NYCHA BRAVEHEARTS SHOOTOUT & REGIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

A CUT ABOVE

The inaugural NYCHA BraveHearts Shootout touched hearts, changed lives and made dreams come true for U.S. military veterans, NYCHA members and NCHA trainers.

BY BLANCHE SCHAEFER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY S. SYLVESTER PHOTOGRAPHY

A group of teenagers stood perched on the railing of a panel fence on the floor of the W. R. Watt Arena, yelling fervently for every move Smart Peptonomics made as the red roan gelding cut across the pen after a cow with U.S. Army veteran Alex Rodriguez in the saddle. The building echoed with spectators’ cheers for the first draw to cut in the inaugural NYCHA BraveHearts Shootout, a unique team event that paired veterans from the BraveHearts riding program with famed National Cutting Horse Association trainers and National Youth Cutting Horse Association regional finalists.

Amanda Bethards, who served as a Navy Corpsman, tied for the highest veteran score and, teamed with her youth partner Lilly Lorasa, won the team Shootout with the highest composite score of 443. Bethards rode John McGraw’s mare Shes Metallic to a crowd-pleasing 223.

The intensity didn’t let up as the second rider, 58-year-old Marine veteran Marshall Wolfe, turned in a thrilling run, complete with a hat toss at the end and an ear-to-ear smile when his score of 218 flashed on the board.

“Wow, Mr. Wolfe killed it! Oh look, Mr. Mercurio is up next, we have to make sure we cheer loud for him, too,” one teenager noted to her friends as Wolfe exited the pen while Army and Vietnam War veteran Bill Mercurio prepared to make his run.

“Mr. Mercurio is so sweet, I met his wife yesterday,” her friend responded. “I hope he does good.”

The heartwarming scene was one of many at an event that brought trainers and NYCHA members together to befriend, coach and rally behind U.S. military veterans, with many of the youth meeting their veteran partners only 24 hours prior to the show.

The Shootout from July 26-27 at the Will Rogers Memorial Center in Fort Worth, Texas, held during the NCHA Metallic Cat Summer Cutting Spectacular, is the product of one idea to give one veteran a showing experience that blossomed into something much greater through a partnership between the NCHA and the BraveHearts riding program.

BraveHearts is one of the oldest and largest equine therapy programs. The 501(c)(3) organization established in 2002 has two full-time, year-round accredited horse farms in Poplar Grove and Harvard, Illinois, that provide equine services and therapy to military veterans at zero cost. BraveHearts is unique in that it provides more challenging riding and horsemanship opportunities, such as working with various performance horses, starting Mustangs and more.

“The goal is not to keep people hooked up to lead ropes with side-walkers, but it lets them go challenge themselves,” BraveHearts president and COO Meggan Hill-McQueeney said. “These are people who have defended our freedom. They certainly can learn how to sit a horse and hold a cow—that’s what they’re most deserving of.”

Hill-McQueeney, herself a therapeutic riding instructor of 25 years, has worked at BraveHearts for 12 years. She also has a strong background in cutting, having previously managed a cutting horse breeding operation, and has seen firsthand
time and again how the sport can provide an outlet for veterans searching for healing, adrenaline, competition, or simply a connection with animals.

“When I started at Bravehearts, we had some cows and started to teach veterans how to work cattle, and over the years we have brought in some wonderful cutting horse trainer friends of mine to spend time with the veterans,” Hill-McQueeney said. “The chairman of our board, Ken Boyd, is a Gold Star father, so he lost his only son in combat in Afghanistan, and he and his wife came to our farm years ago. They didn’t know anything about horses but fell in love with the program at the farm. He got pretty active riding, loved cutting and ended up buying a cutting horse.”

The idea for the Shootout began taking shape last year with the help of NCHA Hall of Famer Kathy Daughn and NCHA Director of Youth Michael Simmons, who proposed pairing 16 veterans of all ages and all military backgrounds with 16 youth cutters—eight junior regional finalists and eight senior regional finalists—and assigning an NCHA trainer to coach each pair, culminating with the Shootout show in Fort Worth.

“I was talking to Kathy Daughn and mentioned how I’ve always seen the celebrity cuttings, and it’d be really neat if we could get this gentleman, a Gold Star father, a chance to have an exhibition run at a major NCHA event,” Hill-McQueeney said. “Kathy said, ‘We can do better than that.’ Mike Simmons and I had a conversation about what an incredible cutting opportunity would mean to our veterans. And my goodness, every trainer I asked said, ‘Absolutely; I’m all in.’ I don’t know a lot of other sports or professional athletes who would literally give up their time to give dedicated days to helping these veterans become their very best riders to prepare them to compete.”

The teams got to know their trainers at a two-day clinic in early June at Cowan Ranch in Ardmore, Oklahoma. The veterans had riding experience through BraveHearts’ program, but for the majority of them, the Ardmore clinic was the first time they’d cut a cow or even worked the flag, and the Shootout was the first time they’d ever shown.

Once in Fort Worth, the first day of the event on July 26 was another full-day clinic in the Watt Arena for the veterans to work with their trainers, meet their youth partners and get prepared to show. They also got familiar with the horses—many were kindly donated for use at the show by NCHA members, trainers and owners, while some came from the BraveHearts stable.

Simmons says this one-on-one time for the youth riders to develop a relationship with their veteran partner was valuable in multiple ways.

“I spent 33 years as a cop, so my heart is with our veterans, and I told the youth, ‘You have to be there to help the veterans,’” Simmons said. “This is their first time to show; you guys have shown. Show them how to put boots on, how to calm their horse, so the kids feel like they have some responsibility. These are very bright individuals, and these kids will be our leaders someday. I think one of the things we neglect in our generations is that we have an opportunity to learn about history, and it gives us an idea of the future. For youth to talk to our vets about something they may never experience firsthand, to understand what it takes to sacrifice to give us the freedom to do what we enjoy, it’s important to talk to our veterans who served our country yesterday, today, and in the future.”

— NCHA Director of Youth Michael Simmons

“For youth to talk to our vets about something they may never experience firsthand, to understand what it takes to sacrifice to give us the freedom to do what we enjoy, it’s important to talk to our veterans who served our country yesterday, today, and in the future.”

For veterans, Hill-McQueeney says one of the greatest healing benefits of learning the sport of cutting is learning to trust.

“Veterans find they can’t trust people, they can’t trust their situation, they can’t trust their environment because of their military service, but they learn that they have to trust the horse for the horse to trust them,” Hill-McQueeney said. “I think there’s no better testament of putting that special level of trust in that special relationship with a horse than putting your hand down on a cow and letting that horse take over. Learning to ride a cutting horse is the epitome of learning trust, and I love that correlation between a veteran and a cutting horse.”

Cutting also provides many veterans with a constructive way to improve their mental wellbeing and emotional control. For many who competed, horses were the catalyst to seek positive life changes.

“When I first sat on a cutting horse, I was like, ‘I want to do this for a living!’ But dang man, I’m 58 years old now, but I can still have fun,” said Wolfe, who has been riding for six years and found sobriety thanks to BraveHearts. “I couldn’t have done this a year and a half ago. I wouldn’t be here—not just here at this show, but here in general. I was on my last leg. Being clean and getting my clarity back, that brought the PTSD. But when I’m on a horse, this is a safe place. The biggest [challenge] for me is my anxiety, so this has been a good experience, because it’s really bringing back my center. Taking that deep breath, having that clarity going into that herd.”
Adding the pressure of competition with a horse was a new experience for the BraveHearts veterans, but getting a job done under pressure is something their military experience had them well primed for. Many veterans found themselves in familiar, though different, territory at the horse show. The experience provided a welcome reprieve from lingering post-military triggers.

“We actually talk more about cutting. We fit in so well with each other because we get each other, and a lot of us don’t like to talk about the military or open up about it, because you never know the reaction you’re going to get. This actually is more fun for us that we can take our focus onto something else. No one’s asking us about it; they’re asking us about cutting, and we love it,” said Kayla Tilly, who served as an Army medic from 2012 to 2018 and is now in nursing school. “There’s so much overlap though, even just riding horses and learning things, like when we were cleaning our boots [the night before the show], all of us together, we’re like, ’Man, this is like when we used to get in the barracks and clean weapons together.’”

That unspoken bond and unwavering support was evident during the show as each score flashed on the board and high-fives from horseback, whooping and hollering, good-sported jabs and laughs filled the loping pen. For one day, the veterans were completely enveloped by the energy of a horse show that is sometimes taken for granted.

“Our cutting community is very patriotic and appreciative. We stand for the anthem and say a prayer. They fought for our country so we can preserve our way of life and do the things that we love. They brought us trainers’ appreciation back for the sport and for the horse, because sometimes we get in the routine of it being work, and we all love the horses and we love our jobs, but it brought back appreciation for the cutting horse,” said NCHA $1 million earner Cara Brewer. “It was a really big honor, Jody Galyean and I were talking about it, and he said pretty much that they just wanted to be like us, coming home. They go and do what they do, and the scariest thing was coming home. We owe it to our veterans to help integrate them back into the home.”

**BRAVEHEARTS SHOOTOUT TEAM CHAMPION AMANDA BETHARDS AND NYCHA JUNIOR REGIONAL CHAMPION LILLY LORAAS**

A pair of hearty Metallic Cats made dreams come true for Amanda Bethards and her youth partner Lilly Loraas on Shootout day July 27. Bethards tied for the highest veteran score and, together with Loraas, won the team Shootout with the highest composite score of 443.

Wolfe’s 218 held until No. 9 rider Bethards rode out of the pen on John McGraw’s mare Shes Metallic (Metallic Cat x Playin Tag x Playgun) to the tune of a big 223 as the crowd erupted.

Bethards has years of riding experience in multiple disciplines and was teamed up with Loraas and trainer Brewer.

“At first I was lunging a little and Cara said, ’Don’t hang on with your legs.’ I was like, ’What am I supposed to hang on with?’ I even ripped my fingernail off. But you know, blood, sweat and tears, right?” laughed Bethards, a mom of three who served in the medical field as a Navy Corpsman and recently accepted a full-time position as the BraveHearts volunteer coordinator. “Cara’s always like, ’The cow, the horse, and then you.’ I’m wanting to push the horse and anticipate those turns. I’ve got to trust her, just put my hand down, let her do her job.”
BRAVEHEARTS SHOOTOUT VETERAN CO-CHAMPION WILL BOELCKE

Will Boelcke claims he doesn’t have a competitive bone in his body, but cutting has awakened a healthy competitive drive for the Air Force veteran who worked in military police and security from 1998-2000. He turned it up at draw No. 13 aboard Bill Carter’s gelding Metallic Tracks (Metallic Cat x Love Tracker x DJ Tracker) and matched Bethards’ score of 223 to tie as highest-scoring veteran.

“When I saw the scores, well, it sort of kicked in. But no, normally I’m nervous about competition. I never was in sports or anything like that, so I never really had that. I’m more of, ‘Everybody deserves to win,’” Boelcke said. “The feeling out there of knowing I was doing the right thing, right in the middle—I was in a zone in the run. I couldn’t hear anything else around me in the stands. I listened to my trainer. And that was my favorite part, working as a team with my trainer and the horse. We were working as one unit.”

NCHA trainer Andy Sherrerd said Boelcke was an excellent student because of his focus and dedication.

“Will is pretty quiet, but he is always thinking and trying to do the right thing. I think that’s what allowed him to do as well as he did, because he concentrates on the job at hand. As good as he did in the short period of time was pretty amazing,” Sherrerd said. “This was one of the better things I’ve been involved in— in the horse business and in life. I told Will, it’s almost embarrassing to me that you were so appreciative of me giving my time. I only took two days out of my cush horse training job to be involved in something for someone who fought for our country. When you’re standing next to somebody who actually was in that situation, while the National Anthem plays, it’s just different.”

For the soft-spoken Boelcke, competing and performing under pressure helped grow his sense of self-worth, something he has struggled with in the past.
“I know that I am a sufficient rider, but I don’t often give myself the credit that is due,” Boelcke said. “It’s boosted my confidence a whole lot, because I tend to lack self-esteem and confidence, so competing and doing well has shown me that maybe I have more value than I give myself credit for. It props up my ego in a way that helps me, not in an overblown, egotistical way, but in a way that makes me feel worthy.”

**NYCHA SENIOR REGIONAL CHAMPION GENTRY GONSALVES**

Marking an equally impressive 223, Gentry Gonsalves won the NYCHA Senior Regional Championship aboard her mother Jessica Gonsalves’s 13-year-old mare WR Jillaroo (WR This Cats Smart x Oaks Smart Peach x Docs Oak).

“She loves her job, and she’s so much fun to show. My mom bought her as a 3-year-old, but we don’t show her very often. This is the first time she’s shown since October,” said the 20-year-old daughter of NCHA Hall of Fame trainer Gary Gonsalves. “It felt pretty nice to end my youth career like that. This is actually my first saddle and trophy to win.”

Gentry was paired with Air Force veteran Brenda-Lee Anderson. As someone who has been immersed in the cutting industry since birth, Gentry says seeing the veterans experience the sport she loves for the first time was the most rewarding part.

“I think this is a cool program. It’s awesome seeing them with their buckles and their saddles. I love that,” Gonsalves said. “Just for them to experience what we get to every day—the thrill, excitement. Brenda-Lee got done after she cooled off a little bit and caught her air, and she was like, ‘I want to go do that again!’ And that’s what I love about cutting.”

Marking a 223, Gentry Gonsalves won the NYCHA Senior Regional Championship aboard her mother Jessica Gonsalves’s 13-year-old mare WR Jillaroo.

---

**Thanks to the following NYCHA BraveHearts Shootout and Regional Championship sponsors**

- Reytheon Scholarship (Christine King)
- American Hat Company
- Symbiont (Frank and Ora Diehl)
- Delloras A & Lester J Norris Foundation (Steve Norris)
- Cowan Ranch (William and Michelle Cowan)
- VP Ranches (Victoria and Parker Johnson)
- Rios of Mercedes
- BraveHearts Therapeutic Riding
- CINCH
- Bell County CHA
- 6666 Ranch
- Highbrow CD
- SDP Buffalo Ranch
- Sannman
- The Animal
- Badboonarising
- Catty Hawk
- Barbara and Denton Dunn
At-Large Member: Casey Green

I am looking forward to serving in the At-Large Executive Committee Director position. Because of my extensive involvement in the NCHA over recent years, I feel this is the next step I can take in helping our Association to keep moving forward.

Many people in the Association most likely recognize me as a professional trainer. Growing up in Indiana, I showed in youth before moving to Texas to start my training career. I have been blessed with the opportunity to train and show horses for clients and friends for over 20 years and was inducted into the NCHA Open Riders Hall of Fame in 2018. My clients and I show across the country at both limited-age events and weekend shows.

In addition to showing, I have been involved in numerous committees over the years, with recent appointments to the Cattle, Open Trainers, and Competition Committees. I have also been asked to serve on several sub-committees, including the payout task force and leveling. These committee appointments have provided me with a thorough and extensive understanding of the Association from not only a competitor standpoint but also the operational, fiscal, and community involvement aspects.

There is no doubt that this Association is facing many internal and external challenges in the days ahead. As someone that has taken the time to not only understand the Association from a competition standpoint, but also an operational and fiscal one, I feel uniquely positioned to be an impartial member of the Executive Committee. Given my collective experiences I will strive to evaluate all matters without bias and will challenge other members of our organization to do the same.

Cutting is how I provide for my family and teach my daughter life skills that will make her successful no matter what she chooses to do, to include understanding the value of a long day’s work. I have made lifelong friends and have celebrated with my friends and clients when they have experienced some of the happiest moments of their lives. All these experiences, relationships, and years have shown me that we all care deeply about the same thing, and that is the sport of cutting.

It is the right time for me to give back to the sport that has provided an amazing and rewarding life for my family. Thank you for your time and I look forward to representing this amazing organization.