

Mustang Troop at the Kentucky Horse Park

Inner-city youth and BLM Mustangs work together in this innovative, educational program.

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When young people work with horses, it gives them a sense of purpose, teaches them responsibility and makes them learn patience. This is the idea behind the Kentucky Horse Park's Mustang Troop program.

Since the early 1990s, the Mustang Troop has given inner-city youth the chance to ride and work with horses in a safe, educational environment. Potential participants are identified as "at-risk" and referred to the program by the Lexington Police Activities League (PAL). By participating in Mustang Troop activities, participants take on challenges, learn new skills and work in an ongoing activity that channels their energy in a positive direction. At the same time, the program showcases Mustangs to members of the public who may not be exposed to the breed otherwise.

Participants in the program spend up to five days a week at the farm during their summer break from school. Most enter the program with no prior horse experience, but they quickly learn how to groom, tack up and cool out the horses in addition to cleaning stalls and tack. The riders spend two to three hours riding each day, working on perfecting their drill routines.

The program admits up to ten participants at a time. Riders can start the program as young as age 9. Many continue participation for several years, and riders can stay with the program until they graduate at 18. Currently there are a handful of riders who have been involved in the Mustang Troop for 6-7 years. Although the program is only open to riders through age 18, many graduates return to visit and help mentor the new riders.

As the riders gain more experience, they have the chance to visit other farms and learn to ride and drive horses outside of the Mustang herd. Field trips also include visits to veterinary hospitals, racetracks, training facilities and equine rescues, giving them a broad understanding of the equine industry.

Every year, the Mustang Troop rides in the Pegasus Parade before the Kentucky Derby and Lexington's downtown Fourth of July parade. They also perform in the Horse Park's breed demonstrations and at Breyerfest. The Troop has traveled out-of-state for appearances in major national events, including the Gator Bowl Parade, the dedication of Washington D.C.'s African American War Memorial, and President Clinton's 1996 inaugural parade.

Why Mustangs?

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is charged with managing the population of wild Mustangs in the American west. While the massive round-ups and holding of wild horses has caused its fair share of well-publicized problems, it has also given rise to innovative new programs.

The initial herd of horses for the Mustang Troop came through the Wyoming Penitentiary in a program with a philosophy similar to that of the Mustang Troop. Inmates considered low-risk and selected for good behavior work with previously unhandled BLM Mustangs to make them more appealing to potential adopters. The program benefits the horses by giving them a better chance at finding a loving home, and benefits the inmates by teaching them skills that will help give them a second chance at life once they have served their sentences.

When the Mustang Troop was launched in 1994, it began with a herd of 24 bay geldings. The horses had been handled and given some training by the Wyoming inmates, but required finishing by Kentucky Horse Park staff before they were ready for their first class of young, novice riders. Over the years, some horses from the original herd have been retired or



moved on to private homes, and the remaining horses still active in the program are beginning to reach retirement age. The program's directors have started a search for new Mustang geldings to gradually phase into the program as the older horses retire. The older and more experienced Mustang troopers will have the opportunity to work with the new horses to finish their saddle training.