

## The Extremes of Extreme Farm

By Pamela Nolf

In November of 2010, the clarion call went out over the Internet: “62 Icelandics on Feedlot Awaiting Shipment to Slaughter.” (The owner of these horses had given them to what he thought was a charity for re-homing only to have them show up on a feedlot.) The Equine-related discussion groups were abuzz with this news and individuals and groups rallied together to find funds to adopt these horses at meat prices. Subsequently, the owner of Extreme Farms in Washington State gave away approximately 100 more Icelandic horses. Most of the horses were untouched, unhandled, unregistered—raised in wide open pastures. So over a year and half later, what is happening with all these Extreme Farm horses?

To set the stage for the discussion, let’s define some terminology. A rescue horse is usually an animal that needs to be re-homed due to poor upkeep and/or the inability of the owner to continue to support the horse. At the time of the “giveaway,” the Extreme Farm horses were in good weight and condition. A better term for these horses was “unhandled”—many of these horses that had reverted to a semi-wild state in which humans were regarded as predators. I can’t really say that I understood the challenges faced by the adopters of these horses until I got to visit some up close and personal.

Several months ago, I visited a farm that had several of the Extreme Farm horses. Since adoption, these horses have been owned by the same person and received basically the same introduction to domestic life. When the owner first got the horses, none of them were approachable by humans—they just wanted to run away. A single misjudgment of pressure or unconsidered movement would result in the horse desperately trying to get away—a scenario rife with potential for injury. In fact the owner did make such a mistake and the Extreme Farm horse knocked him to the ground. Knowing that he could get seriously hurt when dealing with feral horses, the owner had a professional trainer experienced with Icelandic horses start them with ground manners and, if old enough, under saddle. Following is an introduction to three of these horses approximately one year after adoption-- Sweetie Pie, the Athlete, and the Beauty. Note the owner of these horses has approved these descriptions

Sweetie Pie is adorable. As soon as I stroll into sight, both she and her pasture mate leave their hay to come up for skritches and a possible treat. Sweetie Pie just can’t get enough attention—she loves pets and hugs and kind words. The owner halts the horse and we go into the indoor arena. Sweetie Pie calmly steps over the hose laying across the doorway. I play lead line exercises with Sweetie Pie who has great ground manners but is too young to go under saddle. When we take her back to the pasture, Sweetie Pie hangs around the gate hoping that we will come back. Over the past months, this horse continues to make great progress by dealing with crowds of people and learning how to drive and pull a cart.

The Athlete is a gorgeous young gelding with good gaits—you can definitely visualize this horse on the tolt track. The experienced Icelandic horse trainer fetches him from the pasture and tacks him up for a ride. The Athlete is alert, a bit cautious, but trusts his trainer. The trainer demos some of his lateral work and gaits under saddle—really a nice exhibit. Six of us are in a corner of the arena and the trainer

can ride the Athlete up to us at a walk—a step that would have been too much for him a month ago. At the end of the ride, I walk over to give scratches and pets. The Athlete is appreciative but still just a bit wary. As the months go by, the Athlete is becoming more and more certain that people are good things.

And then, there's the Beauty. She has the best conformation and gaits out of the three horses. As we walk towards her pasture, I see a stunning horse, standing tall and alert—just breathtaking. But on second glance, this horse is more like a gazelle watching a pride of lions approach. The Beauty is just waiting for these “lions” to eat her. (Before sending The Beauty to a trainer, the owner spent hours just sitting in the pasture with a bucket of grain waiting for the Beauty to approach him. It was many days before the horse would even take a nibble of grain.) The trainer goes into the Beauty's pasture slowly and deliberately puts on her halter. . The trainer can lead the Beauty around the pasture but any ill-considered movement is still a source of big concern to the Beauty. When the “lion pride” leaves, I approach the gate to Beauty's pasture with a handful of fresh grass. She really wants that grass, seems to want to trust me, inches closer to the fence, very cautiously takes a nibble of grass from my hand, and then backs away. This is good sign and over the past few months, the owner and trainer report that the Beauty continues to take those small but significant steps to building trust with humans.

The above vignettes represent the extremes of the Extreme Farm horses. Reports from owners of the larger population of Extreme Farm horses vary wildly as to progress made. Some of these horses were under saddle and on the trail in six months. And some horses have been re-homed several times because of the challenges of working with them. Results vary based on the age of the horse, sire (and dam of course), and whether or not the horse had some sort of exposure to humans early in its life. And some of the Extreme Farm horses have great potential. A filly Alfradis was evaluated by Barbara Frische, International Icelandic Horse Breeding judge, who awarded the filly a first prize status for conformation commenting that she was a sparkling young filly in excellent condition to be evaluated as a 2 year old.

The Inland Icelandic Facebook group is an excellent source to exchange information with current owners of Extreme Farm horses. And a shout out goes to Darick Sanderson, the caretaker at Extreme Farms, who has been tireless in his support of trying to find the right match ups for the horses and helping new owners with their horses and registration.

And the good news is that many owners are trying to get these horses registered. As of the researching of this article, 49 Extreme Farm horses are registered. Since the owner had previously registered some of his horses, approximately 35 of these “re-homed” horses have been registered by their new owners. Extreme Farms has now filed all the stallion reports so that as people get more of the dams registered, more adopters of the resulting offspring will be able to register their horses. Some of the Extreme Farm horses can never be registered since a progenitor may have died with no DNA on record. If you own an Extreme Farms horse, the Inland Icelandic group has a list of dams and their registration numbers and can provide advice on registration. The USIHC can also help you with the registration process.

Some of these horses required the attention of a professional trainer just to get the horses to the point that they could be safely handled on the ground. Several adopters of Extreme Farm horses have

reported negative results from the more extreme “cowboy” methods of breaking a horse such as intensive round penning. These methods just seemed to confirm to the Icelandic horse that people are predators; it is important to build trust with these horses first before moving on to any kind of training. And although people are to be commended for opening their hearts and wallets to save these horses, many have found the additional amount of money required to train a free but unhandled horse equals or exceeds the price of trained Icelandic horse bought from a breeder. Adopting an unhandled horse is a chancy proposition—you may win the giveaway lottery and find your heart horse or you may end up with a horse that may never be safely ridden.