

Challenging the Trainer's Challenge

By Barbra Ann King

Most horse rescue operations are either at full capacity or very close to it. Many horses they rescue are young, unstarted horses. They are nursed back to health, assessed by veterinarians and hopefully placed in good homes. Some rescue operations even have the time and available staff to start some of these young horses; but most rely heavily on volunteers to care and handle the horses, so getting them started under saddle is not always an option.

When these young horses get a good start under saddle, they have a better chance of finding a good home. Rescue operations pour their hearts and souls (and bank accounts) into helping horses have a decent life. They are entirely devoted to the well-being of the horse.

The Trainer's Challenge competition takes place every year at the Mane Event in Chilliwack, BC, and in Red Deer, AB, as well as in other horse events across the country and beyond. Three trainers are randomly assigned a horse to train over a period of three days. The horses are very young (two to three years old) and not started. They all have similar backgrounds and usually come from the same ranch to ensure they have all been handled the same way. At the end of the Trainer's Challenge, the young horses are sold as green broke, ready to pursue a life as a saddle horse. Pretty much all of the trainers that participate in this competition are used to starting horses and do it for a living. I heard one guy say he starts 30-50 horses a week. I'm thinking this competition is not so much of a challenge after all.

Here's an idea: what if we were to use rescued foals for the Trainer's Challenge? I'm sure it wouldn't be difficult to find three young horses of similar age. It doesn't matter if they are not from the same breeder because, as a horse breeder pointed out to me, you can have foals out of the same dam and sire that have totally different character traits. Most horse owners do not have the skills to take on

an unbroken horse, but they don't mind purchasing a horse that has been started.

I see a win-win combination here. If the horses used in trainer's challenges came from rescue operations, that would take three foals off their hands and the money these horses bring in when sold after the challenge could go back to the rescue operation. We know rescue organizations could use the extra funds to help out other horses. If the Trainer's Challenge supported rescue operations, there would be more awareness of rescued horses. There could even be a \$1 cover fee for spectators to watch and learn during the challenge. The money collected could go back to the rescue organizations that supplied the horses.

As for the trainers, they would get a real challenge where they would have the opportunity to show all their skills as a trainer. The horses and trainers would also be on more even ground as neither one would know what to expect from the other. The audience would get to see what trainers do when faced with this kind of challenge. This would be a more realistic challenge that would match every day experiences.

When I ran this idea by a few people, most found it to be an extraordinary idea. But one respondent was concerned with the fact that the trainers had to have horses that were "properly" raised. Apparently, training a horse that has a shady background or an unknown sire is not acceptable and can even be dangerous for the trainers. Does this mean too difficult?

I believe it is safe to say that all attendees at the Mane Event are horse lovers (or they are accompanying someone who is!). Most of us want what is best for horses everywhere. No one likes learning that a perfectly good horse was sent to the meat market because it was unwanted. Can we not pull together and make the Trainer's Challenge about starting young horses, no matter what breed or background? I think all three trainers



Oki before riding



Oki first ride

would be winners in this situation because they all cared enough to take up the challenge of helping a horse have a good start in life.

I honestly hope that I have started some dialog with this article. The Trainer's Challenge competition could develop to its full potential, showcasing trainers that can demonstrate how skillful they really are. The Challenge could bring awareness to the growing problem of abandoned, unwanted and abused horses where most go for meat without the chance at a useful and happy life.

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