest Service). Wild horse media isn't as accessible on the East Coast as it is on the West, and several participants noted they have tried to learn as they have worked with their own mustangs, but even owning one they noted needing to do a lot of research on their own. Further, the information they were able to access was limited and often confusing as the narrative of the mustang is long and wears many different faces depending on who is creating that narrative. As Holly, a trainer working with mustangs for over five years, put it,

I mean, honestly, even this is how naive I am here on the East Coast. I didn't even realize that there were wild horses still roaming the land out west, you know. I just saw Hollywood, and but oh, you know, mustangs are so pretty! I had no clue that there were like over 60,000 odd horses and holding facilities across the United States. I had no clue that they're like over 65,000 mustangs still out on the land. So again, like, I keep saying, this is all this whole journey has taught me so much, even so much more than just working with a lot of horses. You know, it's opened my eyes to the need that we must help these horses.

### *3.5. Integrating Mustangs into Eventing and Dressage*

The trainers and instructors had many suggestions regarding how to incorporate more mustangs into the world of eventing and dressage. To some degree, all the participants feel that there needs to be more streamlined access to consistent information pertaining to management of wild horses and the procuring of those wild horses. Many, including Autumn, noted that there are limited locations to pick up a horse from, and trainers often must work with others interested in getting a mustang to make the trek to an adoption site financially worthwhile. Autumn stated,

We've been to Ohio; I've never actually been to a holding like a big holding pen. I'd love to go someday but being in Maine that's far. So, we've done like a pickup in Massachusetts at Peter Whitmore's [who has been training "problem horses" for 25 years]. We've done a pickup in Ohio. We've kind of co-picked up with other people who have picked up like in



Texas, then brought up for us, and then kind of done the trailer switch kind of deal things like that. So, we found them kind of from all over.

For those interested in working with mustangs, the financial commitment of driving thousands of miles to an adoption location can be a barrier. Some trainers reported using the online adoption option, but others often like to see what horses they are getting prior to purchasing and opt out of this resource.

The EMM and TIP programs have been great opportunities for mustangs to be showcased; however, several trainers noted that they tend to be geared towards western crowds and don't often have many mustangs showcased as eventing and dressage prospects. Many trainers noted they are looking forward to the Mustang Classic, a new English-based mustang training program, and agreed with Summer that "The more people see them out there the more they could realize that they're actually pretty adaptable, flexible, trainable, useful, mid-size athletic horses." Other trainers echoed these ideas and acknowledged the variety this competition will add to mustang training programs. For example, Daisy stated,

The mustang makeovers and everything are cool. However, that's such a specific competition, but if maybe the BLM could also push showing some of the finished horses, you know, in eventing and dressage, and all the sports, you know, really doing well and getting more people that have them to speak out about them.

However, some trainers, such as Cassia, feel the lifestyle of dressage specifically has gotten too "ritzy and expensive, and there's a lot more need for the horses to be perfect when you go buy it, and a mustang might not be that, because they might have some scars, or their conformation might not be perfect." This is important to consider when determining the best strategy to market a mustang to fit the needs of eventers and dressage riders. Not every mustang will fit into the needs of eventing and dressage trainers which is why analyzing trainer needs is an important part of determining how to frame mustangs to increase their incorporation into eventing and dressage programs.

Horses selected for eventing and dressage can have a wide range of characteristics depending on the end goal for the horse. Trainers who have high competition goals may have additional prerequisite qualities they are looking for in their horse. However, there are far more riders at the lower levels who don't need the picture-perfect conformation horse; rather, they need one who is steady on their feet and willing to work with them. Today there is an air of specialization; whereas, several years ago there was more focus on a horse's ability to be versatile, something that several participants commented on. Therefore, it is critical to showcase not only the versatility of mustangs, which is an attribute noted by most participants, but also those mustangs who are reaching the higher levels of competition.

The cost of the average riding horse is also increasing, leaving a gap for the less costly mustangs to fill. Some trainers, such as Heather, noted that "I think that you won't be able to get as much money for a mustang pony as you can for a Connemara"; however, maybe in an era where accessing riding horses is at a premium, it isn't so terrible that mustangs can't fetch a price tag equivalent to "more desired" breeds such as Connemaras and other Warmblood types.

### *3.6. The Impact of Social Media*

Many trainers use their social media to share in the successes and struggles that come with working with mustangs. But participants noted that they are very careful with how they represent their mustangs on social media, making sure they highlight the strengths of their mustangs to demonstrate what they can achieve.

One participant, Ginger, who is an active mustang advocate and trainer noted, "There's a lot of negativity around the concepts of mustangs... they'll tell me they shouldn't be rounded up... you're a horrible person for ripping [them] away from their families... on Facebook you get a lot that." Social media is not only a place where participants go to share success, but also to share information regarding how they get their mustangs.

Some participants noted they try to share follow ups of mustangs they have sold to showcase the progress they are making in their new homes. Daisy explained, “I just think not enough people get to see them out there or know that that’s a mustang out there doing it well... if the ones I’ve sold do well, I’ll always share the post that [new owners] post to promote mustangs.”

#### 4. Conclusions

Discussions with trainers have determined that, yes, there is a place for mustangs within the eventing and dressage industries on the East Coast. While participants have varying degrees of backgrounds with mustangs, they are all willing to work with mustangs in some capacity.

Some trainers specifically seek mustangs out, while others don’t necessarily want to have a mustang of their own due to the time commitment and financial constraints. However, most participants enjoy working with mustangs that clients bring to them for training and/or boarding. Only a few stated they will work with mustangs but don’t prefer them. Importantly, no one said that they would turn away a mustang from their training program. They did explain, however, that for some mustangs, they might refer a client to a colleague with more mustang experience to assist in the initial gentling, as that isn’t their main area of expertise and they want success for both mustang and owner.

##### 4.1. Recommendations

Trainers have varying degrees of knowledge regarding the conditions mustangs live in in the wild and the BLM’s use of roundups and removals to manage them on public lands. Streamlining the processes of acquiring a mustang would help those interested in working with mustangs have easier access. Trainers who work with mustangs frequently noted that the lack of satellite adoption locations near them limits the number of mustangs they can work with. Further, this limitation sometimes prohibits trainers from working with mustangs at all due to the cost of associated travel. Therefore, the BLM should increase the number of satellite adoption locations on the East Coast.

##### 4.2. Social Media Presence

Participants also recommended increasing visibility of mustangs participating in eventing and dressage type activities via social media. Understanding the impact of social media is important when using it as a platform for change. DeConcini and Rice [9] showed that various organizations on social media have strong influence over how the narrative of mustangs is framed and how information is dispersed. Trainers try to be mindful of what they post so as not to feed into any negative stereotypes already associated with mustangs. As Ginger noted in her interview, she had seen a trainer make a post comparing her “perfect angel” of a quarter horse with her very-green-and-just-started mustang who was pictured bucking across the ring. Comparisons like this, while posted with the intention of humor, can further ingrain stereotypes about mustangs that harm their prospects for integration into eventing and dressage.

Social media can be used to start a new narrative of the mustang. When comparing mustangs to domestic horses, many participants echoed similar sentiments to Heather: “I would say they’re pretty similar... I don’t mean to discredit them, but they’re just another horse.” Moving toward the view that mustangs, on average, are just “another horse” is a crucial step in integrating them into the eventing and dressage worlds. Some mustangs are timid and fearful, but so are some domestic horses, and decreasing the stereotypes of mustangs could help to show people they are on equal playing field to many other domestic horses.

##### 4.3. Expanding Existing Programs

Finally, participants recommended that the BLM and MHF include more English-derived competitions to increase visibility and awareness of their ability to be successful in those disciplines. While several wanted to see English style routes included in the EMM and TIP programs, others noted their excitement for the new Mustang Champion program that started October 2023, and

believe it could improve perceptions about mustangs as eventing and dressage prospects. A few trainers who enjoy the shorter timelines of the EMM and TIP challenges mentioned that the year-long timeline was a potential challenge. However, a majority welcomed the longer timeline and could see themselves doing the competition, as it will allow them to train longer and not feel as rushed.

Several participants noted that the EMM and TIP programs are more “western geared” causing participants to change disciplines to be able to place successfully within these competitive programs. Breaking away from these stereotypes is critical to increase awareness that mustangs can make successful English prospects. Some trainers recommended strategies to combat this, such as including a set of strictly English classes within the EMM to allow English-based trainers to flourish in an already successful program and allow them to highlight other strengths of mustangs.

#### 4.4. Future Research

An important factor brought up by some participants is the need to assess and address the capacity of veterinarians, farriers, and other equine professionals to care for mustangs. Until tamed and trained, mustangs are indeed wild animals who are at varying levels of socialization upon arriving at their new homes. Therefore, further studies are needed to assess the resources available to care for these animals who are not the “typical” domestic horse, as mustangs can get injured and need routine care as well. So, before increasing the numbers of wild horses living on the East Coast, it is critical to first assess whether these animals can be cared for with existing resources.

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## Appendix A

Interview Guide:

A New Opportunity for Mustangs: Finding a place for mustangs in the eventing and dressage disciplines.

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Cayla, I have a B.S. in Equine Studies with a focus in Equine Science from the University of New Hampshire. Currently I am working on my M.S. in Animals and Public Policy through Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine. This interview is part of my M.S. research looking at whether there is a place for mustangs in eventing and dressage programs in the eastern states of the U.S. You were selected to participate in this research due to your background in \_\_\_\_\_ (insert individual person’s background highlights). If you have any questions throughout the process, please let me know. Also, if at any time you need to stop this interview for any reason you are free to do so, or if you don’t feel comfortable with questions, we can skip those too. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Introduction (focus is fleshing out the participant’s background further).

1. How would you describe your business?
  - a. How would you describe your training/teaching program?
  - b. Components of your program do you consider integral to your training/teaching program?
2. How long have you been working with horses, and what factors contributed to you opening your own business?
3. What would you say is your strongest “skill” as a trainer/teacher is (problem horses, young horses, sport horses, specific discipline...)?  
Relationship with horses (Focus is understanding more about how they view horses.)
1. Tell me about your relationship with horses (your horses, client’s horses, or in general).
  - a. Do you see them as partners, competitors, part of your business structure?
  - b. Positive stories? Negative stories? (can be stories about horses you owned, trained, helped a client train...)
  - c. Have your views regarding how you perceive your relationship with your horse (client’s horses, training horses...) changed throughout your working relationship with them?
2. What are the qualities you like in a horse?
  - a. Types of horses you work with most (breeds, genders...).
3. How do you decide what horses fit into your training/teaching program?
  - a. Physical type, age, history of the horse, purpose/job the horse will fulfill.

Client base (To understand the community that they serve and whether the participant feels Mustangs would work in their program).
1. What is the age range of people that you teach and/or train (with and for)?
2. What is the skill range of...
  - a. The horses in your lesson/training program?
    - i. What level would you describe your lesson horses at?
  - b. The clientele that you teach.
    - i. Do they own horses?
    - ii. What types of horses do they own?
    - iii. Does your cliental work on training goals with their horses?
    - iv. How would you feel having your clientele work with green horses?
3. Do you take your clients to shows?
  - a. If yes, please describe the types of shows and venues you go to?
  - b. Do you have qualifications that you expect students to make to take them to shows?
    - i. What are those qualifications?
    - ii. Own their own horse or lease? Meet certain milestones?

#### Facility

1. Please describe the general care of your horses? (Number, feeding, turn out practices)
2. How important is it for horses in your care to be able to live in the set up you have? Do you have flexibility when it comes to introducing horses to your set up?
  - a. Can you modify paddocks to allow more horses to live together? (If yes, how so? If no, why not?)
  - b. How adaptable is your facilities structure for individual horse’s needs?

#### Experience and relationship with mustangs

1. How familiar are you with mustangs?
  - a. What is your current understanding of who mustangs are and the environment they live in (both in holding facilities and on the ranges)?
    - i. Overpopulation on public lands. Populations in holding facilities.
    - ii. Mustang Make Over Challenge and Trainer Incentive Program?
  - b. How do you perceive mustangs?
    - i. What comes to mind when you think about them?
    - ii. Are there any stereotypes that you associate with mustangs?
  - c. What experiences have you had with mustangs?
2. Relationship with mustangs.
  - a. For trainers who work with mustangs:

- i. How do you feel when clients come to you with a mustang for training and/or lessons?
  - ii. Can you describe the qualities and characteristics of mustangs that appeal to you?
    1. Do you see these qualities in other horses (can you elaborate)?
  - iii. Can you talk about any differences between mustangs and domestic horses that you have noticed or believe to exist?
  - iv. Can you speak about any comments or feedback from other trainers or instructors regarding your work with mustangs that you've encountered?
  - v. Would you choose to work with them again?
- b. For trainers who don't work with mustangs:
  - i. How would you feel if a client came to you wanting to adopt/train a mustang?
    1. Gentled versus ungentle?
    2. Would you want it to have 30, 60, 90 (etc..) days of training on the horse prior to purchasing?
  - ii. Why don't you work with Mustangs?
  - iii. What factors would influence you to take a Mustang into your program (or not)?
    1. As a sales horse?
    2. As a lesson horse?
3. Questions for judges (not all will receive these questions).
  - a. How long have you been a judge?
  - b. Can you talk about your experiences judging "nontypical" breeds competing within your sports such as Mustangs or Gypsy Vanners?

#### Opportunities and perceived challenges

1. Do you have any suggestions to create more opportunities for mustangs to be used in eventing and dressage riding and/or training programs?
2. What challenges do you think exist for mustangs and those who work with them? Or what challenges exist that you face yourself (if you work with mustangs)?
3. Where do you think mustangs belong?
  - a. As wild animals? Monitored by the Bureau of Land Management? In private farms? As riding and/or show horses?

#### Ending Questions

1. After talking about Mustangs more, do you think that you would be interested in incorporating them into your program, or be open to it in the future if a client brought one to you? (Just for participants who do not work with Mustangs).
  2. Do you have any last thoughts or questions for me?
- Thank you so much for your time and participation. I really enjoyed talking with you about your program and hearing your thoughts on the place of Mustangs in eventing and dressage. If you have any questions or thoughts later, you are welcome to call or email me. I hope you have a great rest of your day.

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