

A Conquistador's Horse

The cool afternoon air was charged with energy. Plans for attending the HOA meeting were quickly changing by the moment. Plan "A" was scraped as the utility trailer that was to haul almost 25 panels had axle troubles, so it was decided that for safety reasons, we would only take what supplies and panels we could fit into a covered stock trailer. This also meant that our horse list would have to be trimmed—drastically. Our reduced capacity meant that only three or four horses would make the trip to the Baca's ranch, outside of Ramah. We hastily loaded up the stock trailer, and made fast evaluations as to which horses to take. The first choice was our BLM mustang gelding, a large, heavy horse with a steady temperament and willing attitude. He is our number one work horse and is the rock upon which any difficulties or complications melt away from. A foundation bred Quarter Horse, recovered from a shoulder injury and needing to get out for a "little ride" was the second choice. Both geldings are seasoned travelers, and could be tied for long hours to a trailer or tie line. This would save our few panels for a less experienced horse. As this annual meeting was a celebration of the Colonial Spanish Horse, we realized we needed to take at least one of our CS horses. After gazing at our youngsters, it was decided that "Cisco", our two year stud colt from Mt. Taylor would make the trip with us. It would also be a wonderful opportunity to have some of the HOA inspectors look at him and evaluate him for type.

We easily loaded the two geldings, but as we walked the young roan colt up to the gooseneck, he balked. Usually he would bail right in, but at this moment, his ears and gaze seemed fixed on something farther away than the trailer. At that moment, a van pulled over the rise in the driveway, a Don Williams song blasting from the radio. It was our second driver, Curtis Sanders.

Curtis is a preacher who has only recently become a CSH "convert" and new owner. He stopped in front of the stock trailer; his big, easy smile put us all at ease as he quickly hooked the trailer to his van, and rolled out ahead of us. Promising to meet up with us later at the Baca's, after picking up a passenger in Albuquerque, he left us in a small swirl of dust and the fading strains of another Don Williams tune.

We looked at the colt, and he looked at us. The crisis of the moment over, he leapt, deer-like, into the trailer. Squeezing in next to the BLM mustang, and Quarter Horse, he appeared even smaller than usual.

The gooseneck gate securely latched, we jumped in the truck, and set off on our journey. As we passed through scenic New Mexico countryside, the talk drifted in and out of such topics as the local grazing conditions, the menacing clouds gathering to the West, a new local radio station that was quickly fading, and the fact that so was the remaining sun light. The prospect of finding all the correct turn offs was not a pleasant one, especially since we were not traveling in caravan with our stock trailer and supplies. The swiftly setting sun, was soon cloaked in black clouds, a small thin golden veil of light hovered against the distant mountain. We were traveling the dark, uncertain road towards an unknown destination.

As we passed by Mt. Taylor, its imposing form reminded us of the many horses still running wild and free there. Was Cisco's family still alive? Increasingly, more horses

were being found shot by Dan Elkins, the owner/manager of the majority of the feral Colonial Spanish horses on the mountain. It was a somber reminder that even in today's more enlightened times, many people still had old ideas and prejudices, and the horses were often the focus of it.

The route quickly led us away from the city of Grants, off the interstate and onto a dark, winding road towards Ramah. Passing the Ice Caves, El Morro National Monument, it was suddenly clear how much history had survived in this part of the country, and the CS horse was an important part of that history. In back, we wondered if Cisco knew how close he was passing by his home, the turquoise mountain, Mt. Taylor.

Our turn for the Baca's ranch quickly appeared out of the darkness, and pulling what seemed to be a couple of "g"s, we rounded the turn and crept along the gravel road. Slowly, we drove through the blackness, straining our eyes to look for signs or markers. Anything to let us know we were either on the right path, or hopelessly lost.

"There it is!" A watery flicker of light in the darkness signaled that we were closing in on our destination. As we drove closer, we made out the outlines of horse trailers, the outlines of people walking around, and the welcoming blaze of a large bon fire. Turning in the gate, we were met by John Gonzalez, all smiles and quick to give assistance with parking and settling our horses.

Annette Gonzalez, John's wife, made introductions to those clustered around the warm flames of the fire, and then parked us in front of a table with plates of home-made hamburgers sitting on them. We were given a huge hug from Vik, and a warm handshake from Tom. A few brief conversations with some of the other folks gathering around the food, and it was time to check on the horses, and wait for Curtis.

At this point we began to get worried. The stock trailer had not only the panels for the colt, but also our water buckets, hay nets and feed. Reluctantly we had tied all three horses to the trailer when we arrived, now it looked like they would have to stay there for awhile. They had been fed and watered before we left, but it was always good to help them settle down in a new environment with feed and water. We looked down the inky road that we had just traveled in on. A few headlights heralded more arrivals, but none was Curtis. Positive that he had missed the turn, and would probably stay in Ramah for the night, we realized how tired we were, and climbed up into the nosecone of the trailer and fell asleep to the sounds of laughter, and music.

"CA-CLANG!" "CA-CLANG!" "CA-CLANG!" Cisco was not happy spending so much time tied up. At three in the am, neither were many of the sleepy campers that were all subjected to his tantrum. His hoof continued to hammer the trailer's metal gate. I climbed out of the trailer, looking around, the entire field we had parked in and the surrounding buildings were bathed in a slivery light. The fire was out, and the sky was filled with stars. Checking on the horses, "Bullseye", the BLM mustang, nickered softly when I walked around the corner of the trailer. "Gomez", the QH stood, shaking, his slick coat no insulation to the cold mountain air. Cisco stopped his pawing, to look at me with the expectation of being given his liberty and something to eat. "Sorry, kid." A reassuring pat to each horse, and it was time to climb back into the trailer to get some sleep.

"CA-CLANG!" "CA-CLANG!" "CA-CLANG!" It was going to be a long night...

The soft glow of early dawn saw us out surveying the area with a better light than the night had given us. Horse trailers were stacked along each other like corn rows, portable corral panels stood along fence lines, and everywhere, there were horses. And, it seems, all of them whinnied and snorted, and gave us greeting as we walked across the dew covered pasture. Our thoughts turned to our missing friend. We hoped he was safe, but our immediate attention needed to be focused on getting water and feed for our horses. A fellow early-riser walked over to us, and put out his hand, "Hi, I'm Dennis". He kept a cigarette in the other hand. Then he asked if he could help us with anything. We mentioned our predicament, and he quickly produced a plastic bucket. "I've also got some extra hay." What a guy! We quickly watered all three horses, and parceled out the small morning meal. Just then, John Gonzalez came over to us, a hot, steaming cup of coffee in each hand. "And that's not all," he said, and from his jacket pocket he produced hazelnut creamer and sugar packets. This was simply heaven, especially after so little sleep. Horses fed/watered, humans caffeinated, we were ready to meet the day.

Slowly, more fellow mustangers crept out of tents and trailers into the cool mountain morning. We assembled around the main cabin, and soon large baskets of fresh fruit, danishes, bagels and more coffee materialized. Breakfast was spent talking horses, making new friends, and catching up with what everyone had been up to. Occasionally we would look up from a sweet roll and scan the misty horizon for signs of a van and stock trailer, but to no avail.

The van carrying Vik, Tom, and several others rolled into the drive in front of the cabin. It was almost show time. It was announced that Vik would do a conformation clinic/demonstration, and then the inspectors and board members would proceed with looking at any horses that had brought for inspection. The inspection could be done privately, if the owner did not wish to have the horse's points discussed in public, or the inspection could be done as part of the clinic, making it an educational opportunity for all attending.

To get the clinic rolling, Vik brought out her stallion; "El Tigre Segundo". She joked that she wanted to get things started by going over his conformation as she did not mind criticizing him, and reminded us all that no horse has the "perfect" conformation. Well, if "Tigre" had any flaws you wouldn't have know it to look at him. The striking dun stood in a balanced and relaxed manner, and the gleam off his golden coat seemed to outshine the early morning sun. Carefully, Vik went over his proportions and explained how these were always the same for all Colonial Spanish Horses. Her practical and humorous description of what she was doing made for a fun and interesting learning experience. Point by point, she measured and explained what she was doing. Then, to help show how these proportions help determine the overall physical type of the CSH, she had a horse that had not passed inspection brought out to demonstrate the difference. Then, it was announced that if anyone had a horse they wanted looked at in public, now was the time to bring 'em out. We said we wanted Cisco looked at, and John went to get him from the trailer. Cisco had been ponied from Bullseye earlier that morning to stretch out and get him moving after a chilly and noisy night tied to the trailer. Being tied back to the trailer was, no doubt, a disappointment for him.

He whinnied at John's approach. His hoof in mid swing, he stopped, stood quietly and waited to be un-tied. The trailer license plate had taken the worse of it.

John hurried back to the main group with Cisco. This was going to be interesting. Nerve wracking and exciting all at the same time. In our eyes, he looked like every description we had come across for a Colonial Spanish horse. To look at him, the first impression comes from a strong Iberian head. His dark, almond shaped eyes are cradled in the heavy bone of the upper temple. Pulling away his shaggy forelock, one can easily see the distinctive “horns” above the corners of the eye. His shoulders slope sharply, to a high set of withers. His tail is low set, with the hair almost sweeping the ground.

Unfortunately, his full, long mane was partially rubbed off due to summer insects and a pasture buddy who loves to chew on mane hair. The chest is narrow, and the legs seem to be able to contort into all sorts of seemingly impossible positions. And finally, the hooves. They are black, and seem to be made of the hard volcanic stone of the mountain he came from. Interestingly, the hooves in back look like mule feet—upright as if he were standing on soup cans. We had always seen and believed in the “Spanish-ness” of the colt, and now, it was going to be evaluated by the people who had worked with this breed for so many years. People who had to be impartial for the sake of the breed, and not let emotion and affection interfere with a tough decision regarding registration. Especially in the case of an outside and feral horse. Vik asked John to move the colt around in the small area in front of the inspectors, registrar, and the audience. Slowly, and patiently, she began to take her measurements. Just then, a small dust cloud down the distant road signaled the arrival of someone. Could it be? Eyes squinting against the bright sunshine, the outline of a van and stock trailer came to view. Yes! Curtis had finally arrived. He had made it! I walked around the demonstration, trying not to be a distraction and then ran over to the main gate. Curtis pulled in and stopped as I walked over waving my arms.

“We’re glad you’re here!” Curtis smiled his easy grin, and made a quick introduction of his friend, a well dressed lady who had family that lived close to Ramah. Joty Baca walked over, not wanting the horse to be spooked by the rumbling trailer full of panels, and helped direct Curtis to the field we had parked in. The evaluation appeared to be almost over. I quietly walked back to my spot on the edge of the audience. Vik asked for a measuring tape. It just so happened we had one in the truck, so I dashed off to get it and saw that Curtis had pulled in next to us and was beginning to off load the panels. I tried to be polite, and exchange pleasantries with Curtis’ lady friend, but I wanted to get back to Cisco’s evaluation. So much of what was being done, I was somehow missing. I hurried back to where Vik was waiting. We taped Cisco at 14.0 hands even. Next, John was asked to trot the horse out, down the driveway and back. Cisco was reluctant at first, but then seemed to decide it was great fun running with a human dangling from his lead rope. The crowd applauded, and John walked him back to the trailer, anxious to help Curtis set up the panels, and get the buckets and feed out. The next horse, a fine blue corn stallion from El Rito was preparing to get evaluated. I started to walk over to Vik. What had happened? I missed almost all of it. From somewhere Gretchen came over and asked about Cisco’s name, and our farm name. In the ledger book she carried, I read Cisco’s name, a number, and some notes. He passed? He passed! The moment of truth. The little colt from Mt. Taylor was recognized as being a Colonial Spanish Horse. It felt wonderful! I went back to the trailer to see Curtis and John setting up hay bags and water buckets. “Well?” was the general question, “How did he do?” In his hurry to get back and get the horses taken care of, John had not heard the final verdict.

“He made it!”

We “high-fived” each other, and then hugged Cisco. The BLM mustang and QH were busy tearing mouthfuls of hay from their bags. Consumed with putting away a second round of breakfast, they ignored us. Cisco looked up from his bucket, mouth dripping water. He always enjoys attention, and the extra hugs were welcomed and acknowledged by a wet swipe of the muzzle on our shirts.

In April 1605, Don Juan de Oñate lost some of his horse in the area now known as Mt. Taylor. On October 2, 2004, it seems one of them was found.



Conquistador español