

Saving Moonlight

The violence along the Mexico border isn't just against people. By Stephen L. Wilmeth

The drug war in Mexico is not a simple police action. It is a ferocious upheaval of human endeavors that threatens to disrupt any normal existence in Mexico for a generation. More civilians are being killed on a proportional basis than in Afghanistan. The border towns have been ravaged by cartel intrusions. Whole communities have been displaced. Families have been shattered. Normal patterns of life that existed only a few years ago are gone.

Equine Destruction

The awful human toll is one piece of a greater problem. The Mexican horse world is another. It is being shredded and this is most apparent in the competitive jumping world. Today, few events are being scheduled. The lives of both riders and horses are threatened.

The cartels have added extortion to drug smuggling. And it is not just wealthy Mexican families who have faced kidnappings and business extortion. Juarez street vendors have

been killed for failing to make weekly protection demands of 100 pesos...less than \$20. Lives of young riders are at risk simply because they are associated with what is perceived to be wealth-driven pursuits. The English riding world is included as a target.

A Growing Mexican Presence

In recent local jumping competitions on the American side of the border, gatherings of Mexicans who have fled their home country can be seen watching and discussing the proceedings. The American approach is different and they are learning a new discipline.

In America, hunter-jumpers are judged by style and time. In Mexico, riders are judged strictly on the fastest times and the absence of faults. Mexican horses are different, too. Dominated by warmbloods that tower over the Southwest's thoroughbreds and quarter-horse crosses, both sides are learning from an unexpected new union of cultures.

The Plight of the Horses

Mexican horses at local events in that country have experienced a gauntlet of risks and they are not exempt from any abuses or dangers faced by the Mexicans themselves. They face the uncertainty of any border crossing and the danger of the extortion and drug-smuggling reality of Mexico. When heading for the border, half of those horses today never make it to their northern destination. They are killed, held for ransom, or disappear, and they are being intercepted and used in running drugs across the border. The insertion of drugs into their orifices or the unfathomable cruelty of cutting them open and inserting drugs into their bodies are real cartel atrocities.

Prelude to Passage

In the recent Scottsdale Classic in Arizona, a big Hanoverian mare named Moonlight carried a young rider, Mayci Lee, to a class championship. At 17.2 hands and in excess of



COURTESY, LEE FAMILY ARCHIVES

Moonlight and Mayci Lee competing at the Scottsdale Classic. Moonlight enjoys these shows immensely. In part, it is the joy of hearing the familiar communication among Mexican grooms. When she hears Spanish spoken, the mare joins the conversation!

1,600 pounds, the horse found the turns of several of the classes a bit too tight for her stride and style. Her demeanor with the .8-meter jumps also demonstrated her absence of patience for the short jumps.

This mare is one of those lucky Mexican

horses that survived the journey north. Her former owner, a young Mexican rider who shall be called Isabella for security reasons, competed at high levels across Mexico. She is considered one of the bright young riders of that country.

The decision to move the horse north came as the violence surrounding equines escalated. Isabella's family agreed to engage security to guard the horse and accompany it to its destination. The night they crossed the border the mare was in the only trailer

The Silent Horror of the Drug Trade

Border Patrol agent George Boone remembers when he first started seeing horse tracks into the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. At first, there was speculation the tracks were made by Mexican ranchers running cattle across the border to graze on protected federal lands. Something wasn't quite right, though, and Boone began to suspect something else was happening. When twin sets of tracks were spotted up to 15 miles from cattle, he knew it was cartel activity.

The full horror revealed itself when Boone and fellow agent and pilot Colonel Child worked a set of tracks that involved four horses. Boone thought they were working three sets of tracks until he found where one of the horses veered off from the others. "It looked like the horse couldn't walk anymore, so they turned it loose," Boone recalls. "It was too exhausted and couldn't keep up."

What he discovered will remain in his mind forever. The horse was trying to stay up with the others by scent. At intervals, it would lie down and had difficulty getting back up. In trying to get to its feet, it would dig what appeared to be donuts in the sand. This pattern continued every hundred yards or so as the horse struggled. "You could see the hoofprints digging in, like a drunk person bracing himself." Boone found the horse dead, covered with cuts and bruises.

The day continued. The agents recovered more than 600 pounds of marijuana, two

saddles, and other items the smugglers abandoned in their 100-mile marathon across the desert. They found a second dead horse. Another of the horses was determined to have been returned to Mexico, likely ridden by two smugglers. The fourth horse remained missing.

Going back the next day—his day off—Boone was determined to find the remaining horse. He returned to the tracks and started seeing the same telltale donut depressions in the sand. He felt rage when he found it. "It was pitiful. The horse was probably 250 pounds underweight. Its skin was taut as a drum and its upper lip was gone. All the fat, all the moisture in the body was gone."

With dry desert conditions to start with, the horses had received no water, no food, and no relief for three days and more than 100 miles of travel. Boone offered the horse water and it drank. Checking its mouth, he discovered big deep gashes in the gums and lower jaw. The smugglers had tied baling wire in the horse's mouth to jerk him along when it could no longer walk.

When the livestock inspector saw the horse, his order was to shoot it. Boone denied the order, saying, "We're going to give this horse a chance." The process was heart wrenching. Deep galls on its back became toxic and Boone cleaned them out and doctored them. The horse lost all sphincter control and bodily discharges oozed down its

hind legs. It fought for life.

It took the horse a year to recover. Named after the agent who helped find him, Colonel and Boone have become trusted friends. "He turned out to be the best horse I ever rode," Boone says. "I would brag on my five-dollar horse with his \$1,500 saddle!"

The Beat Goes On

Today, the state of Arizona places up to 45 of these "drug horses" a year into rehabilitation centers. Their stories are all similar: Obscene loads, dehydrated from miles in the heat without care, in near-death condition, tongues cut, ill-fitting tack pulled too tight, and abandoned upon transfer of the drug load. They are found on freeway ramps or along interstate highways with their heads hanging, unable to go a step further. Those lucky enough to be reached are cared for by the Border Patrol or routed into private rehabilitation centers.

One of these centers, Heart of Tucson, spends upwards of \$120,000 per year to operate. Additionally, the state of Arizona, obligated to treat the horse as arriving livestock, requires a battery of testing. The costs escalate. Heart of Tucson president, Judy Glore, finds it difficult to help these horses in the current economy. "The drug horses are simply pitiful," she says. "They are not just physically wrecked, they are detached from any stimulus. They just stand there with no lights on inside. No soul. No feelings."

The Border Patrol and the Arizona State Department of Agriculture are in the lead. Former BP Tucson Sector Chief Victor Manjarrez says: "When those horses are strong enough to be drafted into the service, they are assigned not to a pool of horses, but to an agent. If or when that agent leaves that duty, he is given the opportunity to adopt that horse." The horses are all treated with respect.

The problem remains unresolved. These horses, with their equine instincts to perform, are ravaged and discarded by barbaric human drug-smugglers. To date, not a single charge has been brought before any court on their behalf.—SLW



Daisy, the recently rehabilitated drug horse at Heart of Tucson (www.heartoftucson.org). Daisy was saved by Judy Glore and arrived at the rehabilitation center shod with nails driven directly up into her foot. "The horrors these horses face is simply unthinkable." ABOVE: Border Patrol agent George Boone.



Moonlight and Mayci with blue ribbon: The big Mexican mare is shown in a hackamore. BELOW: Mayci standing with Monte la Fontaine, her 2010 Scottsdale dressage winner. The grand-daughter of ranchers, Mayci McKindree Lee has found the competition in the jumping arena her preferred equine sport.

of a nine-trailer caravan that started the journey from Chihuahua and got through. The other horses were seized, drafted into cartel duty, or killed.

The Meeting

The first time we saw the mare, she was entered in a local competition near El Paso, Texas. Isabella was in the United States on a temporary visa with two things in mind. The first was to find a permanent and safe situation for her horse, and the second was to seek any chance of an extended asylum for herself, away from the dangers she faced in Mexico.

Moonlight drew attention for several reasons. She was the only horse shown in a mechanical hackamore and she was a tremendous athlete. Huge, slick and powerful, she attacked the course willingly. Her demeanor with the two young women, Isabella and a friend who was in the United States for the same reason, was interesting. She was affectionate, particularly with Isabella. This changed abruptly when a stranger, especially a man, approached. She would then pin her ears.

As the show ended, our oldest grand-daughter Mayci started talking to the girls. We learned later that Isabella was surprised at the mare's unexpected friendliness.

The Courtship

Shortly after the show, the mare turned up at the stable where our granddaughters kept

horses. Isabella rode with them. Soon, Mayci was invited to ride Moonlight. They clicked. With the need to care for the horse while she returned to Mexico, Isabella asked our grand-daughter if she would watch over the horse. By the end of the week, all Mayci wanted to do was be with the mare. Her mother couldn't keep her away.

When Isabella returned, she asked how the week had gone and listened intently as all events were excitedly described. When she



learned that her attendant was only 13, though, she was shocked. "I leave this mare with a 13-year-old!" she proclaimed in her mix of English and Spanish. The way Mayci had acted and ridden the horse, its owner thought she was 17.

For another month, Isabella visited with the family and observed the relationship. She asked Mayci to exercise Moonlight. She worked with them as they jumped. She offered instruction and advice.

The Passage

During the August 2011 Hunter-Jumper Association event in Albuquerque, N.M., Isabella rode the big mare for perhaps a final time in competition. Her attempt to extend her visa or secure a sports visa had been unsuccessful. She would have to return to Mexico and all the dangers that presented. Her run put her at the top of the class with no faults. She was smiling as she exited the arena, slapping the big mare on the neck and hugging her, saying, "I am so happy."

Isabella and I talked as more horses jumped the course. She told me that besides herself, Mayci was the only person the horse had ever responded to. "She is a tough horse and doesn't like many people," she said. "I knew Mayci was special."

As the event ended, we were all together with our hands on the mare. No ears back or teeth showing, the mare welcomed our presence as we stood anxiously waiting for the results. First place was announced. Also with no faults, another horse edged Moonlight by a fraction of a second. Our young friend smiled. "Hey, it's okay," was the English translation.

The second place horse was announced. Horse...Moonlight. Rider...our young Mexican friend. Owner...from Las Cruces, New Mexico...Mayci Lee.

We were amazed. Isabella had found the home she was seeking for her horse. We did not know until that public-address announcement. Not a dry eye existed in our circle. The horse was safe. Moonlight will continue to compete, and she will be loved. ■

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. "Mayci and Moonlight competed for the first time together with a win at the Albuquerque Harvest Classic. Their second competition was the win at the Scottsdale Classic. Moonlight demanded that the next event be back among the big jumps. She likes them better. And, oh, yes, Mayci's Spanish is improving. Moonlight prefers to converse in Spanish!"