

## Wrecks and Wild Horses

As usual, Jack and I followed a good 30 yards behind the last rider on the trail. On this particular cool day in January, the only other rider on the trail besides me was fellow Squaw Butte member, Rob Adams. I don't mind picking up the rear most of the time. Doing so gives me a pretty good perspective from which to take pictures and keep an eye on things just in case, you know...we are attacked by cougars or serial killers.

Rob chose the Wild Horse Management area, just north of Emmett on 4 mile road, hoping that we would get a glimpse of a band of mustangs that roam this part of the desert. Rob was familiar with the area; however, this was to be my first trip. I was excited to finally have the chance to see Mustangs in the wild.

Rob rode his bay Mustang, Payette. The four year old was doing well for a green broke colt. He plodded along, picking his way through dense lava fields that covered 90% of the area, with familiarity born of a desert horse. Jack, on the other hand, was not born of the desert. I purchased Jack from a breeder as a young colt. Until I started him two years ago, he was pasture bred and born. Jack carefully picked his way through the rocky terrain with ease. His hard, black hooves held up as well as any horse of the high desert.

The day was unusually warm for the first week of January, topping out at thirty nine degrees. Although there was no snow on the ground, spots of white frost covered areas made slick and hard with nightly freeze. Overcast sky's provided little lighting opportunity for an interesting photo of the surrounding area. Once you've seen one sage brush...you've pretty much seen them all. Staring at the back of Rob's reflective lime green jacket, I sighed at the high-probability that we might not get much of anything of interest in the way of photographs. So far, we had not come across any wild horses either. The most eye-catching thing about the day thus far was that blinding, neon-lime-green jacket. Could the day get any more uneventful? I resolved to enjoy the ride regardless. After all, not every ride can be filled with adventure and photo ops.

Still 30 yards behind, I watched as our uneventful day began to take on an entirely different character. We had been ascending a drainage with steep gullies on either side. Suddenly, Rob and Payette changed direction and were heading up a frost covered, vertical embankment. Payette lost his footing on the hard, frozen surface and slid back into the gully in a sitting position. Rob, a skilled rider, remained centered and mounted. In hindsight, Rob might have taken this opportunity to bail. He did not. Payette gathered his feed under him and made another attempt to scale the embankment. The second attempt proved to be more unsuccessful than the first. The bay mustang performed a perfectly executed reverse summersault into the gully, pinning Rob beneath 950 pounds of Mustang and leather. Had this been an Olympic event, I would have given them a definite 10.

Instinctively, I reached behind me for my pistol. The last think I wanted to do was shoot the man's horse, but if it meant preventing Rob from being drug through sharp lava rocks, I hoped that I could do it if it came to that. My hand fell on empty belt leather. I had left my pistol in the truck. Crap. Now what? I resisted the urge to lope up and assess the situation, afraid doing so might spook Payette into bolting

away and dragging Rob with him. I called to Rob, "...are you hung up?" No answer. Shit. Should I stay mounted in case the horse took off with Rob dangling from the stirrup? Could Jack catch the sheer-footed, trail savvy mustang if needed? I asked again, "Rob – are your feet out of the stirrups?" This time he answered, "Yes, but I'm stuck. I can't get out from under him." I dismounted and as calmly as I could muster, approached the fallen duo. I positioned Jack at an angle I hoped would block Payette from taking off should he right himself with Rob still attached. Rob again assured me that neither he nor the horse was hurt. Rob was pinned from the chest down with one long, left leg, trapped securely under the downed horse. Payette was lying in a hole – his feet uphill from his body. Every time the horse struggled to get up, the weight of his body ground Rob beneath him; his thrashing front hooves just missing Rob's head. Rob spoke softly, patting the horse to keep him calm. "What do you want me to do?" Rob didn't really have an answer. How the hell were we going to get him out from under that horse without further injury? If it didn't go well, I was not looking forward to explaining to Linda why I had to leave her husband in the desert under 900lbs of horse. I considered dallying on Jack and forcibly pulling Payette up, but was afraid the effort would end in Rob being struck in the head or being further crushed. As it was, Rob was essentially being kneed in the chest when the horse thrashed. Luckily, Payette did not panic and remained fairly calm, appearing content to rest atop his rider. I wonder if our horses saw the irony of the situation. "So, human, how does it feel to have the tables turned and be under one of US for a change?"

Plan B: I reached for Payette's lead rope and tried to pull his head away from Rob. If Rob could protect his head and scamper out from under the horse as soon as he started to move, maybe we would get him out of this without killing him in the process. It did not go as smoothly as I hoped. I winced every time those hooves came within inches of Rob's head. It wasn't pretty, but two or three attempts and Rob managed to drag himself free from under the horse.

After a quick self-assessment and showing more concern for his horse than himself, Rob exclaimed, "well, I guess we won't be practicing the splinting techniques we learned in Wilderness first aid, but you missed an excellent photo opportunity." It was reassuring to know that Rob had come out of it with his sense of humor intact. I had to ask, "So ...what would you have thought if I had gotten my camera out and started snapping pictures of you pinned under that horse?" Rob just smiled.

We led the horses up the remainder of the knoll. I kept a good watch on Rob even though he assured me he was not hurt. Payette was shaken, but appeared no worse for wear. I had a feeling by morning Rob was going to find bruises and sore muscles in places he didn't know existed. We stopped for a short rest on a pile of rocks atop the hill. I offered Rob a can of my Beanie Weenies. He declined. Apparently, his condition was much worse than he let on; why else would a guy turn down a perfectly good can of Beanie Weenies?

During the rest of the ride back to the trailers, I could see the wheels turning in Rob's head as he went over and over the situation in his mind. What could we have done differently? Rob thought his next step might have been to free Payette from the saddle so the horse could more easily right-himself. I still am not sure what I could, or should, have done differently to help. I am a little ashamed to admit that

snapping a few pictures *may* have crossed my mind...only after realizing neither horse nor rider was seriously hurt, of course.

Back at the trailers, Rob took full responsibility for the predicament, alleviating Payette of any blame. He mentioned that the situation, omitting injury to horse or rider, probably looked somewhat comical to anybody who might have witnessed it. I assured Rob that his secret was safe with me. After all, nobody reads our blog anyway, right?

Written by: Laurie Bryan