

# **HEALING** **HEROES** **WITH HORSES**

Gerald Jennex, foreground, works with AQHA Professional Horseman Mozaun McKibben to gather a herd of cattle at the Circle Bar Ranch in Truscott, Texas.



## The Semper Fi Fund's Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program pairs

### wounded veterans with American Quarter Horses.

#### Story and photos by Holly Clanahan

GERALD JENNEX'S MIND IS A TANGLED KNOT SOME DAYS AS HE struggles with the post-traumatic stress disorder that followed him home from his Marine Corps service in Iraq.

But get this Michigander out on big ranch country atop a good cow pony, and his thoughts unfurl as his head clears and he reconnects with his latent cowboy spirit.

After leaving the military as fully disabled and struggling to find his purpose, Gerald first thought the music business would be his salvation.

"It turned out to be something totally different," he says now. "When I came out into nature and started getting around the horses, my music became a different sound. I'd be out there on the horse, and I'd be listening to the birds singing, and then I'd put that rhythm of the trot in, and it'd just be music to my ears. I loved it. If I got along some rippling waters, that made it even better." A horse nickers softly behind him, and Gerald smiles.

"It's just music. I listen to that vibration, and it does something for my soul."

Indeed, horses are healing balm for banged-up souls, and nobody knows that better than retired Marine Corps Col. John Mayer, who brought Gerald and nine other wounded veterans to the Circle Bar Ranch in Truscott, Texas, in March for a Jinx McCain Horsemanship Clinic under the auspices of the Semper Fi Fund.

John, a 33-year Marine, was commander of the Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Regiment in 2010, when he realized that post 9/11 veterans – young and full of moxie – needed a different spin on equine therapy.

"I've always had a love for horses, and I believe the best thing for the inside of a person is the outside of a horse," says John, an AQHA member who now lives near Fredericksburg, Texas. "I hate to use the word 'therapy,' but I wanted to get (wounded vets) out there and get them on horseback. So we started with traditional equine therapy sessions. And the guys didn't like the therapy. They didn't want to wear helmets. They didn't like the side-walkers. It just bored them to death. So I said, 'I got ya. We're not going to do therapy. What we're doing to do is cowboy.' They'll get their 'therapy,' but doing neat stuff that challenges them."

It started as cutting-horse challenges (featured in *America's Horse* in 2011) and evolved into a partnership with the Semper Fi Fund, which was started in 2004 by Marine spouses to support wounded, injured or ill Marines. The Semper Fi Fund later created America's Fund, which serves all branches of the military. When John retired from the Marines in 2014, he was asked to come on board as director of the fund's Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program, which is named for a Vietnam-era colonel who hosted trail rides for wounded veterans at Camp Pendleton, California, in the 1960s.

"I said 'Absolutely!' So here we are, doing six clinics a year, plus we do a monthly advanced clinic out in California for our guys who really want to learn," John says.

The Jinx McCain camps have included cattle drives, brandings and, as at the Circle Bar, gathering and sorting cattle on the expanses of a West Texas ranch. The Circle Bar is an AQHA Ranching Heritage Breeder that typically sells its produce as well-trained ranch horses, rather than as babies – so there were plenty of finely tuned American Quarter Horses for the veterans to ride. Legendary horseman Dick Pieper calls the Circle Bar home now, and he was on hand to help coach the riders as they learned how to cut cattle in the arena, and as they made a wide circle outside. AQHA Professional Horseman Mozaun McKibben, who has since been named the 2015 AQHA Versatility Ranch Horse all-around open world champion, was also there as an instructor.

"We really like working ranches vs. going in an arena," John says. "Most of these guys aren't going to become show riders, but they sure enjoy being horseback and having a mission. That's why we love working cows; it's having a mission. They work with their fellow teammates, and they have a mission they need to accomplish, and so it really works out perfect."

"At almost all our clinics, we have some aspect of cow working. It's kind of a unique approach," John says. Riders aren't asked to deal with a riding instructor giving them the usual directives, like, say, posting the trot. They simply relax, focus on the job at hand and learn as they go. "We'll put them on cows on the second day of touching a horse, and it just works out so well," he says.

About half of the participants in each camp are newcomers, while others are repeat riders. All expenses are paid by the Semper Fi Fund, and veterans are encouraged to keep coming back to the camps, as their recovery isn't something that can be neatly wrapped up after just one week in the saddle. Healing – much like horsemanship – is a journey.

Gerald is on about his 10th clinic, and one thing that he holds dear is the camaraderie that has developed among the horsemen and -women.

He looks around at a few of the men he has known since 2014, when he went to the Double Rafter Cattle Drive in Wyoming.

"We hit it off," Gerald says. "We created that bond again (like what they had experienced in the military). And not only was it the bond of brotherhood, but it was also this horsemanship bringing some things out for us, and that caught me on fire."

Gerald built a roping dummy at home and practices often. He's about to start service-dog training, and he hopes to one day train horses, too.

"I'm setting goals, and I'm achieving them," he says. "I got in this arena today, and I was sitting my lope, and I was sitting my trot, and it just felt so good. I can see it, because



Maj. Mike McCave says that even when he was deployed overseas, he read cowboy magazines to feed his love for horses and western culture.

these people believe in me, my brothers and sisters, they believe in me.”

The sense of community at a Jinx McCain clinic is palpable, with riders constantly checking in on one another, helping with each other’s horses as needed and – during some cutting practice in the arena – shouting out encouragement and a few good-natured jabs.

John knows that’s part of the rejuvenating effect – recapturing the close bond of brother- and sisterhood. But the horses have their own magic, too.

“When (riders) start feeling that they can communicate with the horse and work as a team together ... boy, that’s win-win for everybody, and they get excited about that. Once they can ride and move forward, backward and sideways, then you put them on a cow, and it gives them a different challenge of having to work with their horse to move a cow. And then we

have to move a herd of cows, and they have to work with their buddies on the teamwork side of it.

“You see the confidence come back into them that might have been lost or broken. The thing that I always tell folks is that, listen, these guys and gals joined the military knowing they were going to go to war. Less than 1 percent of Americans ever join the military. But these guys and gals joined, knowing they were going to go fight. This is a special breed of people we’re talking about here that needs a greater challenge.

“So we give them that challenge with the horses and with working cows on big country on ranches. It’s just so magical to rejuvenate their spirits. There are things in life that they’ve never even thought of before, not only in the horse world but also in the career world, that shows them, you know, I *can* take care of somebody else. I can learn new things. I *can* accomplish things I never dreamed of.

“That transfers over to their personal life, so they become better parents, better spouses, better citizens of our great land. It all stems from, ‘Here’s how you saddle a horse, here’s how you groom a horse.’ That’s where you start, but it leads to so much more.”

## A Future With Horses

ARMY MAJ. MIKE MCCAVE’S VOICE SOFTENS AS HE THINKS OF HIS military career, where it detoured and how horses might help him find his new path.

He was a Special Forces officer who reveled in taking on the hardest jobs the Army had to offer and doing them well. He survived two gunshots to the chest in 2011 and returned to the field. But then a family health crisis meant he was needed at home, and he took a non-deployable job as a freefall parachute instructor.

He jumped out of planes with his students during the most dangerous of situations. Mike was their safety net; if something went wrong, it was his job to quickly troubleshoot. And one day in 2014, something went terribly wrong. A student started spinning out of control, and “It’s my job as an instructor to grab him, make sure he’s stable and pull his chute,” Mike says. He accomplished that mission, likely saving the student’s life, and then he pulled his own parachute cord. Unfortunately, his reserve parachute deployed at the same time, and the lines tangled.

“I hit the ground at 119 miles an hour,” Mike says. His injuries were considerable, but he says “God saved my life. I shouldn’t be here right now, hitting the ground that hard.”

He had to relearn how to walk, and equine therapy helped with that.

“I’ve always loved horses,” Mike says. He rode a little bit as a child, and he even rode in the Army, as part of his job, for a while. But when he heard about the Jinx McCain program,



Joie Williams was busy picking up tips and techniques he could take back home to Mebane, North Carolina, to try on his own horse.



Rebecca Fletcher, who grew up as a hunter-jumper rider, enjoys every chance she can get to get back in the saddle. Here, she's riding Circle Bar Pistol.

he knew it was for him. He eagerly signed up for his first clinic at the Circle Bar.

"It has always been my dream to be a cowboy," Mike says, "I've just never been in the right place and time."

Pain medications usually dull the roar of his prior injuries, but during lunch break after a hard morning in the saddle, Mike says, "I haven't taken a thing this entire week. I am so sore, but I am so happy. This is the best therapy I could have."

Even better, he's thinking about the future and how, perhaps, he could bring some of that magic to others.

"Cowboy life will be in my future," he says. "My wife, Sarah, is a speech pathologist. We were talking about opening a small therapeutic riding center. If we could do that," he hesitates, "... that's a dream to have."

## A Lifeline

JOIE WILLIAMS OF NORTH CAROLINA WAS IN THE ARMY NATIONAL Guard for 25 years, retiring in 2006 after a tour of duty in Iraq. PTSD and migraines plague him, as well as some other disabilities he says are unseen. But they are deeply felt.

"Before I went to Iraq, I was a business owner," Joie says. "I was an over-the-road truck driver, and I had my own business. After I came back, I had to come out of the truck. I had to get rid of the business."

In his home life, "I had always been the person who was in charge," he says. "But then I got to the point where I realized I can't call the shots no more. I felt powerless, and I felt like I wasn't needed."

It was a sense of despondency that almost went too far.

"I have even thought about what it would be like to take your life," he says quietly. "But the sense of feeling needed, I found in my animals. My animals can't do for themselves, I have to do for them. That gives me a purpose."

Besides his Shar Pei-Pit Bull cross named King, Joie has a bay Quarter Horse he nicknamed "Baby Boy." His wife's horse is "Ladybug." The two of them enjoy monthly trail rides with a group of people, featuring lots of food and fellowship.

Attending the Jinx McCain camp with its excellent instructors, Joie says, "I've been riding for about eight years, but I always knew there were things I was doing wrong. I was never taught by professionals, so I picked up some bad habits. To see it done the right way ... I have some good tools to go back home and work on my horses."

## Staying in the Saddle

HORSE OWNERSHIP IS A GOAL FOR 28-YEAR-OLD REBECCA Fletcher, a skilled hunter-jumper rider who has been in the saddle since she was 6. But there's time for that in the future, as things are already moving pretty fast. She retired as a Marine Corps sergeant a year ago, after a motor vehicle accident that claimed her right leg.

Since then, she bought a home on a couple of acres in Maryland, started working for the Department of Defense and is taking college classes – all while training her Dogo Argentino (a muscular hunting breed) and attending two Jinx McCain clinics.

Riding now, with only one leg, is "definitely different," she says. But the Semper Fi Fund has been instrumental in keeping her in the saddle – specifically, by purchasing a custom treeless saddle with no right fender. Mozaun helped customize it further at the Circle Bar by adding a strap that buckles across Rebecca's right hip, allowing her to lean into that right side and sit equally on both seat bones.

Before, she felt perilously one-sided and unable to balance.

With the addition of the strap, "It has been phenomenal. It has really allowed my riding to improve, just over the last couple of days. I'm so excited about it," she says.

And she's effective with it. The Semper Fi Fund posted a video to its Facebook page, showing Rebecca and Circle Bar Pistol doing nicely executed spins both directions. She uses a crop to deliver leg cues on the right side.

"I love being on horseback," she says. "I've been riding since I was 6, so to me, this is what life is about: coming out here, enjoying good camaraderie, good friends and just being with what God created."

## Learning a Trade

John Mayer is also director of another Semper Fi Fund program that works hand in hand with the Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program. It is an apprenticeship program that teaches cowboy trades (among others) to wounded veterans.

Many disabled veterans are left without a purpose, John says, and "what we do with the horses is try to get them excited about life again and show them they can do challenging things." Once they believe that, there's no limit, and a home business seems doable.

"When your spirit is rejuvenated, and you have hope again, that'll get you out, and you can do almost anything," he says.

At the Circle Bar clinic, veterans worked on a leather-working project in the evenings.

"I guarantee you, of the 10 people that show, one will become just incredibly interested and continue on with horses, and one will be interested in being a leather worker and perhaps opening a saddle shop or getting into the trade," John says.

The apprenticeship program offers an outlet for continued training in trades like bit and spur making, silver engraving or gun-smithing.

Check out the digital edition of *America's Horse* to see a TV news broadcast about the apprenticeship program.





Jeremy Williams, right, says being horseback is his therapy. At left is Colton Daniel of the Circle Bar Ranch.

## Communicating Clearly

THE WORLD TRADE CENTER TOWERS FELL JUST BEFORE JEREMY Williams marked his first anniversary in the Marine Corps. “Then,” he says, “we started pre-deployment training.” His tours took him to Fallujah, Ramadi – all the Iraqi cities that were in the news at the time – and he was injured by multiple IEDs, or improvised explosive devices, in Ramadi.

After his recovery, Jeremy, a 34-year-old Texan, threw himself with equal fervor into an academic career. He has an undergraduate degree in political science from Sam Houston State University and has applied for the executive master of public service and administration program at Texas A&M’s Bush School of Government and Public Service.

So it should come as no surprise that when Jeremy realized how healing horses could be, he threw himself into that world with gusto, too.

He went on two cattle drives in 2014 and then, eager to hone his skills, signed up for the advanced horsemanship program, which is held monthly in California.

“I’ve been consistently on a horse the last two years,” Jeremy says. “It’s my therapy. I’ve become more confident in communicating with the horse, and that skill set has run over into my personal life, with my children, with my relationship with their mother, my ex-wife. It has helped me communicate better. It’s the same kind of technique I use on my children. My two sons are 13 and 11, and I’m starting to use those reinforcement techniques.”

Like most of the other Jinx McCain riders, Jeremy is grateful for the brotherhood he has found within its ranks. Looking around at the riders he has done multiple clinics with, he says simply: “It’s a family.”

## Still a Cowboy

TWENTY-NINE-YEAR-OLD CALIFORNIAN AARON MCMHELK IS another Jinx McCain rider with some past riding experience. Besides horses, he also sat on a few bucking bulls.

“My parents and my football coach didn’t really want me to do that, because they wanted me to play football,” says Aaron, who is on this month’s cover of *America’s Horse*. “I loved playing football, but you know, I wanted to be a cowboy. Chicks dig cowboys.”

He also wanted to be a Marine, first enlisting in 2006. He left boot camp to heal from an injured wrist and then, after fighting some red tape, returned to boot camp in January 2008. A week later, he became paralyzed, due to what he calls a rare allergic reaction around his spinal cord to the second round of vaccinations.

“I started riding horses again in 2009,” he says. “I got on this big kick to do everything that I used to do. I wasn’t going to let anything stop me.” (He even rode a mechanical bull, but stopped short of the real thing.)

He experimented with different accommodations to a regular saddle until a fellow veteran gave him her Randy Bird therapeutic saddle. He continued to modify it a little, to suit his tastes, and says, “It made me a lot more comfortable.”

But Aaron says a lot of his comfort in the saddle has to do with the horse he’s mounted on. At the Circle Bar, his little sorrel, Circle Bar Waurika, was smooth and responsive, even though ranch owner Eugenie Daniel says none of her horses had ever been ridden by special-needs riders before.

“Where I am now compared to where I was this time last year is a big difference,” Aaron says, crediting the Jinx McCain camps that he has been attending since 2014. He’s grateful for ranch owners like Eugenie and her husband, Jerry Bob Daniel, who welcome veterans with amazing hospitality.

“These types of people are what make America great,” he says. When he’s told that the Daniels would likely say the same thing about him and his fellow riders, Aaron just grins. 🐾

*To learn more about the Semper Fi Fund and America’s Fund, go to [www.semperfifund.org](http://www.semperfifund.org). If you are interested in hosting a Jinx McCain Horsemanship event at your facility, contact John Mayer at [john.mayer@semperfifund.org](mailto:john.mayer@semperfifund.org).*



REVISIT THE CIRCLE BAR RANCH BY READING a story from the *America’s Horse* archives, available now in the digital magazine. Instructions for accessing the digital edition are on Page 42.