

Nevada Joe: Living Legend and Legendary Ambassador

by Doreen Shumpert

An 8-year old young lady that has had the pleasure and honor of sitting atop the former wild mustang now known as Nevada Joe perhaps summed it up best. After undergoing two heart transplants, she called the horse's home base at the Shooting Star Ranch in Darby, Mont., requesting to meet him. She felt a strong connection to this regal creature she'd never met, and her reasoning was simple. She recognized she'd been given a second chance in life, just like Nevada Joe.

The Wahl Clipper Corporation (who features the horse on their packaging) arranged the meeting, and Nevada Joe filled yet another life with joy, hope, motivation and promise.

Around 100 years ago—yesterday to some and ancient history to others—American wild mustangs, ancestors of Nevada Joe, were still battle mounts for plains Indians or packing six-shooter toting cowboys up the trail behind cattle bound for the railheads.

As they say, history repeats itself. This was never more evident as it is in one mustang—Nevada Joe. First, he is still helping fight battles. Battles of a different nature, but battles nonetheless. He helps countless children with numerous disabilities fight their diseases and physical challenges through new-found freedom of movement, not to mention the motivation and inspiration that the joy of accomplishment brings. Second, he still totes gun-packing cowboys and cowgirls as a competitive mounted shooting horse, standing yet again as a perfect symbol of the American West.

A living legend

Mustangs have been termed American living legends due to their heartiness, survival and symbolism of the old West. They are tangible remnants of a bygone era. However, the mustang's spirit and will to be free lives on.

In 2002, the Federal Bureau of Land Management rounded up a group of mustangs from the Fox and Lake Range herd in Nevada. Amongst them was a typical mustang—a tough looking stocky little bay, about six years old, and around 14.2 hands, 1,000 pounds. Not so typical were his huge, kind, soft eyes—windows to his incredible trainability.

He was adopted by the Wahl Clipper Corporation, and soon crossed paths with Diane Purcelli who worked with Wahl. Nevada Joe's initial training for 12 months (which was chronicled in *Horse Illustrated*) was with noted trainer and clinician Pat Parelli, who spent the year gentling him and teaching him the basics for survival in a working horse's world. After that, Purcelli gladly took him on, and he was soon featured at Dodge World's Toughest Rodeo events and began running some barrels. He's also done goat-tying at junior rodeos, most gymkhana events and team roping. Currently, the plan is to introduce him to basic dressage. Pretty impressive for a horse that was "wild" merely five years ago.

Ask anybody who has ever trained a mustang, and they will tell you that they're known for possessing a savvy and smartness only self-preservation in the wilderness can teach. In captivity, that often manifests in uncanny powers of retention.

"Nevada Joe has such a kind eye. He's very trusting, he's extremely trainable, smart and retains well," Purcelli reported. "He recently competed in a mounted shooting contest that took place in a corn maze [a televised event]. Jessie Kuka from Minn. rode him, showed him the pattern once, and he knew it."



Diane Purcelli, left, gets a hand from Matt Sronce, right.

Nevada Joe also participated in the Extreme Cowboy Race (also televised) where participants are timed and are required to navigate numerous obstacles and terrain that may be encountered on a ranch, such as deep water crossings, gates and dragging logs. Purcelli prepared Nevada Joe in the neighbor's pastures, and he finished sixth on the second day.

"There is nothing he won't do," she said. "That's the neatest thing about him. And he's fun to try new things on because he's so good about everything."

NARHA Ambassador and mounted shooting ace

These days, being good about "everything" encompasses a lot.

Diane and Ernie Purcelli own and operate Shooting Star Ranch, a therapeutic riding center and program in Montana. Based on their years of experience as therapeutic riding instructors, they noticed early on that Nevada Joe's kindness and trainability would make him a perfect candidate as a therapeutic riding horse. To qualify, a horse must pass stringent tests. Not surprisingly, he did, and soon became a favorite amongst the students. That led to Purcelli approaching the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Inc. (NARHA) about using Nevada Joe as an official goodwill ambassador.

"We thought a mustang could best represent the all-around atmosphere of the country with his wild spirit, yet he gives back," she explained. "No words can describe how much he gives. He was rescued and saved, and now he's doing the same."

Nevada Joe is on the road every month of the year serving as an ambassador for the organization. Children and adults far and wide call and ask to meet him, ride him, and visit him at events. He's featured at horse expos, schools, camps, equine affairs—basically anywhere he is requested that can be accommodated. His upcoming schedule includes cancer and muscular dystrophy camps amongst other appearances.

"Recently at an open horse show, a boy that competed on him at an event two years ago remembered him and was so happy to see him," Purcelli said. "He still had his belt buckle and was so proud."

And speaking of horse shows, Nevada Joe also carried a young lady with cerebral palsy to a placing in a regular open gymkhana, where he competed all day long in events and remained as calm and steady as ever.

Meanwhile, he had also become a solid mounted shooting horse for anybody who needed to use him. That included placings with Diane and Ernie, and a Utah Running Gun state championship in the Wrangler division (ages 12 and under) for Purcelli's granddaughter in her very first competition last year.

Naturally, Nevada Joe's adaptability and consistency in both sports led to his being a bonafide, highly-demanded superstar at the therapeutic shootouts. In these competitions, competitors are assisted and led by a ground crew as they ride up and pop the balloons with a dowel stick. Last year, Nevada Joe carried 12 riders through the pattern at the CMSA World Championship.

"No horse handles this as well as he does," Purcelli said. "He's been used by as many as 15 students in one setting and he doesn't flinch. My other horses will flinch with different riders," she continued, "but it's like he just knows that kids are up there and they need him. Instinctively, he's so wonderful and seems to know how to care for them and who he has aboard. Going to the therapeutic shootouts at the different centers is so fun. No words can describe how many people he has touched, their expressions, the joy in their faces when they pop those balloons, and their excitement in meeting the cowboys and cowgirls. It's just overwhelming."

There are no plans for Nevada Joe to slow down. The demand is too high and he loves what he does. He will continue with the therapeutic shootouts and as a goodwill ambassador for NARHA. He will also continue training and add more and more disciplines to his resume. "It's just such a neat irony that that an American living legend is giving back so much in America," Purcelli said. "He will continue to promote awareness of equine-assisted activities, of which the benefits are astounding."

For more information on Nevada Joe and his tour schedule, visit www.nevadajoe.net.



Diane Purcelli, left, and Kenda Lenseigne, right, lead Nevada Joe through the course.