

# The Tale of Mingo Mike

by REX A. EWING

About the time my grandfather was lobbing hand grenades at German infantry in the War to End All Wars, a stout Thoroughbred stallion, named Prince Palatine, conceived a colt who was called Rose Prince. Rose Prince begat Prince Rose, who begat Prinquillo, the sire of Round Table, who begat Queen's Knights, sire of Knight's Mingo, sire of Mingo Mike. Mingo Mike, being a gelding, begat nothing more than pain and frustration for this cowboy, and more than a few others.

Mingo Mike was one of those special horses, the kind that scares you a little when you look him in the eye, because you can see that he's thinking. It's been my experience that horses that spend a lot of time thinking are usually not thinking of ways to improve my quality of life. Mike was a tall, sinewy, bay with the grace of Nadia Comaneche on the balance beam, and the raw power of a finely tuned V-8. With dual carbs.

All I had to do was get him green-broke, so he could go into race training with someone a lot more comfortable in an exercise saddle than I'll ever be. A simple concept, in principle.

Mike went through all the requisite steps in the round pen; a mile a day, left and right. He was brushed, handled, stroked head to hoof, saddled and unsaddled a hundred times. There was nothing left to do but pile on. The only saddle I had at the time was a seasoned old Colorado Saddlery rig, the back cinch to which was someplace I hadn't looked.

He stood like a statue as I saddled him ... thinking. I slipped the D-ring snaffle in his mouth and, despite the foreboding feeling in

the very bottom of my gut (where the future is really known), I mounted him.

Always the gentleman, Mike was gracious enough to let me get my other foot in the stirrup before he cut loose. Then his head disappeared between his legs, and Mingo Mike brought all his grace and power to bear in the singular task of putting me back on the not-so-soft ground where I had stood a moment before. But I don't think Mike much cared if I was standing, or not.

It must have been over pretty quick, but I can't say for sure. It's hard to maintain any real sense of time when your brain is rolling around the inside your skull like cornmeal mush, trying to endure the chaos of compression and expansion as it bounces off the sides. When things finally quit moving, I was on my knees in the dirt, still sitting in the saddle. As the dust began to settle, I could make out the faint outline of Mingo Mike, standing calmly off to the side. He was staring at me ... thinking. I can't say for sure, but I suppose something equivalent to, "You had to have known!", was beaming through those dark and canny eyes.

As humiliated as I was (the pain hadn't made it to my battered brain, yet), I was even more amazed, by the fact that Mike was buck-naked. Not only had he gotten the saddle off with me still in it, he had removed the bridle and the halter under it. Mike gave the "Thorough" in "Thoroughbred" a new meaning.

To my dismay, I discovered the next morning that I could still walk, and nothing appeared to be broken. That meant that Mike was

going to figure large in the scheme of the day. I would rather have done my taxes.

I bought a strong, nylon back cinch from a local saddlery and charged it to my Dad's account; Mike may have been my problem, but he was still my Daddy's horse. I saddled Mike and gave him enough laps in the round pen to tire any mortal horse. Mike just looked amused. Even though I'm a bit tall, thin and top-heavy to be much of a bronc rider, I was heartened by the memory that he had not technically unseated me the day before. He had only removed the seat, with me still in it. I figured I had Mike's number - then I looked him in the eye, and saw that he was thinking, again.

The newly-acquired back cinch performed flawlessly—the saddle was still in place as I dug my face out of the dust and saw Mike, calmly watching me drag my battered body off the parched ground. Mike liked to watch me; he took a lot of pride in his handiwork. Being as he was still saddled, and I could still walk and move a little, I gathered him up and got on, again. He was a perfect ride. He walked, trotted, cantered, and even backed up. For the first time in my life, I stepped off Mingo Mike. I was satisfied. Maybe he figured he owed me one.

The following morning, the slate being clean, Mike's sense of fairness kept him from allowing me to get one up on him. He was bigger than me, and probably smarter, and he wanted to call the shots. He dumped me, and it didn't take him 10 seconds to do it. Then he let me ride him. This pattern went on for eight more long days, and sleepless nights, with no time off. On day nine, I couldn't even walk, much less ride. My left knee was swollen to porcine dimensions, and it popped painfully when I bent my leg.

Despite the predictable derision from my father, I gave up. Considering that my battered bones had given up the day before, it really wasn't much of a decision. Mike went lots of places after that, and had a good time doing to the cowboys at those places the

same things he had done to me. They gave up, too, and a lot quicker than I did. His last stop was the farm of a German fellow named Gunter. Gunter kept Mike for two weeks, then asked me over for a demonstration.

By that time, it was mid-January. There was 12 inches of snow on the ground and the temperature hovered just a hair above freezing. So why was Mingo Mike drenched with sweat?

Gunter jumped on and Mike did everything a green-broke horse is supposed to do. He went through his paces and responded admirably to the bit. He was attentive and well-behaved. But he had seen Hell, before I got there.

With reservation, I gave Gunter my father's check, loaded him in the trailer, and took him home. Except for the persistent pain and popping in my knee, I was feeling pretty healthy, about then. I really wanted to ride Mike. Mike, on the other hand, remembered me and the special memories we shared from weeks before, and was more than willing to put on an encore performance. My fondest memory of that brief ride is in coming to the knowledge that a foot of snow is considerably softer than 1/4 inch of dust over sun-baked earth. That was my last time on (and off) Mingo Mike.

By and by, Mingo Mike was finally broke and sent to the track. Though it was still not beneath him to unseat an occasional exercise rider, Mike did well there. He was strong and fast, and had tremendous endurance. Besides—his little idiosyncrasies notwithstanding—Mike was a kind and well-mannered horse.

Then, just days before his maiden race, Mingo Mike was delivered back to the farm. I remember the sad irony of watching Mike stand in his stall, wincing in pain, from the slab fracture he had incurred to his left knee from a workout two days before. I, myself, was propped up on a pair of crutches, being just two days out of surgery on my left knee. "Mike, my friend, ain't we a pair?" I told

him. I really think his eyes brightened, just a little.

The good doctors at Colorado State University did what they could to put Mike's knee back together again, but the final result was three unsightly screws and an unflattering prognosis. Detailing with his index finger the post-operative radiographs, the surgeon gave his assessment: "Mike will only be good as a pleasure horse, from here on out."

"That's fine, Doc," I said, " 'cept you don't know this 'ol horse. His only pleasures in life are bucking and running, and I don't reckon that's the kind of pleasure you had in mind." Well, no, it wasn't. I grimly loaded my old nemesis and friend and took him home, yet again, for a long rest.

As it turned out, the bright-eyed and pensive Mingo Mike possessed healing powers in league with his other talents. After 18 months of convalescence, Mike had grown stout and sound, and was as agile and spirited as ever. He needed a career. Toward that end, I took Mike for a short trailer ride to our local vet hospital and had his knee radiographed. It looked pretty good—I was given the OK to buck him out a time or two, to see how the knee would stand up.

His first ride was at a small, local rodeo school. Since Mike knew two things well (bucking and running), he did both. I was disappointed to see him ridden, but happy that he was none the worse for wear. He was sound and anxious. After that, I loaned him to Laramie County Community College in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Mike taught the students how to ride broncs, and the students taught Mike that, with enough will power, anyone can be unseated. Mike learned faster than they did. I wasn't surprised, thoughtful cuss that old Mike was. After a couple of months, L-Triple-C called to tell me no one

could ride my horse anymore, so could I please come and get him? I had to smile, as I hooked up the trailer.

I didn't take Mike back home; my dear old Dad had pretty much forgotten about Mike by then, and I didn't want to jar his memory, if I didn't have to. Instead, I took Mike to a friend's ranch, where we sold him to a rodeo stock contractor. I couldn't exactly give the money to my Dad, since he didn't know I had sold his horse, so I opened a savings account and put the money away. I figured if he ever did ask about Mingo Mike I'd have to tell him the truth, and I would at least have the money and the bill of sale to back me up. It wouldn't have saved my skin, but at least I would have had a good feeling about myself as he wrote me out of his will. It never got that far, but that's another story.

What about Mingo Mike? Well, as I understand it, his name has changed a time or two, and he's busy doing what he really loves to do: putting cow punchers face down in the dust, with his polite, and acrobatic flair. Though I've lost track of old Mike over the years, I hear he's gone on to be one of top bareback broncs in the nation. I wouldn't be surprised.

The last time I saw Mingo Mike was a few years ago at the Grover Rodeo, in Grover, Colorado. I walked in the pen, my knee well mended by time, and felt the pins in his knee. Then I looked him in the eye. As he looked back at me, I could feel again the strange bond that had formed between us, as our paths had so often crossed over the years. I think I really loved old Mike, because he had never once compromised himself; Mike had always made his living by bein' Mike. I stroked his long, powerful neck and whispered, "So long, old buddy." Then I turned around and walked away, on a path ol' Mike would never cross again.