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## Soldier's Purple Heart

By Danee Rudy

*This article appeared in our November 2009 newsletter- shortly after the 2009 Extreme Mustang Makeover. For the competition, trainers from across the United States pick up an untouched mustang, train it for less than 100 days, and then traveled to Tennessee to compete against each other showing off their horse's ground manners and riding skills. Davin named his 3 year old Mustang gelding "Soldier."*

Many of you know that Soldier was having some lameness issues. Maybe it was the hard ground in the round pen and the many laps he made around it before being gentled, maybe it was an old injury, maybe we pushed too hard, but his stifles were never quite right. Davin lost a lot of time with Soldier. In fact Davin wasn't riding Soldier until 20 days before the competition! There are two divisions of the competition, idols and legends. Davin stayed in the slightly easier idols division since he really did not get to prepare his mustang. That said the last twenty days of training were amazing. Soldier and Davin acted like they had been working together under saddle for years and as we left for Tennessee we started thinking they could do really well. Watching everyone school is always intimidating as there are so many amazing trainers that show up to these competitions, but even so, Davin and Soldier looked cool, calm, and ready. I was sitting in with the audience when Davin and Soldier entered for the in hand portion. The judges first impression had to be a great one- my boys looked GOOD!! Davin was in his typical wranglers, boots and black felt cowboy hat, but the white shirt and sport coat commanded attention. Soldier was more than shiny- his feet were painted, mane slicked down, and his small amount of white markings gleamed. He was also calm and well mannered as Davin walked him over the rails, picked up his feet, loaded him in the trailer, trotted him through the serpentine, and all the other obstacles in the in hand course. He place second. The top three spots all went to Pennsylvania trainers. For the ridden course Soldier was quiet and well behaved but he was hurting.

Apparently the fifteen hour trainer ride to Tennessee was more than he could handle. He had been so sound the last thirty days that we thought we were in the clear. Their performance was okay but not as great as we had hoped. Everyone was positive he made it to the top ten, except Davin, who was honestly surprised when he qualified for the freestyle.

We knew from before that Banamine did wonders for Soldier so we got a vet pass, gave him a few cc's and prepared for the freestyle with excitement. Davin had a tire with a flag pole concreted into it with a huge American flag flying over 12 feet in the air. The plan was for Soldier to drag it. We knew it was too heavy so Davin and his buddy Darryl used every tool and kitchen knife they had to cut the tire off the concrete, chisel the concrete slab down, and fit it into the bottom of a cut off trash can. Darryl's wife, Denise, and I modified a big USA banner when we realized it was a little droopy. The plan was for the 6 by 25 foot banner to be rolled up on one post and for Davin to ride up to it, grab the end and ride it out to the other post. But it flopped in the center so the 25 foot banner got shortened to about 12 feet. Okay, it still looked cool.

Davin was forth to go. I can't be quiet and I just make him nervous so I was in the stands with Denise and our four year old son, Wyatt. During the grand entry the top ten trainers rode in. Soldier was last in line and the other horses were galloping around by the time he made it in. The usually calm horse was a little obnoxious. Alright, no big deal. Then it happened- the horse's entire stifle just collapsed under him. Like a bad knee that just gives out, his stifle just went. Davin did a one rein halt and dismounted. As the horses exited I wanted so bad to run down and see what Davin was planning since the horse was so obviously not feeling good. Davin is very independent and can figure it out on his own so I watched two horses go- then I couldn't take it anymore and ran down. Glad I did. Because the horse was spooking Davin couldn't tell it was his stifle. He thought the horse just tripped behind hard while acting goofy. At this point he only had four minutes to re-plan his freestyle. The drag was still too heavy for a horse this lame. All the canter work was out. Soldier was rightfully unhappy so pulling out the banner on a horse that concerned for his well being was a not a great idea.

I went back to my seat- my heart pounding. Davin rode in and they played his song- a soft ballad about America by Charlie Daniels. Davin pulled the flag out and twirled it, no whipped it, around Soldier's head- something we only played with a little bit and had not done in awhile. Soldier stood still like, well, like a soldier. When Davin tried to mount up it was obvious the stifle pain was radiating into his back so Davin stepped back down and played a little more on the ground. He grabbed the rope and had Soldier pull the flag stand backwards just a few feet. It was much less pressure on him than pulling it forward and Davin held the tail of the rope in a way to help make it easy on his horse. When

Davin remounted he was more careful and Soldier said, "Yes, I can." Davin trotted each way and did a pivot each way. Canterng both directions was a required move and had Davin asked I KNOW that Soldier would have done it and done it well, but he didn't ask. The song ended and all who knew the horse's condition was in tears. Mark Lyons, the winner of last year's Texas Mustang Makeover, rode in to interview each trainer. I wish I knew word for word what he said, but Mark informed the audience that he "had some explaining to do" and mentioned that the cowboy code included to never overtax a lame horse.

As we walked Soldier back to his stall, all I could think of was that Soldier earned a purple heart. That little horse tried so hard and gave his all. For the awards ceremony Davin led him in tacked up with the American flag hanging over the saddle. They placed ninth. Soldier sold the next day to a trail riding couple in Illinois. It has never been so hard to see a horse go.

It is hard to be disappointed when they did so well, but it's hard to be elated when the sweetest horse you've ever worked with is feeling so poorly. The good news is the new owners didn't mind giving Soldier plenty of time off before starting his new career doing light trail rides.

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