Last summer, four friends rode from the Mexican border to Canada on a string of Mustangs. Along the way, they filmed *Unbranded*, a documentary about their epic journey. I joined them on a stretch that traversed two Montana mountain ranges, and our adventure was just a glimpse at what they experienced.

Story and photography by RYAN T. BELL
Masters brandished the Grizzly Adams look like a badge of honor, and given his success at leading his team of four cowboys, 13 Mustangs, one burro and a crew of cameramen nearly the height of the United States, he could be proud of every follicle.

His companions, on the other hand, were distinctly better groomed. Thomas Glover combed his goatee to match a flowing blonde mullet that would be the envy of an ’80s rocker. Wisecracking Ben Thamer was clean-shaven. He sported a handgun in a shoulder holster and knee-high riding boots, giving off a Han Solo vibe. And the square-jawed Jonny Fitzmaurice wasn’t that hairy to begin with. Befitting his status as a second-generation U.S. Marine Corps officer, he was dressed for backcountry battle in tan hat, canvas jacket and shotgun chaps.

As they say in Hollywood, the Unbranded cowboys had faces for the silver screen. By last summer, five months into their trip, the guys were well practiced at presenting themselves as characters in a movie. But for the stretch ahead, I would take the cameraman’s place on the trip. They would be just four buddies riding good horses through some jaw-dropping backcountry, without the pressures of cameras recording their every move.

A Televised Adventure
I rendezvoused with the Unbranded outfit at Mountain Sky Guest Ranch in the Paradise Valley, not far from the northern boundary of Yellowstone National Park. The cowboys had stopped for a layover after making it through Yellowstone’s backcountry, a trip that included a ride on the Thorofare Trail—the most remote location in the lower 48 states. The trip’s itinerary allowed for 10 days on the trail, followed by a few days of rest. But Mountain Sky wasn’t just another stop for Ben Masters; it was a homecoming. He worked there for two summers, wrangling guests into the Gallatin Mountains. Of all the trails Masters had charted, he knew this section like his backyard.

The locals still remembered him. As we rode up a National Forest Service access road, on a bearing for the Big Creek Trailhead, a parade of cars stopped to greet Masters: the ranch manager, a housekeeper, someone from guest services, even a few wranglers. Were it not pouring down rain, we wouldn’t have minded sitting on our horses while Masters caught up on old times. We donned slickers and cocked our hats to keep water from dripping down our shirt collars. It was unseasonably wet for August in Montana, and stormy weather had been the crew’s constant companion since Yellowstone.

“There’s been green grass from border to border, ” Masters later said. “We couldn’t have picked a better summer to go on this trip. ”

Masters would know, since he rode a similar route from Santa Fe, New Mexico, to Glacier National Park back in 2010. That had been a dry summer; grass was scarce, and his string of Quarter Horses didn’t hold up well. The journey left Masters wanting more, and he vowed to do the ride again, this time on adopted

Montana had experienced an unusually wet summer, so the pack trip encountered water crossings every day.
As we traversed a steep-angle mountainside, with Big Creek roaring in the valley depths below, I asked Masters what he thought motivated everyday people to donate money to his project.

“People dream of taking an adventure like this, but for whatever reason they aren’t able to go,” he responds. “They respected that we were going for it.”

The Mustangs were in impressive shape, considering they’d walked to Montana from Arizona. Each cowboy had a string of three horses, and it was their responsibility to make the horses fresh last. Mornings, they dabbed salve on anything even resembling a sore. Every six weeks, the horses got new shoes with borium melted over the nail heads for traction, and to resist wear and tear. On the trail, the Mustangs took turns as saddle horses and pack stock, with a free day in between to run loose. I had started out riding Frisky, a horse out of Masters’ string. The bay gelding was trained by Wylene Wilson, a two-time winner of the Extreme Mustang Makeover competition. In the documentary Wild Horse, Wild Ride—a film that inspired Masters to make Unbranded—Wilson is the Arizona outfitter who rides her horse into the arena wearing a golden cape. The lady can train a Mustang, and I felt honored to be paired with Frisky.

Too bad my saddle didn’t feel the same way. The second day, I noticed Frisky’s withers were inflamed. Masters swapped him out for Chief, a dappled gray named in honor of Masters’ grandfather, who was battling cancer. Nothing against Frisky, but Chief was my idea of a prototypical mountain horse. He stood just under 15 hands, with a quiet stride and a sassy attitude that attacked steep grades with a vengeance. Having once adopted my own BLM Mustang, I was an easy sell about the horse’s virtues. Some horsemen, however, take convincing, and that is the stated goal of the Unbranded documentary project.

“A lot of people think they’re too wild,” Masters says. “A lot of people think they’d be better off going and buying a Quarter Horse or a Thoroughbred, when in reality a lot of these wild Mustangs are really good stock.”

**Trail Obstacles**

With everyone finally mounted, we struck out of camp mid-morning following a single track that paralleled Big Creek through a narrow mountain valley. Snowball bushes covered the ground, except where ancient rockslides had swept down the mountain slopes. Covering 25 miles in one day was ambitious, but not out of the ordinary. We were making good time until we reached a downed forest that hadn’t seen a trail crew for at least a year. The cowboys took turns cutting our way through a labyrinth of fallen trees. Already, the trip had seen its share of obstacles and hardships. Should one of them forget, a reminder hung from Fitzsimons’ saddle: the branded tail of a horse that had died. One night, back in Utah, something had spooked the horses and they stampeded. In the morning, when the cowboys gathered the loose horses, Fitzsimons noticed that his horse Cricket was missing. He found the horse dead a half-mile from camp. Scuff marks on the ground indicated that the gelding had thrashed around. Fitzsimons suspected that Cricket had suffered an aneurysm during the stampede. He cut off a length of tail, braided it and hung the locket from his saddle to bring the horse with him to the Canadian border in spirit.

In Chah, they almost lost another horse, Dinosaur. “We rode into a narrow box canyon called Hell Hole,” Fitzsimons recalls. “It was rimmed all around by cliffs. We found a thin ledge trail, barely two feet wide, and led the horses up it one at a time. Dinosaur balked and fell over the edge.”

The horse landed on the canyon floor in a cloud of sand. The cowboys were about to unpack a gun, figuring Dinosaur would need to be put out of his misery, when the gelding stood up,
shook himself off and caught up with the herd. Those were the most severe accidents, but the horses had a rap sheet of smaller calamities. One horse dragged down a propane tank, busting the nozzle so that hissing gas incited a horse riot. Another wrapped his lead rope around a highway reflector, somehow projecting the metal pole 10 feet into the air. And the whole string had worked together to drag down a buck rail fence at one of Unbranded’s layover ranches in Wyoming.

Tag Alongs
Not having a pack saw of my own to help out, I waited at the back of the traffic jam with my two fellow tag-alongs: Donkita the burro and a man named Eduardo Garcia. Donkita was from a BLM facility in Utah, where the crew had stopped to get more horses. Two of the original Mustangs hadn’t worked out and they needed a few remounts. The facility’s manager, Heath Weber, specialized in rehabilitating horses and burros that had been returned to the BLM by their adopters. Failed adoptions are cheap, attracting first-time horse buyers, effectively matching the toughest students with novice teachers. Or, as Masters puts it, “It’s like going to the pound and adopting a bobcat for a housecat.”

Donkita was originally adopted by someone who wanted her for her milk. Most female burros are pregnant when they come in from the wild. When they discovered that Donkita wasn’t, they returned her to the BLM. After the cowboys acquired three new horses, Ben Thamer asked if Weber had any mules. No, but Weber had a burro. Thamer liked the idea and agreed to take her.

“When the movie comes out, Donkita will be the third-most-famous burro in history,” Thamer said, “behind the burro Mary Magdalene rode into Bethlehem, and the burro in Lonesome Dove.”

Donkita became Unbranded’s mascot. She milled about camp, chewed on anything cardboard or paper, lounged in the dust, and tolerated impromptu petting zoos with people they met on the trail. Donkita was also a worrywart. When the pack strings stretched too far apart, she would stand in the gap braying.

My other companion, Eduardo Garcia, had joined the Unbranded crew in the Paradise Valley, where he grew up. As a child, Garcia was a modern day Huckleberry Finn, going fishing, hunting, and foraging for wild food in the mountains. His mother had instilled in him a love of cooking, and after attending the Seattle Culinary Institute, Garcia sailed the oceans as a chef-for-hire on private yachts. But the mountains suited him better than rolling waves, so he moved home and started a business, Montana Mex, that sells specialty food seasonings.

As Garcia and I hung back at the end of the trailside traffic jam, he told me the amazing story of how he overcame an accident that took his left arm. A few years ago, Garcia was foraging in the mountains when he saw a strange object in the underbrush. He took out his knife and poked it. The object was
an exposed power source. Electricity shot up the knife, burning his left forearm to a crisp, collapsing a lung, charring several ribs, and knocking him out cold.

“I shouldn’t be here,” Garcia said. “That should’ve been all she wrote.”

He came to after 20 minutes and stumbled back to civilization. Surgeons re-inflated his lung, removed several ribs and amputated his left arm at the elbow. During his recovery, Garcia met a man who was a quadriplegic. That man was happy just to be alive, making Garcia realize he could get along with one good arm. Now, Garcia facetiously refers to his prosthetic arm as his “claw,” and uses it to his advantage, fearlessly reaching into the fire when he cooks.

“A lot of people wearing prosthetics feel sweaty and itchy after wearing it for eight hours,” Garcia said. “I don’t care. It’s my tool and I hate taking it off. If something goes down in the middle of the night, there’s no time to strap on the harness. I need to be ready to roll.”

With a pistol, bear spray and a butterfly knife all within reach of his right hand, Garcia was indeed always ready to roll. He had been following *Unbranded* ever since donating to the Kickstarter campaign. By following Masters’ trail blog, he knew they would pass through the Paradise Valley. He showed up at Mountain Sky Guest Ranch and asked if he could ride along for a night. The cowboys were always glad to have his company, especially Thamer, the camp cook, who appreciated Garcia’s skills around the campfire.

Garcia also opened our eyes to the bounty of forageable food around us. As we descended the far side of the Gallatin Mountains, he found dozens of porcini mushrooms growing along the trail. The bread-loaf-sized porcini is a delicacy, and Garcia dismounted every quarter mile to knife another one out of the ground. By the time we reached Highway 191 in the gut of the Gallatin Canyon, where Garcia’s girlfriend would pick him up, the foraging chef had dozens of fungi stashed in the nooks and crannies of everyone’s saddlebags and panniers. On the side of the highway, Garcia gathered his porcini and bid us *adios*.

**(Pack) Animal House**

For the cowboys, the *Unbranded* adventure came at a time of transition in their lives. Their hard-partying, freewheeling college days were behind them. Fitzsimons would soon ship out for the Marine Corps Officer Candidate School. Glover had a job waiting for him in Houston, working as a construction engineer. Thamer was rethinking his next move, having quit a feedlot rider job in order to go on the trip. And for Masters, well, the *Unbranded* documentary was his career play.

“This is a story about a group of guys and horses who were stuck in their holding pens,” Masters says. “We freed each other by going on this trip. People get sucked into the path of success, and they become too connected to material things. We tossed that off.”

When the four guys cut loose, they did so like it was their last run through the paddock before the yoke. Thamer had warned me the first night that *Unbranded* was like a pack-trip version of the John Belushi movie *Animal House*. Swap togas for trench coats and the comparison wasn’t far off. Their trailside banter was a regular comedy routine. Their best act was the centaur-versus-Pegasus debate.

Fitzsimons: “What would you rather ride on this trip, a centaur or Pegasus?”

Thamer: “Depends, is the centaur my buddy? If not, he might grab me with his arms and throw me off. Wouldn’t
even have to buck. But if he’s friendly, when the trail gets rough, he can be like, ‘Grab my hands and hold on!’”

Glover: “Would it be wrong to kiss a female centaur?”

Fitzsimons: “A centaur could cook and shoe himself. But a Pegasus could fly ahead to camp.”

All morning, Fitzsimons mulled the question over, piping up with random thoughts.

“Do centaurs eat human food, but still poop like a horse? They probably just eat salad.”

Finally, he crafted the ideal scenario: “I’d want a centaur that could forage for food while I rode, just like Eduardo. I’d call him Centuardo. Then I’d want four pack Pegasi.”

But for every hilarious moment, the cowboys endured hours of isolation in the saddle. Because of the trip’s logistics, they were spaced out by the distance of their pack strings, making conversation difficult. And after five months on the trail, normally scenic landscapes started to look commonplace.

“My biggest challenge is keeping my mind occupied,” Glover says. “You get to the point where you run out of topics to think about.”

To combat the doldrums, the cowboys carried books with them to read in the saddle. And when they crested a divide, they powered-on their cell phones and checked in with girlfriends and family. They were also happy to chat up anyone they met on the trail. There is a camaraderie among backcountry users that doesn’t exist on front-country trails, where heavy traffic makes people jealous of their privacy.

In the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area, Fitzsimons and Thamer learned that you never know who you might meet on the trail. We had just descended a gnarly pass along a boulder-strewn trail when the pack train encountered three hikers—a middle-aged man and two young men. The cowboys recognized one of them as a friend of theirs from college. There they were, thousands of miles from home, in Montana’s back of beyond, and they see a friend with whom they’d attended a Christmas party just last December.

“It blows my mind,” Fitzsimons says. “I can’t wrap my head around it. Makes the world feel small.”

“Mustangs are built for mountain travel,” Masters says. “They are very sure-footed and their feet are as hard as rocks.”

Because quality digital video cameras are portable and easy to use, a documentary project like Unbranded is possible.

“Unbranded is possible.”

Spectacular country that the grand vistas blurred together. But our final precipice stood out as exceptional, even to them. To the south we could see the ski runs of Big Sky Resort, and beyond it the monolithic Sphinx Mountain. Below us, a glacier-carved bowl carried snowmelt on its long run to the Madison River, which in turn flowed into the Missouri River, then the Mississippi and finally the Gulf of Mexico.

But the most remarkable feature was the section of trail ahead of us, across a cirque of fallen rock. Like a ribbon of floss, the trail climbed over a saddle between two molar-shaped peaks. Thinking like a cinematographer, Masters envisioned a shot of the Unbranded pack train climbing the divide. It was cinematic gold, but he didn’t have a cameraman.

“You film it,” Masters told me. “We made a plan that I would stay back with Chief and the Princess-toting pack animal. Masters set up the camera and showed me which buttons to press, then the cowboys rode off. Thirty minutes later, I watched them plodding up the trail, small specks against a rocky backdrop. I followed Masters’ instructions, zooming in tight and then panning out to take in the landscape. The wide-angle lens opened up, the cowboys shrunk from view and were swallowed by the mountains.”

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