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Video: Topeka horse trainer making name for himself as an Extreme Cowboy

Hart will ride in Cowboy Up Challenge this weekend at Calgary Stampede in Canada



Topekan Lee Hart, a horse trainer and participant in Extreme Cowboy racing, will compete with horse Shelby in the Cowboy Up Challenge at the Calgary Stampede this weekend.

Lee Hart, here going through obstacles with Shelby, has made a profession out of horse training and "cowboy logic."

Topekan Lee Hart, riding one of the horses he'll compete with at the Mustang Million in September, is a trainer and professional rider who has been around horses since a young age.

Topekan Lee Hart has been around horses his entire life.

A Council Grove native, he rode his first equine at the age of 3.

"They tied me on him," Hart said. "I wanted to be there."

By 12, he was training his first colt.



Now at age 41, with decades of experience working on ranches, Hart is one of the premier horse trainers and professional riders in the area.

“I am a cowboy because I care about people, I care about animals,” said Hart, who is booked more than 40 weeks out of the year training horses all over the country.

Using what he calls his “cowboy logic,” Hart finds reason to build a connection with horses. Turning wild animals into something completely different, he acts as a caregiver, nurturing and providing for them.

The end result is a close relationship with horses that Hart has used to be successful in racing competitions involving obstacles in the Extreme Cowboy Association.

“I like to do things that make confident horses, better horses,” Hart said. “And obstacles with the Extreme Cowboy racing just ties right in with what I do. Every obstacle I ever introduce them to just makes them a better horse.”

The EXCA is a national organization for racing horses through man-made and natural obstacles while maintaining horsemanship.

The local organization of EXCA out of Kansas and Missouri is the Ultimate Horsemen's Challenge Association.

Whatever competition, local or national, Hart is pretty good at it. An EXCA five-time world champion and two-time national champion, Hart has accumulated several honors over the years in Extreme Cowboy racing, including Working Ranch Cowboys Association Top Hand at the World Championships in 2004.

Hart has two big events coming up in the next few months — the Cowboy Up Challenge this weekend at the Calgary Stampede in Canada, and Mustang Million, a first-time event in September in Fort Worth, Texas, that has a million dollar purse.

The upcoming event in Canada is invitation-only with just 12 riders from across North America — the “best of the best” — and the winner taking home around \$7,000. The Mustang Million will have many more competitors, and it offers \$200,000 to the winner and a brand new Dodge truck.

In Canada, Hart will ride a 7-year-old mustang named Shelby, who is owned by Topekan C.C. Metzler, a novice rider himself who has also placed at the world event. Hart, who's been working with Shelby for about a year and a half, will ride her in three runs during three days of competition.

“She's arguably one of the top mustangs in the country,” Metzler said. “Definitely the top mustang in the country in Extreme Cowboy.”

In the Mustang Million, Hart will ride Wilson, 4, and Hui, 3, both mustangs who were recently adopted through the Mustang Heritage Foundation and the Bureau of Land Management. The competition gives riders 120 days to train their wild horses before competition, a tall task Hart and Metzler believe they will accomplish.

In the Extreme Cowboy racing competitions, speed and horsemanship are measured as a rider and horse go through 13 obstacles. The obstacles can be logs, stationary bridges, teeter bridges and even curtains that you have to ride through. One may also have to carry a flag, rope a steer or chase a cow.

"You're really testing the trust and relationship between the rider and the horse," Metzler said.

"A lot of these obstacles really in a way are designed to almost scare the horse and challenge the horse. Because a lot of horses won't do it. 'I ain't going to get on that. I don't want to do this.' Because they've got that preservation instinct within them that they don't want to injure themselves or their rider."

Take water crossings for example.

"There's some horses that don't like water," Metzler said. "A horse will walk up to something like that and see that and go, 'All I got to do is go like this and walk around it. Why do we need to do this?'"

With the obstacles, the competitors don't find out what the course looks like until shortly before competition.

"There's always going to be something you haven't seen," Hart said.

Extreme Cowboy racing is enjoyable, Hart said, because of the family base it has.

"Even though you're competing against the guys, you still want them to do good," said Hart, who's son Jaden also competes. "I've never been one to wish anyone bad luck as far as when I compete. I want them to have their best run, and if I don't beat them because I didn't have my best run, that's on me."

That doesn't happen very often to Hart, who is one of just 11 Hall of Famers in a sport that is in its infancy.

"People ask why is it Lee Hart always does well?" Metzler said. "Well, he's a good cowboy for one, and he's got good horses for two. And he's trained and developed these horses since they were babies."