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# From Wild TO MILD

How Courtney Jo Wexler won the Extreme Mustang Makeover and found love in the process—twice.

BY DUSTIN GRINNELL

Every year, horse trainers from all over the U.S. convene in a select location for the Extreme Mustang Makeover (EMM), a competition in which trainers showcase wild Mustangs after spending the previous 100 days desensitizing and training their assigned mount. After the three-day competition, the Mustangs are auctioned off to new homes.

Run by the Mustang Heritage Foundation, the “makeover challenge,” as it’s known by many, launched in 2007 in Fort Worth, Texas. Since then, more than 16,000 Mustangs have been trained, adopted, and auctioned off to individuals across the country.

In 2019, Courtney Jo Wexler, a 28-year-old horse trainer and North Carolina native, won the Extreme Mustang Makeover in Lexington, Ky., and found a whole new life in the process.

## READY FOR A NEW CHALLENGE

Wexler has been on the back of a horse since she was 3 years old. A certified riding instructor through the American Riding Instructors Association, she’s also been training horses for the last 15 years and has done numerous equestrian disciplines.

For the past five years, she has managed a small barn in Williamston, a town in Martin County, N.C., where she grew up. There, she

led a riding lesson program for kids. Despite the satisfying work, Wexler was burned out and felt lost.

When her best friend, Carey Stewart, first said she was participating in the 2019 EMM and suggested they do it together, Wexler refused. But after careful research, she submitted her application to compete—just one hour before the deadline.

Her assigned mount was one of the youngest horses in the competition. Kayah seemed gentle and easygoing, although territorial. After picking her up, Wexler convinced herself that she wouldn’t get attached to Kayah. She’d compete in the makeover, her Mustang would be auctioned off, and they’d say goodbye.

The next morning, Wexler groomed Kayah’s mane and described how they would compete in the makeover in June. As she told Kayah about the auction at the end of the event, Kayah exhaled deeply and nuzzled Wexler. She started to cry.

## 100 DAYS OF TRAINING

“Some trainers felt comfortable enough to put first rides on their Mustangs early,” says Wexler. “I wanted to develop a deeper connection and understanding between Kayah and myself before I got on her back.”



On the fourth day, Kayah got a bath. As Wexler washed the mud from her body, Kayah nickered toward her and nuzzled her nose into Wexler's neck. Wexler helped relax Kayah's muscles using pulsed electromagnetic field therapy (PEMF; see article about this therapy on pg. 42).

Ten days into training, a saddle was placed on Kayah for her first ride. A week later, on Kayah's fourth ride, the pair participated in their first horse show, put on by the Inter-County Saddle Club in Edenton, N.C. When they were named champions of the ranch division, Wexler thought they might have something special.

"At this point, I became dead set on putting everything I had into this horse," Wexler recalls. "For the next three months, Kayah and I participated in every event I could find. We were together every weekend for horse shows, trail rides, or clinics."

She and Jesse Chase, an accomplished trainer who had qualified a Mustang for a previous makeover, showed Kayah circles and steering.

"As Kayah became more gentled, I let kids touch her at training camps," says Wexler. "We also visited barns to discuss the Mustang breed and the makeover challenge with the public."

### COMPETING IN THE MAKEOVER

After hundreds of hours of training, Wexler, Stewart, and 33 out of the original 70 trainers arrived in Lexington, Ky., for the EMM. After two days of competing, Wexler had won 9th in ground handling and conditioning, 2nd in maneuvers, and 1st in trail.

She had the most points of any competitor in their first Mustang event, so she also won Rookie of the Year. Stewart placed 12th and joined Wexler's friends in the stands to watch the freestyle routines.

When Wexler made it to the top 10, she realized that she hadn't prepared a freestyle performance. She had no props, song or outfit. Competitors rushed in to help. One of the volunteers was named Justin. He had come to watch the competition with his father, who owned and trained Mustangs.

"Justin and his dad were so kind," says Wexler. "Justin held himself so well and that drew me in. He also had one of the best smiles, and every time he looked at me, it caught my breath."

### IMPROMPTU FREESTYLE

Wexler choreographed her freestyle routine only two hours before the performance. Her routine had none of the tricks that other riders had built into their routines.

Courtney Jo Wexler competed Kayah at the Extreme Mustang Makeover, with 100 days to go from "wild to mild."

Although Wexler only had two hours to plan her freestyle routine, Kayah came through by handling every move with ease.



To start the routine, Neil Diamond’s “Sweet Caroline” blared through the speakers.

Wexler and Kayah, who was wearing a large tarp, walked toward the center of the arena. Wexler stripped off the tarp and mounted Kayah as the crowd cheered. Kayah traversed a bridge and then sidepassed poles.

Wexler used a pole to pick up another tarp and dragged it behind Kayah. Then the pair maneuvered around a 3-foot inflatable ball, followed by a 5-foot ball, which Kayah then pushed around with her nose. They trotted over a final jump and sprinted to the center as the song ended. It was enough to secure the win.

But Kayah was scheduled to be the first horse auctioned off.

“Not even five minutes after I had won the makeover, I was holding a paddle in the air and bidding on Kayah,” says Wexler, who used the \$4,000 she’d won as the makeover champion to buy her horse back.

## FINDING TWO LOVES

A few weeks later, she and Justin began dating. In 2020, Wexler moved to central North Carolina to be closer to her family before moving to Louisiana to live with Justin.

She completed her bachelor’s in business administration—the first in her family to earn a college degree—and now runs her business, Absolute Pulse Therapy, which offers PEMF to speed recovery in injured horses and people.

Kayah and Wexler have been giving lessons and offering demos to promote the American Mustang, which Wexler calls “America’s horse.”

“Competing in the Makeover Challenge was my destiny,” says Wexler. “I was supposed to take part in it. I was supposed to find Kayah. To meet Justin. The real star in this story is Kayah, though. I wish she could tell everyone her side of the story.” ❧

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