



Starla Pointer/News-Register

Alex Russell shares a moment with Jasper, the yearling she's been gentling this summer through Teens and Oregon Mustangs. She's proud that the colt is friendly and willing to work with a trainer.

Parting will be bittersweet for teen, mustang

New class of gentled mustangs ready for auction block

By STARLA POINTER
Of the News-Register

Jasper, a yearling mustang born wild on the plains of Eastern Oregon, is as friendly as a Labrador retriever — especially when he spots his summer buddy, Carlton resident Alex Russell.

When the 12-year-old enters the barn at FitzGerald Farms near Yamhill, Jasper goes to her immediately, powerful muscles rippling under his satiny coat. He nuzzles her face as she scratches his withers in just the right spot.

"I'm very pleased with him, how far he's come," said Alex, one of 22 youths in this year's Teens and Oregon Mustangs program. "It will be sad to see him go."

But it also will be a happy day when Jasper is adopted into a permanent home.

The bay gelding is among 22 yearlings gentled and trained under the auspices of the Teens and Oregon Mustangs Youth and Yearling Challenge. They are set for auctioning off Saturday, Aug. 24.

The free public event is slated to run 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the Yamhill County Fairgrounds. During the morning, the teens will show their horses and lead them through events such as obstacles, side passing and trotting in hand. The live auction will follow later in the day.

Adoption fees start at \$25, although bidding can climb fast from there. Last year, one mustang sold for \$1,200.

Jasper already has received an online bid of \$200. Online bids can be placed through the non-profit program's website, at www.teensandoregonmustangs.org.

This the fifth year for Teens and Oregon Mustangs. Yamhill horse trainer Erica Fitzgerald started the program to help Oregon's wild horses while simultaneously teaching young people equine skills.

Thousands of the wild

horses run on public lands in Eastern Oregon, where they enjoy protection under the auspices of the federal Bureau of Land Management.

Some are descendants of pony express horses and others from work horses released by Depression-era farmers who could no longer feed them. But most are descended from sturdy horses bred for the U.S. Army in the 1800s.

Each year, many wild mustangs are rounded up and offered for adoption by the BLM. But only a few find homes, Fitzgerald said, partly out of fear they won't be amenable to taming and training.

Fitzgerald said mustangs can be successfully social-

need a home."

Thus far, Teens and Oregon Mustangs has found permanent homes for 123 yearlings. That's a drop in the bucket, considering how many are available, but it's a start, Fitzgerald said.

With support from the Mustang Heritage Foundation, Teens and Oregon Mustangs picks up about two dozen yearlings each May. The horses board and train at FitzGerald Farm.

Most of the trainers are teens.

Some, like Alex, are younger. She first gentled a mustang last year, when she was just 11.

Alex said last year's horse, a filly named Kyleigh, was challenging at first.

In contrast, Jasper arrived willing to please. "He cares as much as I do about doing what I want him to do," she said.

Alex, a horse lover since early childhood, recalled her first look at Jasper on May 19.

He was smaller than a domestic horse of the same age, and his coat and black mane were a little scruffy. But he looked at her with interested, intelligent eyes, one of them brown and the other blue.

Now Jasper is a sleek 14.2 hands at the withers, and Alex keeps his mane neatly braided. "He's grown a lot," she said proudly.

"He likes to play and run around the arena," she said. "And he likes people."

Jasper's fitness and sociability are due in large part to the way Alex has worked with him. She's spent time with him every day, helping him get used to the bridle, training him to follow her commands and, of course, scratching him in that special spot.

Alex also comes to the farm to ride Major, the horse she uses in 4-H, and to serve as a counselor for the day camps aimed at teaching young children to groom and ride horses. But her friends think she's really there for one overriding reason — Jasper.

IF YOU GO

What: Teens and Oregon Mustangs show and auction

Where: Yamhill County Fairgrounds

When: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 24

How: Bidding on horses starts at \$25, but there is no charge for spectating; for additional details, visit teensandoregonmustangs.org.

ized. They can be turned into great horses for people interested in trail riding and such, she said.

"These horses are worthy," she said. "They're sound, healthy — the perfect choice for the average owner."

In fact, Fitzgerald said, mustangs often have fewer health problems than domestically bred horses.

"The strong survive in the wild," she said. "These horses are sure-footed; they have much fewer lameness issues."

She compared her work with wild horses to that of the Humane Society with dogs and cats.

"Instead of breeding, consider adoption," she said. "Plenty of horses