



AN UNLIKELY COWBOY

By Catherine King

Camilla Willings and her Paso Fino stallion, Mercenario dela Libertad, (aka "Mercy"), are making quite a name for themselves as all-around competitors. They are also causing a stir in the non-Paso Fino realm, showing the complete versatility of the breed. Though Mercy has earned over 500 points in PFHA Fino A/O Stallion classes, the pair is most known for their bold attitude to try just about any challenge, inside or outside of the ring. Camilla and Mercy were the 2010 North American Wind Rider Challenge Champions and demonstrated two Musical Freestyle Performances at the 2010 PFHA National Show. Mercy was also a demo horse with the Wind Rider Challenge Clinicians at the 2010 World Equestrian Games, to the great delight of the crowd. At the 2011 PFHA National Show, the pair participated in the trail class, Obstacle Trail Challenge, and the Horse Soccer demonstrations and clinics. Having tried and conquered so many different challenges, Camilla was naturally drawn in when she was told about the Extreme Cowboy Race coming to Canada's Outdoor Equine Expo in Burlington, Ontario. She thought it sounded like a new experience and a fun thing to try, so she signed up. Only then did she check out the website and thought, "Yikes! What have I signed up for?" The courses vary at each event, so Camilla knew they better practice - founder Craig Cameron has even been known to ask competitors to take off the saddle and hop on bareback!

Extreme Cowboy Racing is a fast-growing equine sport. The race requires horses to maneuver through a series of obstacles, demonstrating horsemanship and speed. Competitors have 20 to 30 seconds to complete each obstacle, and each is judged on a scale of 1 to 10 based on the approach to the obstacle, the obstacle itself, and the departure from the obstacle. Competitors are asked to go over jumps, cross water, drag a log, get off, get on, go fast, go slow. It's a complete test of horse and rider.

Arriving to the event with her dressage saddle and helmet amid a sea of Quarter Horses, big cowboy hats, and belt buckles, Camilla assumed she was just as likely to be laughed off the course as she was to win the entire competition. Camilla says, "I felt extra pressure to represent the breed. When one Paso Fino shows up and screws up, it's a disservice to the breed." Despite her nervousness and worries about forgetting the course, Camilla and Mercy sped through the preliminary round and were invited back for the top 12 the next day.

Getting the crowd involved, Craig Cameron provided his color commentary while also educating the crowd and had some great things to say about Mercy and Camilla. Yelling along with the crowd, Craig couldn't help but finish his commentary, "You are just a wild, wild woman, I tell you! A wild woman!" This unlikely pair



thrilled and delighted him with every run. Camilla was pleasantly surprised at how much focus was put on soft hands and control. The judges wanted to see a willing horse and a good pilot - speed and control. Camilla always had her head up, looking to the next obstacle, and Craig loved how patiently Mercy waited on her while she crawled through the hay tunnel and climbed the ladder.

Completing the course with speed and style, the most unlikely cowboy with the "prancing" Paso Fino came out on top! Camilla says, "I was hoping for top five and was completely floored when I won. Winning was awesome! I was truly astonished." When asked about her amazing Paso Fino partner, Camilla answered, "Not a day goes by I don't thank my lucky stars for having this horse in my life. We have such adventures together, and he is wonderful character and so much fun to be with. I also love how infectious his energy and enthusiasm is. So many people connect and respond to him that it feels like he has a wide circle of friends and fans. People pull for him because he's so little, cute, and super keen... how can you not?"



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