

DRESSAGE TODAY

VOL. 52

# EXTRA

## THE MUSTANG CLASSIC:

Learn About  
This Inaugural  
Event

## ONE TRAINER'S JOURNEY WITH HER BLM MUSTANG

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# MUSTANG CLASSIC

THE FIRST OF ITS KIND ENGLISH DISCIPLINE MUSTANG COMPETITION  
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# Ready for Action at the **MUSTANG CLASSIC**

*Learn how dressage and eventing trainer Chelsea Canedy brought along a barely touched BLM mustang mare to compete in this sure-to-be thrilling inaugural event.*

**BY ALANA HARRISON**

A woman wearing a dark cap, a patterned long-sleeve shirt under a dark vest, blue riding pants, and black boots stands in a stable. She is holding the lead rope of a white mustang mare. The mare is standing in a dirt arena with wooden walls. The woman is looking down at the horse. The background shows a stable interior with wooden shelves and a window.

TAYLOR  
marie

After Luna was comfortable with handling and groundwork basics, Chelsea Canedy progressed to working with the mare at liberty.

**C**helsea Canedy and her mustang mare Luna have shared quite the journey since they first partnered about a year ago with aspirations to compete in the inaugural Mustang Classic this September. The pair hit a milestone last April when they competed in their first schooling show. At that point in their training, Canedy wasn't sure how Luna would handle the crowds and scores of unfamiliar horses—let alone the sea of brightly colored fences in a new arena on a crisp morning.

"She absolutely blew my expectations out of the water, winning her flat class and jumping every single fence without hesitation," Canedy said. "She was shy about the people but kept her head beautifully, and I knew we were well on our way to being prepared for the Classic."

**Once Luna gained a solid foundation on the flat, the plucky 14.2-hand mare immediately took to jumping. Canedy noted that mustangs make for sharp, careful jumpers because they're very aware of their bodies.**

In an effort to showcase the unique human–mustang bond and highlight the breed's vast potential and versatility in equestrian sports, the first-of-its-kind event will feature mustangs competing in a variety of English disciplines including Training level dressage, show jumping, arena cross country and working equitation.

The competition does, however, present a twist. All mustangs must have been purchased or adopted through a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) holding facility or satellite event and are required to be in training between 100 days and one year.

With help from fellow mustang advocate Meg Magsig, Canedy found her ideal partner for the event at the Twin Peaks Herd Management Area in California—a 6-year-old gray mare she named Luna, which means moon in Spanish. After meeting her new mustang partner, the eventing and dressage trainer utilized her knowledge of equine behavior and natural horsemanship to start establishing the first layers of trust with the barely touched mare. Canedy was quick to recognize Luna's natural intelligence and even called her a problem-solving extraordinaire.

"She is so smart. But I learned that I needed to break everything down into manageable bits in order to build up her confidence and trust," Canedy explained. "She has taught me so much about my own body language and intention. And, through all this, she continues to teach me how to be a better problem solver, too."

At the inaugural Mustang Classic, September 13-15, at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, Kentucky, Canedy and Luna will compete in Training level dressage (test 2) that all exhibitors are required to participate in, as well as a 2-foot-3

TAYLOR MARIE IMAGES



show jumping course and a 2-foot-3 arena cross-country course. If the pair makes the cut, they will go on to compete in the final freestyle competition.

“As for our freestyle, we plan to do a little riding—maybe without a bridle—and some liberty work on the ground,” she noted. “There will be lots of fun props and the entire routine is moon themed to pay homage to Luna’s name.”

### Homework with Tik Maynard

After getting Luna to her home base in Wales, Maine, about a month after finding the mare, Canedy started introducing her to basic groundwork. She noted that Luna is the type of horse who needs a lot of time between questions to think and process what she’s learning, so patience has been a priority for the horsewoman since their first day of training.

“She’s such an eager learner and wants to get things right. She tries really hard to figure out what I’m asking and sometimes she gets frustrated when she doesn’t understand right away,” Canedy said. “She is very sensitive to any perceived pressure, especially touch, but every reaction she gives me is so unbelievably genuine.”

After mastering some basics on the ground, they progressed to

walk, trot and canter work on the longe line and at liberty, and Luna continued to learn her job with gusto. Last January, Canedy and Luna headed to their winter training facility in Florida to continue their gradual, but steady progress.

However, when an unplanned dismount during one of their initial rides left Canedy with a broken nose, she employed help from her friend, trainer and mentor Tik Maynard who happened to live down the road from her Florida farm.

“Tik really helped me make progress with Luna on our fieldtrips to his place. He would give me homework that I’d go home and practice with her,” she explained. “Tik would then add the next layer and give us more homework. We continued like this for about two months until he took Luna out of the roundpen for a ride in his outdoor arena. At that point, I took the riding back over completely, as I felt like both Luna and I had regained our confidence.”

By the end of their third month in Florida, Canedy and her plucky mustang mare were walking, trotting and cantering in open spaces, as well as jumping small show and cross-country jumps. Once Luna became more comfortable and confident under saddle, Canedy recognized the true depth of her potential.

“She became something I was very familiar with—a green horse. From there, it was slow and steady gains,” she said. “It became a really normal process for me in terms of helping her

**With help from fellow mustang advocate Meg Magsig, Canedy found her ideal partner for the 2024 Mustang Classic—a 6-year-old gray mare she named Luna.**

COURTESY, BROOKE HULLFORD



understand the basic aids and gaining both strength and balance.”

### Painting a Blank Canvas

Over the course of their time together, Canedy has learned a lot about her mare. One of the primary factors that peaked the horsewoman’s interest in this event was the “blank-slate” aspect of working with a barely handled mustang.

“I spend a lot of time in my business helping people solve problems that have been trained into horses. Sometimes these habits are so ingrained they’re hard to get to the bottom of,” she explained. “With Luna, everything she’s learning about interacting with humans is coming from me. So, if a problem arises, I can more easily trace it back and hopefully find a solution.”

Canedy was also pleasantly surprised to learn how much common sense Luna had even from their first interactions. She noted that the mare seems more relaxed about new sights and sounds than any domestic horse she’s worked with over her long career.

“She’s also very snuggly now. She loves a good long hug. Once she discovered that humans are very handy at helping with itchy spots,

she became even better about being handled. She absolutely adores a good dock scratch makes these hilarious faces when you hit the right spot,” Canedy said of Luna’s personality as it’s come to light over the course of their partnership. “Most of all, her intelligence never ceases to amaze me. She learns so quickly and now that she trusts me, it means we can play with all sorts of fun things.”

### Clear, Consistent Communication is Key

As prey animals who at first perceive humans as predators, Canedy cautions that adopting a mustang who’s never been handled isn’t suitable for all riders. To be successful with a feral horse, she notes, you must have a solid understanding of the way horses interact with one another in the wild, so you can read a mustang’s body language and the subtle cues they’re conveying.

“You need to have this basic foundation to give your mustang clear signals. They are, after all, very large wild animals with a completely intact survival instinct,” she said. “This means they will do whatever they have to in order to survive if they feel threatened.”

When evaluating whether a mustang is appropriate for amateur riders, Canedy stresses that like with any other horse—wild or domestic—it all depends on the individual horse’s nature.

COURTESY, MICHAEL FRANKEL

**Luna originally hailed from the Twin Peaks Herd Management Area in California. The mare’s athletic build and lighter body caught Canedy’s eye.**



“Some horses are just naturally more relaxed and less sensitive. It’s also about the quality of training that goes into these mustangs,” she said. “Were they rushed in their understanding of what we want from them? Or are they relaxed and comfortable with new ideas because someone gave them the opportunity to think through each new question and experience?”

In Luna’s case, Canedy said her biggest challenge is that she’s naturally built downhill, which can sometimes make it more challenging for horses to push off their hindquarters and lift through their backs.

“To help with that, I brought in my vet to do some chiropractic work on her and that significantly helped. Luna now reminds me of many domestic ponies I’ve known—full of opinions and sometimes looking for the easiest way to the other side of physical challenges,” she laughed. “But she also knows her job and takes care of her rider.”

## Versatile Athletes

While there are numerous well-established competitions and programs for mustangs in Western disciplines due to their hearty nature and compact conformation, their ability to excel in English disciplines hasn’t been recognized at such a premier national level before. Since many of today’s mustangs are descended from Spanish horses, Canedy said it’s in their DNA to excel in dressage. While it’s more obvious in some, she’s seen a number of mustangs with conformation resembling a Lusitano or Pura Raza Española (PRE).

“Mustangs tend to be short-coupled and muscular over their haunches, loins and backs, which helps in dressage,” she noted. “Some could more easily go up the Training Scale, depending on their conformation and innate tendency to be forward thinking. But all of them have the capacity to do basic correct lower-level work.”

Canedy said mustangs are also well suited for jumping since they’re often compact and maneuverable, which is handy on a jump course.

“Mustangs are very aware of their bodies in relation to other things around them, so they’re careful jumpers with lovely form over fences—tucked knees and a nice use of their backs,” she said. “They’re also so intelligent that once they understand the task of jumping, they can be very game. Luna takes me to the fences!”

## The Ultimate Challenge

After returning from Florida with a solid foundation, Canedy shifted her focus toward consistent flat and jumping work at home. She was also keen on introducing Luna to a variety of off-property venues to continue bolstering the mare’s confidence. After their first successful local show back in April, they continued to work with Tik and his wife, five-star eventer Sinead Halpin, at the annual New England Spring Symposium Canedy hosts at her farm every May.

They went on an overnight adventure to Green Mountain Horse Association in Vermont as their first official outing and peppered in a few cross-country schooling excursions. The pair has two more local shows coming up to put the finishing touches on their rides before the Mustang Classic: one combined test and one three-phase.

“As any eventer understands, it’s a lot to balance the training requirements of all three phases of competition. On top of that I’ve been trying to do at least one day a week of liberty work to be prepared for our freestyle if we make it to the top 10,” Canedy said. “It’s a lot to balance, but I feel like I’ve done my best, and Luna is as prepared as she can be in the time we’ve had together. Luckily, she’s very chill in new venues. We will see if she feels the same about the Rolex arena in Kentucky!” 🍷

## EVENT INFORMATION AT A GLANCE

**WHAT:** 2024 Mustang Classic

September 14, 2024: Preliminary classes, awards ceremony and Top 10 announcement

[mustangclassic2024.com/tickets](https://mustangclassic2024.com/tickets) to purchase.

**WHEN:** September 13-15, 2024

**WHERE:** Kentucky Horse Park, Rolex Stadium, 4089 Iron Works Parkway, Lexington, Kentucky

September 15, 2024: Mustang Classic Championship Final (1 p.m. EST)

- The entire event will be live streamed for free on EQUESTRAIN+ ([equestrianplus.com](https://equestrianplus.com)). You can also view after the event with a subscription.

### SCHEDULE

September 13, 2024: Preliminary classes

### HOW TO WATCH

- In person: Tickets sold for Mustang Classic Championship Final (September 15), \$30/ticket. Go to

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**  
[mustangclassic2024.com](https://mustangclassic2024.com)

# The Mustang Classic: A CELEBRATION OF SPIRIT AND SKILL

*Everything you need to know about the inaugural 2024 Mustang Classic—  
an English discipline competition showcasing the human-mustang bond and  
the breed's incredible versatility.*

BY JULIA BUITENHUIS

**T**he average horseperson may not know much about the American mustang. What is the breed good for? Where do they come from? Can they succeed in English disciplines? The Mustang Classic helps provide answers to these questions.

For three days this September, exhibitors and their

purchased or adopted mustangs will gather in Lexington, Kentucky, to compete in the 2024 Mustang Classic. The first-of-its-kind event puts mustangs to the test across the English disciplines of dressage, show jumping, arena cross country and working equitation.

But it's not just another competition. Its goal is to showcase the bond between humans and mustangs and to



Five-star eventer and  
mustang trainer Elisa Wallace  
will participate in the 2024  
Mustang Classic.





AMY K. DRAGOO

**Mustangs are moved into a holding corral to await adoption or purchase at a Bureau of Land Management auction.**

who have been given successful foundations on their journeys from a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) holding to private ownership.

## Finding a Mustang

The competition welcomes mustangs 3 years of age and older (as of January 2024) who were adopted or purchased at a BLM off-range corral or BLM satellite event. Mustangs must have been adopted during the eligibility window of September 8, 2023, through June 1, 2024. But how did riders go about adopting a mustang?

“There are holding facilities across the United States,” explained Matt Manroe, the executive director of Mustang Champions. “You can go to [BLM.gov/WHB](https://www.blm.gov/WHB)—Wild Horse and Burro Program—to find out where the holding facilities are.” A mustang owner himself, Manroe knows the ins and outs of finding and adopting the breed.

“There are also satellite adoptions across the U.S. that are more prevalent in the eastern part of the country,” he explained. “It’s called the ‘online corral.’ You can go online to see photos and videos of mustangs available for adoption or purchase.”

As for getting your mustang to its new home, Manroe says you can purchase the horse online and have it shipped as

highlight their potential and adaptability in the equestrian world. The Mustang Classic provides an opportunity to witness the growth of mustangs

castration if needed, but that’s about as much as they’ve been handled. When you first take your new mustang home, be prepared that the horse won’t likely want to associate with you.”

So, how do you start to engage with your new mustang and encourage him to be curious about interacting with you? The process is called “gentling.”

“Keep in mind that as prey animals these horses very much have that strong fight or flight instinct,” Manroe said. “That’s all they’ve known, and it sometimes can be a difficult hurdle to overcome.”

And though it takes time and patience, Manroe noted that in his experience mustangs bond with their humans differently than most domestic horses, especially if you’re the person who gentles them.

“As your mustang starts to trust you after that first touch, you will be able to make more and more progress in his training. Like leading with a halter, picking up all four feet, loading into a trailer and being groomed,” Manroe shared from his personal experience with the breed. “We did a lot of groundwork with our yearling mustangs. So, by the time we put a saddle on them, they already knew how to side pass. It was a really interesting process. Eventually, you get the saddle pad and saddle on, and then you get on. It’s just like working with any green horse.”

The Mustang Classic stresses that all training in preparation for the competition should be humane and compassionate and that the mustangs should be treated with dignity and respect. Competitors found using abusive or excessive

close to you as possible, or they can be shipped to a satellite adoption facility.

## Between Adoption and the Mustang Classic

To be eligible to compete in the Mustang Classic, horses must have been in training between 100 days and one year. But a lot of growth must happen in that relatively short time period and step one is the “first touch.”

“Most mustangs have none or very minimal handling,” Manroe noted. “They may have been in a chute and then into a confined corral for foot trimming, vaccinations and

training techniques or actions deemed inhumane toward a mustang will result in immediate disqualification.

In addition, all exhibitors must complete the online Mustang Training Readiness Curriculum. “We’re really trying to improve training techniques,” Manroe said. “And to provide people with resources to help them better understand how to work with mustangs versus domestic horses.”

Before the big event, competitors must show proof that they’ve shown their mustangs in one qualifying event, which is defined as any organized competition consisting of three or more horses.

## The 2024 Mustang Classic

This year’s Mustang Classic will be held at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington from September 13-15, where \$125,000 in cash and prizes will be awarded, with \$50,000 going to the champion.

Exhibitors will compete in three of four preliminary classes: Training level dressage, show jumping and either arena cross country or working equitation. Each class is designed to demonstrate the mustang’s willingness under saddle.

### Training Level

**Dressage:** Mustangs will perform the 2023 U.S. Equestrian Federation Training level test 2 before a single judge.

### Show Jumping:

Mustangs will jump a course of eight to 12 efforts, including one combination. The class will be offered at two heights—12 inches maximum and 2-foot-3 maximum. Judges will award a score of 0 to 10 for each jumping effort based on:

1. Way of moving, which includes balance, stride, adjustability and rhythm
2. Acceptance of rider’s aids
3. Straightness between fences and over the jumps
4. Relaxation, confidence and carefulness
5. Jumping technique

**Arena Cross Country:** Mustangs will compete over a USEA Starter level cross-country course of approximately 10 obstacles in an arena. The jumps will have a maximum height of 2-foot-3 and judges will award a score of 0 to 10 for

each jumping effort based on:

1. Rideability
2. Between fences
3. Form over fences
4. Open gallop

**Working Equitation:** Mustangs will perform a USA Working Equitation (USAWE) Ease of Handling course at the Novice level with a minimum of 10 obstacles. Judges will award a score of 0 to 10 for each obstacle.

## The Grand Finale

At the conclusion of the preliminary classes, the top 10 performing mustang-and-rider pairs will be invited to compete in the championship finals inside the Rolex Stadium.

The final event is a freestyle performance designed to encourage creativity. Exhibitors are asked to incorporate props, costumes and music to demonstrate the skills and talents of their mustangs through choreographed maneuvers. Each pair will have three-and-a-half minutes to entertain the crowd by demonstrating quality horsemanship and showing off the partnership they’ve developed with one another.

The final score will be a combination of 40-percent Training level dressage (carried over from preliminary competition) and 60-percent freestyle performance.

The winner of the 2024 Mustang Classic will be awarded \$50,000. But prize money aside, the goal of the event is to champion American mustangs. It strives to bring attention to their intelligence and trainability, and ultimately, to find them safe, loving homes where they have an opportunity to thrive.

“We want to encourage people to engage with mustangs at any level, whether that involves competition or simply attending the event,” Manroe said. “We’re working very hard to make the finals a fun party, whether you’re into mustangs or not.”

*The 2024 Mustang Classic will be streamed live on EQUESTRIAN+ ([equestrianplus.com](http://equestrianplus.com)).*



**With their keen intelligence, willingness and compact and maneuverable conformation, mustangs are versatile equine athletes who can excel in many disciplines.**