

El Loco Bandito

A 3 Strikes BLM Wild Burro Who Swung Back With a Grand Slam

In March 2019, I stumbled across an advertisement about a Mustang Heritage Foundation Trainer Incentive Program (TIP) Challenge to be hosted in Las Vegas, NV. Having followed the Extreme Mustang Makeover events, I was somewhat knowledgeable of the program, but when I read it would involve wild burros, I became more intrigued. The program incentivizes non-pro trainers to become involved and adopt a wild mustang or burro to gentle/train over a period of 100 days and then compete with like peers.

I quietly submitted my application wondering if I would be considered for the program since I really had only trained mini donkeys and horses on my application. Over cocktails one evening I decided to fess up about my secret plot to tame a long-eared beast from the California desert. I can only say the conversation did not go quite as planned when my partner in crime found out what I had requested to participate in and possibly shorten my life expectancy. With a bit of silver-tongued wordsmithing I made the task seem like an adventure and assured her I would probably *not* be selected to compete.

After submitting enough paperwork to request secret clearance for the Gold Codes to the nuclear weapons buttons, we received the letter Natalie had been hoping did not arrive. I was accepted! We were to pick up our burro in July in South Texas. We had to select 3 choices from nothing more than a catalog of pictures giving sex, age, and color. We chose a leggy black gelding with stringy hair and a kind eye. He would later be known as El Loco Bandito, denoting his wild side and home grounds of California. The adventure began.

On July 12, 2019 my team and I strike out 6 hours from Canyon, TX to Perrin, TX to the home of Matt and Staci Barnes who were also getting a mustang and burro. Thanks again to Matt & Staci for the corrals and Amber & Isidro Espinoza for transporting them to Texas. We lay eyes on "our" burro and he is much bigger and wilder than we had anticipated, but we are trainers.....the paperwork says as much. We run him into the trailer, scared and alone from his herd, frantically trying to assure him we are a blast, relax and to relax big fella. Isidro wrestles a halter on him and we head back to Canyon to do great things with our wild burro.

We arrive in Canyon with a very scared and tired donk. We open the gate and out he trots. After a few minutes I was able to brush him a bit, but that was pretty much the

last time we were close to him for at least 30 days. He made it very clear he did not trust people and had the kicking velocity and trajectory of a sniper rifle. We were trainers.....right? My mornings and evenings for about 45 days were spent just sitting and talking to him from across the lot. Eventually we coaxed him up with some ginger snaps and pretzels. But we still could not touch him without extreme situational awareness and a keenly scoped escape plan. He never once displayed aggression such as biting or striking, but he was deadly accurate with his back feet. His only possession in this world was a giant beach ball he began to bond with. He began to play with this ball and engage me to toss it to him. He became so bonded with this ball, I was simply the keeper of the treats, so I began to make him "do" something for the reward even if it was just to go get his ball. Still, no touching or loving on him.

I was beginning to wonder what I had gotten myself into and if this donkey would ever trust us, much less teach him any ground manners or tricks. We finally moved him to the show barn where he would have a nice stall and paddock to run in, but limit his ability to evade me. This brilliant decision left me with a 12" bruise on my thigh, that had it connected just right, would have shattered my femur. But a good trainer would figure this out. All we did was move my sitting location from the lot to the barn. On with the talking, ginger snaps and begging him to trust me. At what point do we purchase a glucometer to check his blood sugar after all the treats? The poor guy would eat anything. He even ate an ice cube. Why didn't he love us for such quality fare we provided?

In the next few days a friend overnights her horses at our place and I asked her opinion on my insubordinate burro only to hear, "give it time, he will turn a corner." We sat with him and talked to him until dark. I bid her farewell the next morning, prayed about what I might try next and just gave up for a couple of days. In what I considered a lost 48 hours of training, Bandito turned the corner. He joined up with me and the training commenced. I can't explain it, but when I gave in, he got busy and decided my attention was far better than giving up on each other. Relaxed energy, maybe? A trainer once told to quit trying so hard and the animal would release. Sort of like the pressure and release theory of training equine. There was no magical recipe to this flip. I'm just grateful it happened and the hourglass was running again! We switched to carrots and peppermints and pinned our ears. Officially 48 days until #7516 would transform into the sweet-spirited El Loco Bandito we know today.

We started slowly walking on halter, working some liberty training, and gradually began picking up legs. His first trailer ride since coming to Canyon was heartbreaking. He came out of the trailer drenched in sweat and tears streaming down his face. He was terrified of his next destination. When we walked back to his stall, he immediately began to relax, found his ball and began to realize he had a home. He would never be left or abandoned

again. Anyone who thinks donkeys do not cry, is naive. I have seen it twice and both times were during times of extreme anxiety and sadness within the animal.

The final punch in the leather, was Natalie was able to rub his ears. This burro was so head shy you had to duck when he swung that big jug head. I still warn against strangers touching his ears, but he is getting better. The last 45 days of training prior to the competition were tenuous at times, but for the most part, he learned all his required maneuvers and a few tricks to entertain his growing fan club. Everyone was pulling for this guy and he proved his worth after traveling 14 hours to Las Vegas, NV and winning both the 2019 TIP Challenge and Overall High Point Burro in the Las Vegas Wild Showdown where he competed with both mustangs and burros. This was a team effort of building obstacles, learning routines, cues, costumes, music, and mobilizing Bandito's circus to Nevada. Thank you to everyone involved for your help.

After more closely reading his paperwork, I discovered Bandito was a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) "3 Strikes" Wild Burro, which simply means he was given 3 chances at different adoption events and no one selected him. I think we have all felt unwanted at times and I can only imagine what he was thinking when someone really wanted him. We were his last chance at a home with a family. He swung for the fences in Las Vegas and hit a Grand Slam. Thank you, "Dito". Natalie and I will never be the same after this adventure. Bandito will continue to learn new things and will be a fine ambassador for the BLM and the Mustang Heritage Foundation. God had big things for Natalie, Bandito, and I. I'm so glad we trusted Him. Bandito has so many fans and friends who adore him now. He will never be referred to as a rescue. He rescued several of us and restored our faith in the reciprocal power of love.

When you are ready to give up: Be still and know that I am God. Psalm 46:10

