



# The Road to National Finals

By Kelly Krueger

(Opening photo courtesy of Cherine Marie)

**A**s many of you know, when you are the only mule at a horse show, there is nothing better than exhibiting a really good mule and showcasing what they can do. As mule owners, we take great pride in our animals and know that they can hold their own against the horses in an endless variety of competitions. In 2016 I had the great privilege of putting my sixteen-year-old mule, Penny, up against some of the country's best stock horses competing in the National Versatility Ranch Horse Association ([www.NVRHA.org](http://www.NVRHA.org)). As the only mule in the country competing, we certainly turned a few heads at the events. But when a little red mule from northern Minnesota traveled to Colorado Springs, Colorado, and won a National Championship, we did more than just turn heads. We proved that mules have a place in yet another "horse" event.

I discovered versatility ranch in the fall of 2015. A friend had been competing and pestering me to give it a try for a couple of years. She explained how fun the group was and how educational the events were. I live on the Canadian border and it isn't what you would call cattle country. I have no access to cattle, not much interest in cows, and no experience cutting or roping (required skills for these competitions) so I routinely declined. But in the fall of 2015 she wore me down. I called the Minnesota club (Northern Lights Versatility Ranch Horse Association) and inquired

about a double show they were putting on just three hours south of me. I was impressed by the warm response that I received, encouraging me to attend and stressing that they were an all-breed organization and that they would love to see a mule participate. So I signed up and headed down to give it a try.

Under NVRHA each schooling competition is comprised of a full day of clinics with your judges followed by a day of showing. Each rider competes in five different events: Ranch Cutting (classic cutting class with a penning), Working Ranch (a two part class that starts with a reining pattern and ends with boxing a single cow), Ranch Riding (a technical riding pattern demonstrating smooth transitions, control and collection), Ranch Trail (a trail course designed to simulate the skills required on a working ranch), and finally Ranch Conformation (looking for “form to function” for the working an-

imal). Not only was this organization promoting a well-rounded working animal but it was done in a no frills manner that I appreciated. No silver, glitz or bling allowed.

Over the past few years, I had found myself in a bit of a training rut. I was practicing the same things time and again, we were competing in the same classes year after year and that competitive spark was waning. Yet at that first show, I sat astride my mule watching the other riders work their horses and knew that I had found that “next level”. Instead of being intimidated, I was charged! I, too, wanted to master a reining pattern, to learn to cut a cow, to rope a steer, and to have the collection necessary to compete in these events! It gave me new goals and would require that I learn many new skills. In addition to all this, I made a new circle of friends who were all about preserving the western heritage and the skills required. I

was eager to follow in their footsteps, just on long ears instead of short. We placed well in only one of the five classes at those initial shows, but I looked around and knew this was something I could grow into. I was captivated and my mind was quickly spinning out of control with plans and possibilities for the next year.

I realized we had much to learn if we wanted to succeed in versatility. I got a look at how tough the competition was, but there wasn't that condescending/oppressive air felt at some other shows. I had judges and competitors alike walking me through explanations and examples. People just didn't clap for friends... they CHEERED for everyone. So after considerable thought, I decided to jump in with both feet for 2016. I put aside all other travel plans, show schedules and family vacations. I never do things by halves and of course I had hazy dreams of competing at the National Finals in Colorado

*Photo courtesy of Beth G. Mitchell.*





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Springs, Colorado, someday but had no idea if that was even a realistic goal. So I attended every clinic I could find, took lessons, got thirty days of help with training for collection and the start of flying lead changes, and worked hard at home. At every turn I was pushing my own comfort level and asking more of my mule. By midsummer, the change was noticeable in both of us. You could say that we found our stride.

Each competition created its own goal and deadline for me. Under NVRHA

guidelines, participants receive a detailed score sheet that breaks down exactly how you did in each event. It creates a very personal way to track your improvements. I can still remember the first time I was handed a score sheet without any penalties in Ranch Cutting. I simply glowed with pride. It didn't matter how I placed in the class... it was a personal victory. All riders pour over their "report cards" with groans and happy outbursts as they see line by line where the mistakes were made and where the milestones were

achieved.

Diligently Penny and I worked towards improvement in Cutting and Working Ranch. At the same time we tried to add some polish and style to the classes we were more proficient in. Soon it was August and we had five shows under our belts. Points were tallied and it was determined that we were in first place for the year-end awards under the Northern Lights Affiliate (covering Minnesota and Wisconsin with many riders from Iowa). At that point, I felt we could make a respectable attempt at Nationals. Plans were finalized and phone calls were made. A Minnesota mule was going to Colorado Springs!

I never pass up an opportunity to learn, and when Jay and Gena Henson of the W bar H training stables offered all Northern Lights competitors a chance to come to their place in Kansas prior to the Finals event, I accepted! I took extra time off work and hauled to Hugoton, Kansas for a tune-up and three days of lessons. The W bar H has been creating versatility champions in NVRHA and AQHA for years. Gena worked with me on my riding and Jay was my instructor for the cattle work. Not only did we spend time on cattle, but we got to cut and work buffalo! That was a rush!

From there it was off to Colorado Springs. We arrived a full day before most other competitors, so I thought Penny would have time to settle in and relax. Instead, she worried about being in a new location without "buddies". I tried to practice but couldn't get her to focus. I gave up and gave her a break. I knew that once she flipped that switch and went into show-mode, we would be fine but I couldn't push. The next day, as more horses arrived and the warm up arenas filled with other riders, she settled down. We got in a couple decent practice runs and she felt ready.

I wasn't as sure about myself. I was intimidated by all the gorgeous stock horses that were bred and trained to excel in these events. But I was committed to giving it my all. Everyone there was happy

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to see a mule at the finals and was openly friendly. There were a handful of other Minnesota riders competing and they tried to get me to relax. They helped, but I was still really nervous going in to our first class on Saturday: Ranch Cutting. I had seen some of the other cattle get worked and knew they were sticky and tough. As our cow's number was called, the cut went fine but I instantly knew that I had a cow that was going to be a problem. It did not honor my mule (focus on Penny) and we lost it back to the herd... more than once. It was then that the penalty points started racking up in my head and I lost all focus. I was on Penny's bit and chasing instead of controlling the cow. We bombed. I walked out of the arena dejected believing that our Finals had ended before it had hardly even begun. There was no way that we could ever make up for all those penalties. After cutting I had a break in the action and tried to regroup. Penny had done her very best and I knew that our weakest class was behind us. I owed it to my mule not to quit on her and to go into the other classes with a better attitude. My original goal had been to make it into the top three... maybe there was still a chance at third place?

Next up was Working Ranch. We struggle with lead changes in the reining pattern as Penny is so smooth and short strided that she can throw in one little hop step at the change and make it look effortless... though still incorrect. And that was what she did. But the rest of the pattern was strong and we had no other penalties. We finished by boxing our cow and did a respectable job of it. There was nothing flashy or fancy... but it was penalty free. Our day was done and Penny could rest. I tried to put this day behind us and started thinking about the next day's classes.

Sunday morning I had a fresh perspective. I didn't think we were competitive, so why worry? We LOVE Trail class and Ranch Riding... they are "our" classes. Suddenly the whole thing was fun again. Penny gave me everything she had in the Ranch Riding and we were very tuned in



*Photo courtesy of Sandy Ellis-Brye.*

to one another. Our transitions were smooth and our timing seemed to be on. I walked out of the arena with a smile on my face and great pride in my mule. I had wanted to come to this event and show what a mule could do and to prove that long ears belonged there. This was the first class I felt like we had met that goal. Trail class was no different. We have excelled in trail for years. I practice on a challenging course at home regularly and we had picked up some new things at Henson's the week before. I was confident when we entered the course and pleased with our ride when we walked out. Last up was conformation. At every NVRHA event, I wonder how the judge will score my mule. Some have experience with mules... some do not. I always figured it as a bit of a wild card but have been proven wrong at every turn. Penny has been judged fairly by every judge we have stood in front of. Our scores have been pretty consistent all year and there has never been a hint of mule prejudice. And this AQHA World Judge was no exception. In addition, NVRHA scores conformation in a unique manner. Sixty percent of the score comes from the halter class... but the other 40% is earned during the performance classes. Penny already had half her winter coat (there had

been frost at home) and we were both a little worn out. I doubt we looked real sharp for our halter class, but we got it done.

At the awards ceremony that evening, I had no idea what to expect. But Penny won the Ranch Trail and the Ranch Riding for our division. We also came in second in Working Ranch and third in Conformation! Wahoo! Those scores more than made up for the crash and burn of our cutting class and I was SHOCKED to win the National Finals Show. The tears slide down my face and I couldn't believe I was holding that buckle. The realization really hit home on just how very hard that little mule had worked to get me there and how very lucky I was. Penny and I have been a team for over eleven years and I have never had a connection with another equine like I do with her. Never have I sat astride an animal with more heart, try or talent. Just as my eyes cleared, the floor fell out from under me again. We had earned enough points throughout the year (including the finals show) to win the National Championship / Novice Division! For this, I will receive a custom award saddle that will be built to my specifications. The first question I had for the saddle maker... "Can you make it on mule bars?" The answer was yes!