

ALWAYS FAITHFUL

The Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program ignites a sense of purpose in wounded warriors.

Story and photography by MATT BROCKMAN



Veteran Rebecca Fletcher prepares to mount up at a clinic on the Circle Bar Ranch in West Texas.



After sustaining injuries while serving as an Army Green Beret, Michael McCave says horses have helped him heal on many levels.

OHN MAYER REMEMBERS THE FIRST TIME HE LOST A FELLOW SOLDIER IN COMBAT.

"He was 19 years old and pretty much bled to death in my arms," recalls Mayer, a 33-year-old U.S. Marine Corps officer who was deployed to Iraq multiple times. "I sat there watching him die, and I wanted to tell him how much his country, his unit and his fellow Marines loved him. But I couldn't do it because it was too late."

It wasn't too late for others, however. Acutely aware of the devastating effects of warfare, Mayer's passion now is to help the many wounded survivors and their families.

"It was quite an honor when the Commandant asked me to lead the Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Regiment, which is in charge of the non-medical recovery of wounded, critically ill and injured Marines," Mayer says. "I did that from 2010 to 2012. It touched me greatly and changed my life."

While Mayer served as the Regiment's Commanding Officer, he became familiar with the Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program. McCain, the equine program's namesake, was a four-time Purple Heart recipient who hosted trail rides for wounded veterans in the 1960s. The program is supported by the Semper Fi Fund and the America's Fund. The two funds provide financial assistance and lifetime support through a variety of programs to post-9/11 wounded, critically ill and injured members of all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. More than 108,000 grants totaling in excess of \$125 million have benefitted almost 16,000 military heroes and their families since the funds were established a dozen years ago.

The Jinx McCain program was created by Karen Guenther, Semper Fi Fund's chief executive officer. Growing up on a California ranch, Guenther has an appreciation for positive interaction between humans and horses, and specifically the impact equine therapy has on wounded veterans. Mayer shared Guenther's passion for horses and the cowboy lifestyle, so he was excited to send Marines from his regiment to the program. Initially providing cutting horse clinics, the program evolved into also giving wounded veterans opportunities to

ride alongside working ranch cowboys and professional horsemen.

"We [first] partnered with them and started sending our wounded warriors to ride horses," Mayer says. "Because we all know the best thing for the inside of a man is the outside of a horse, it was a natural fit."

The partnership strengthened when Guenther offered Mayer the position of foreman of the Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program. Mayer retired from the Marines and began his new duties on September 1, 2014.

THE CIRCLE BAR EXPERIENCE

On a cool and drizzly spring morning, 10 Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program participants trot off from the Circle Bar Ranch headquarters to gather and drive 500 cows. They are accompanied by the ranch's owners, Jerry Bob Daniel, his wife, Eugenie, and their son, Colton. Riding along to provide instruction and support are legendary horseman Dick Pieper and well-known ranch versatility trainer Mozaun McKibben.

The trek covers about 10 miles and stretches into the early afternoon. It isn't a routine ranch task by any measure, but is an opportunity the veterans crave. The excursion is part of a four-day experience provided by the Daniels that includes mounting the veterans on reliable Circle Bar Ranch geldings, as well as providing meals served in the ranch's cookhouse and accommodations in an old church that was renovated into a comfortable lodge.

The heavy morning air is filled with the occasional call of a bobwhite quail, sounds of creaking leather, muted conversations and an occasional burst of laughter. An undercurrent of excitement runs through the veterans, most of whom are experiencing their first cattle drive. The call of a shared mission, deeply instilled in the eight men and two women, keep them cognizant and watchful of their surroundings. While they enjoy the freedom and excitement that come with a big cow gather, they remain mindful of each other's wellbeing.

"All of us have done boot camp and done all the things together that build a bond," says former Marine Carlos Rochel. "We'll gallop across a pasture, disregarding our own safety, to check on someone who may be in [trouble]."

After prowling several pastures, about 500 cows are pushed into a trap where the veterans are tasked with holding the herd in a corner. Jerry Bob takes charge and rides a Circle Bar stallion into the large herd, where he begins sorting off several dozen yearling heifers. They



Aaron McMihelk is one of many former soldiers who participates in the Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program.



TOP: John Mayer, a former Marine, is now the foreman of the Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program.

BOTTOM: With coaching from professional trainer Mozaun McKibben, McMilhelhones his cutting skills.

need to be moved to a different pasture before the older cows can be driven to the ranch's headquarters. Colton and another Circle Bar cowboy assist with the sorting, and soon many of the veterans begin helping, turning back cattle, and driving and holding the heifers on the other end of the trap. Cows that break from the herd are promptly circled and driven back by the veterans. After the sorting is done, the crew moves the heifers and drives the remaining cows to headquarters for pregnancy checking the following day.

A hearty lunch awaits the group at the Circle Bar cookhouse. There isn't much time spent lingering at the dinner table, however, as the veterans are eager to return to the ranch's large round pen for an afternoon of cow work. The ranch's horse program is anchored by 2000 Quarter Horse stallion Circle Bar Pistol, who is by Playgun and out of a Preferred Pay mare. He has won world titles in the American Quarter Horse Association and Ranch Horse Association of America. Versatile ranch horses are the pride of the Daniel family, and the veterans benefit not only from good horses but personal instruction by McKibben and Pieper, who manages the Circle Bar Ranch horse division. Rather than leaving the round pen, each participant stays, helps with the herd work and encourages other riders.

When the session is over, a weary but fulfilled group makes its way to the cookhouse for a supper to satisfy even the hungriest cowpuncher. The experience leaves the servicemen and -women with an important sense of accomplishment.

"Out here, everybody wants to work hard, learn how to be a cowboy and help each other out," says Michael McCave, an Army Green Beret who participated in the clinic. "It's a good, uplifting and edifying environment."

The remainder of the clinic is filled with ranch-related riding activities both in and out of the round pen. Idle time is scarce. Most participants feed the horses and a few assist Eugenie with bottle-feeding some orphaned calves. Mayer provides a unique twist to most clinics by challenging the participants to make a piece of cowboy gear. A hand-stitched "hobble belt," complete with CowPuncher brand hardware, was made by each Circle Bar Ranch clinic participant.

GRADUATE LEVEL

The Jinx McCain is not an ordinary equine therapy program, differing from most due to its lack of accreditation. The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) International sets standards for operating practices at centers offering equine-assisted activities and therapies. While the standards and requirements address safety issues and help lower insurance premiums, the tradeoff is less flexibility and freedom. A willingness to forgo PATH accreditation allows the Jinx McCain program to offer atypical sessions—ones involving more risk that appeal to veterans seeking something beyond conventional treatments and therapies.

“These young gals and guys train together, deploy together, fight together, get wounded together, and then come home to recover,” says Mayer. “But they’ve lost the people that understand what they’ve been through. Many of them fall into bad habits and [some] are on so many medications it makes me angry. And they’re [asking] ‘What am I going to do with the rest of my life?’

“We don’t give them all the answers, but what we do for them is try to help them regain that spirit they had when they joined. They fought, and they won, and they can still be winners in life. That’s the magic that other programs and doctors can’t really offer.”

The challenge for any therapy program tailored to veterans is connecting with someone who has gone from being an independent, motivated and mission-focused individual to a man or woman coping with an injury or illness that may impact them for the remainder of their lives. The Jinx McCain program and its “all-in, cowboy-way” approach is embraced by many veterans—some of whom also participate in traditional PATH International-accredited horseback programs.

“Every therapy, there’s a time and place for it,” McCave says.

McCave served in Special Operations in Iraq and received chest wounds from enemy gunfire. After recovery, he served as a low-altitude parachute instructor in Arizona. There, an accident while assisting a soldier on a jump almost claimed his life and left him seriously injured. He was referred to an equine therapy program near Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and the program connected with McCave.

“I stayed there for six months because I couldn’t get enough. It completely changed my life,” he says. “I could hardly walk and the therapeutic riding strengthened my core. I needed a quieter horse and encouragement, and I needed to be taught. The Jinx McCain—this is like the graduate level for me. We’re on the horse for eight hours a day now and we’re loping through pastures.”



Fletcher and other veterans gather cattle on the Circle Bar Ranch, an activity that requires strategy and teamwork, aspects that appeal to former soldiers.

GIVING THANKS, FULFILLING DREAMS

Mayer’s excitement about the Jinx McCain program is infectious. He says it reignites a veteran’s zest for life and he knows the unique therapy would not be possible without the willingness of ranchers to open their gates to total strangers, mount them and allow them to work their cattle.

“We count on the absolute good graces of ranchers and outfitters and folks that every day are going out in the big country and working cattle, and they don’t realize the absolute gem they have,” Mayer says. “The program wouldn’t be what it is and as powerful as it is without Eugenie and Jerry Bob offering. They let us come out here, put us on the ranch horses that their cowboys use and take us out to work their cattle. That is something that not everybody is willing to take a chance on. Then you throw in world champions like Dick Pieper and Mozaun McKibben, and they give their time, their knowledge and 100 percent effort making sure each of us

learns the most we can and achieves our best. It’s just phenomenal.”

Making the Jinx McCain experience truly life-changing is Mayer’s goal. He wants it to lead to positive, lifelong changes for the participant and his or her family.

While most participants will not become fulltime ranch cowboys or support themselves with horses, Mayer’s goal is to provide them with not only the inspiration, but a pathway to creating a business or avocation that provides income and life satisfaction. The Semper Fi Apprenticeship Program was created in June of 2015 for such purposes.

First, the program determines an applicant’s interests and strengths. Mayer and Semper Fi Fund staff then direct participants with training plans, timelines, goals and start-up funding. Once training is complete, industry experts are sought who will take participants under their tutelage and help get them started in their chosen field. To date, 18 Jinx McCain participants are enrolled in the program and are pursuing trades that include bootmaking, baking, horse shoeing, service dog training, hatmaking, rawhide and leather braiding, silver engraving, horse training and saddlemaking.

“We take that spirit and without a lot of red tape and paperwork come up with a plan to achieve that dream so these young men and women can achieve their dream and have a purpose,” Mayer says. “Instead of an entitlement-based life, they can have a purpose-filled life, and that is the ultimate goal of the Semper Fi Fund and America’s Fund.”

The camaraderie and common purpose that Jinx McCain participants embrace makes an outsider envious of the bond shared by these men and women. Their bond is unique, and although they come from all branches of the armed forces, it’s evident that the spirit of the Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program is easily summed up in the translation of the Marine Corps motto, Semper Fidelis—Always Faithful. 🇺🇸

Learn more at semperfund.org and americasfund.org. **MATT BROCKMAN** is a Texas-based writer and photographer. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.