

# All Extremes

Ten wild horses. Ten training schedules. Ten timeframes.



After working with 11 wild horses from the 2012 muster we thought we had a good idea of what to expect—but from the moment our ten new Kaimanawas arrived at the yards it was obvious we had ten new personalities to work with. It quickly became apparent that two were much more relaxed than we had ever encountered, and if we hadn't seen them being mustered we would have questioned just how wild they were. On the other extreme we realised that some of the stallions were more challenging than we had ever experienced, and we were excited to see what these horses would teach us, because surely they would take us on a journey like no other.

We learnt at a young age that there is no correct formula for working with horses, and this was reinforced when we first began training wild Kaimanawas. The best approach is one of flexibility, and we always try to listen to the horses—letting them tell us when they are ready for more.

For us, the true measure of success is producing happy horses that love their new life in domestication. Our goal on the whiteboard in the stables is simple, and it reads 'to help all the Kaimanawas be happy

- #the team.' For us it doesn't matter how long it takes because we are focused on the long term, not on short term results.

Through trust, great things can be accomplished, and every day many of the Kaimanawas surprise us with their ability to embrace changes. Honor (Elder's lead mare) was initially one of the most aggressive horses in the stockyards, but by observing her body language we understood it was a defense mechanism—she was only trying to protect Elder. Within hours of being separated she had a change of heart and could be touched all over the head, neck, and shoulders, and has continued to make rapid progress. On day five she was trucked from the stockyards to our home and that afternoon she was led around the property and through the rivers, quite happy to be out in open areas.

Taking them on adventures is one of the most important aspects to our training process, and as soon as the horses are safe to lead we take them over the farm and show them there is still more to life than the new fences and enclosed spaces. Life has to be fun, for both us and the horses, and we feel obliged to offer them an amazing life. The Kaimanawa Ranges is

one of the most spectacular places we have ever seen—these horses lived in paradise. To be taken from their home, we feel it has to be worth it for the horses, and so we do everything possible to offer them as much enjoyment as possible. Both our showjumpers and Kaimanawas spend much of their time on the farm, beaches, forests and swimming in rivers. Arena work can be boring, so we very rarely school the Kaimanawas in the first year.

Eight days after the muster Vicki backed Honor and she was better than most domesticated horses. With ears pricked she stood while Vicki lay all over her and got her accustomed to her weight, and since she was so relaxed Vicki sat up and walked her for the first time, bareback with just a halter. The couple of times she was ridden she walked for no more than five minutes, the rest of the time she stood to be scratched while Vicki itched her neck, head, rump, and shoulders for 40 minutes while sitting on her. There is no doubt Honor thinks it's a great life, she is always hanging her head over the gate waiting for us, and spends her days grazing in the paddock.



Her feet did concern us, and although sound at the walk, she had severe cracks in two hooves. When the vet came to geld five of the stallions we asked him to check Honor and the news wasn't good. It was one of the worst cases he had seen, and she was immediately shod and had surgery to prevent the damage from worsening. Honor stood quietly to have her hoof trimmed and shod, but was sedated to have to hoof wall wired together. The extra support meant she could continue to lead a normal life and the vet approved her to go to the beach the following day. As expected she loved seeing the sandy landscape and was in her element rolling in the sand, crashing through the waves, and Vicki rode her, walking along the beach.

While Honor and some of our other Kaimanawas have made huge progress there are others that keep us very grounded. For these horses we have different expectations and work at different speeds. Some days they are left unhandled and their only interaction with people is feeding or mucking out. Other days we wait patiently for them to approach and eat out of our hand or let them out to the paddocks to graze. Once they are leading we take them for adventures through the river.

From working with the wild horses previously we knew some horses are more difficult than others. Although we had encountered difficult horses from the 2012 muster (in particular Memo), their instinct was flight, rather than fight. Aggression, however, has been something new for us to deal with. We believe it is a defense mechanism for horses that are feeling threatened or in pain, and can be something bought on by an injury, by a person pushing them further than they are ready for, or by being pressured into a corner so their only option is to fight. Although some horses from the 2012 muster tried to bite and kick on occasion, it was nothing in comparison to some of our latest stallions. Hoff quickly earned a





reputation as the most challenging, and he would rush at fences to attack us, taking his anger and frustration out on the rails. We were obviously very cautious entering the yards to feed him, and when working him we have been very careful never to put ourselves in a position to be hurt. He is one of the oldest stallions we rehomed, and had also split his forehead open to the bone, so we excuse much of his behaviour and are taking him very slowly. The only thing expected of him is to be led from the yards to the paddock each day.

Elder, the veteran stallion (17-19 years) we saved from slaughter, is another one we are taking very slowly. He surprised us in the early days with his gentle and wise attitude. By day four he would walk up and eat out of our hands and was touched on the head for the first time. The experience was very positive, and for the next few days he would sleep with his head resting only centimeters from Kelly's shoulder—although it took another week before he allowed her to touch him again. Patience is Kelly's virtue though, and she stood quietly beside him each day while he ate hay out of her hand—his eyes soft, ears pricked, and a leg resting. There were times we were left in awe of how happy the old boy was, but we never took him for granted, and each day allowed him to choose just how much he was ready for. Touching him for the second time on day 10 was a highlight for Kelly, and she stood for 40 minutes braiding his forelock and running her hands over his face while he slept.

Two days after being separated, Elder and Honor were reunited and they were obviously relieved and happy to see each other again. Over the next week they often saw each other during the day, and a week later they were yarded beside each other again for the first time. It was a mistake, and we have learned yet another valuable lesson. When Kelly entered his yard to catch him, he lunged at her with teeth bared, and not wanting him to realise she



could be intimidated she held her ground, then retreated and got one of the working students to assist. In total he threatened them another three times before he could be caught, and in the days that followed he continued to regress.

That afternoon, and the following day, Kelly patiently spent hours with him trying to get him happy in her presence, but he never truly relaxed and often threatened to bite, something he had never done previously. Once he was happy to be touched again (because finishing on a positive note is very important), we decided he needed some time to relax, and hoping he would settle we turned him out in a large paddock. Each day Kelly only spends a few minutes with him, holding out hay. Without fail he approaches to eat out of her hand, but he is a long way off where he was the week before. One error in judgment has set Elder back by weeks in his training and we no longer trust him. Fortunately trust

can be restored, and more importantly it is irrelevant how long it takes—as long as we have a happy horse he can have as much time as needed.



The wild horses often remind us of the movie 50 First Dates because overnight they often forget the lessons from the day before. Rather than getting frustrated you have to accept where they are at, and work with whatever they are willing to give you. They teach you patience, and if you are open to learn there are many lessons the wild ones can instill in you. As proven by our horses from the 2012 muster, it doesn't matter how long the horses take in the first year, because they all catch up eventually. Memo took 250 days to get to the same point as Survivor did in three weeks, and Remembrance was turned out for almost two years with very little handling. They are all amazing now and love people, but they all needed to be treated as individuals and be worked on their own timeframe—what works for one horse very rarely works for them all.

Between hoof issues (in general surprisingly bad), possible gastric ulcers from transport and yarding, battle wounds from the truck drive North and being yarded together, we also have horses with extreme dental issues. 19 days after the muster we had some of the Kaimanawas teeth done by Warwick Berhns, and while



some only had minor issues including wolf teeth (we never ride a horse with a bit until wolf teeth are removed), sharp hooks, and razor sharp edges, others are more serious. Elder and DoC have missing and fractured teeth, and overall the horses showed signs of brittle teeth from malnutrition. The worst case was Argo who had a tooth growing out of alignment, and bloody clumps of food were removed from a hole in the socket. The diseased area would have affected his ability to survive in the wild, and he would have been lucky to live to 8-9 years without dental care.

Our approach to horse care is not cheap, and we never take shortcuts. The horses get the very best to ensure they have the best chance at domesticated life. The hours we spend with these horses is extensive, and although some horses only get five minutes each day, others may have hours. It's the constant exposure to people and farm life that helps them transition so quickly. The knowledge we have gained over the past two decades has been critical to the happiness of our horses. The saying 'ignorance is bliss' is far from true, having the knowledge to help horses live a pain free and enjoyable life is one of the greatest things we can offer both our showjumpers and the wild Kaimanawas we save. Across the nation and internationally there is a desperate need for people to better understand horses, and we are committed to raising awareness about horse welfare.

*Kelly Wilson*

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