

Stallion Challenges

FROM THE KAIMANAWA WILDERNESS TO THE SHOW ARENA

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Cover photographs by Kelly Wilson; image of Wilson sisters, Heather Wilson

Image on pages 2–3: A wild bachelor stallion gallops across the Argo Valley in the Kaimanawa Ranges. Image on page 7: A wild Kaimanawa foal at sunrise in the tussock grass. Image on pages 8–9: A stallion with his mare and foal in the Kaimanawa Ranges. Image on page 304: A wild Kaimanawa stallion trots within metres of me in the Argo Valley. Illustration on page 5 by Rachel Henderson

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This book is dedicated to the 17-year-old stallion Major KH — you captured our hearts during your short time with us. Not only did you inspire a new generation to love wild horses, but you were also the inspiration for the Stallion Challenges. May you rest in peace knowing that your legacy lives on in the lives of countless horses that, without these challenges, would have been destined for slaughter.



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INTRODUCTION

*Keeping up with
the Kaimanawas*



As little girls, we — Vicki, Kelly and Amanda Wilson — developed a love for horses, and over the years our passion hasn't faded. Our childhood dreams have not merely come true, but have been well and truly surpassed, from showjumping at the highest levels right through to taming wild horses and travelling the world.

We grew up with very little, only able to afford the cheapest and often most difficult of ponies. Looking back, it is hard to believe how far our love of horses has taken us, and yet, at the same time, how little has changed. We still ride bareback, although it's now for fun rather than out of financial necessity, and we still re-home and rehabilitate horses that many others wouldn't waste their time on. In contrast to our humble beginnings, we now have some of the most competitive horses in New Zealand. We travel the country during the summer months, with Vicki and Amanda competing in the Grand Prix and World Cup classes, while I simply ride and compete for fun. The knowledge and experience we have gained over the years wouldn't have been possible without the support of our parents, who share our love of horses and have always encouraged us to live our dreams.

Of the three of us, Vicki is the most singularly focused on her equestrian dreams. She is one of the most competitive riders in the country and has also competed internationally with much success. In the coming years she aims to represent New Zealand at the highest levels. Amanda also showjumps professionally at the top level, and is equally passionate about writing, filming and property development. She is currently working on her debut novel and a second documentary film. Unlike my sisters, for me showjumping is only a hobby, but over the years my work has also come to revolve around horses — I am a freelance designer and photographer for the New Zealand and international equestrian industry, and, more recently, a best-selling author. I am currently working on my third book, about our work with the American Mustangs.

While Vicki, Amanda and I each have our own individual talents, we complement each other well when we work together. Almost a decade ago we started our family business, Showtym Sport Horses, which incorporates our team of showjumpers, the Showtym Holiday Camps



TOP
Amanda and Showtym Viking, Vicki and Showtym Cadet MVNZ and Momento (our Kaimanawa mare from the 2012 muster) and me.

BOTTOM
Vicki and Showtym Cadet MVNZ competing in the World Cup series.



TOP
Riding our showjumpers at the beach.



BOTTOM
From the moment we first saw the Kaimanawas in the wild,
we became invested in their ongoing survival.

for young riders, Showtym Adult Retreats and Showtym Far Northern Adventures. Our underlying passion is to increase horse welfare on a global scale, and we are committed to starting at a grass-roots level — educating riders so that their horses have a better future.

Many of our champion showjumpers are horses that others had given up on — they were difficult, misunderstood, injured or ill-treated — and time and time again these horses have returned tenfold the effort and love we have invested in them. Most importantly, they enjoy life and thrive in the competition arena. They don't jump because they have to but because they want to, and it's proved to be a winning formula.

But perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of our lives is our work re-homing the wild Kaimanawas; horses that would otherwise be destined for slaughter following the biennial government musters. From the moment we first saw the wild Kaimanawa herds in 2012 they have captured our hearts, and since then we have saved many wild horses.

One Kaimanawa that is particularly special to us is the 17-year-old stallion Major, whose journey to domestication was perhaps the most inspiring we've ever seen, and defied the popular belief that older stallions are too difficult to train. Although, tragically, we lost him just five months after he was mustered, his legacy lives on — in 2014, Kaimanawa Heritage Horses (KHH) launched the nation's first Kaimanawa Stallion Challenges in his memory. In its first year, this national training initiative ensured the survival of every stallion suitable for re-homing; horses that in previous years had been unfairly slaughtered due to a lack of interested people with the experience needed to save them.

In 2014 my first book, *For the Love of Horses*, was published and was instantly a best-seller; that same year, Television New Zealand (TVNZ) commissioned a television series called *Keeping up with the Kaimanawas*, which followed me and my sisters taming our wild horses from the 2014 muster. What started out as an unassuming project has catapulted us firmly onto the world stage, because of our innovative approach to raising awareness about the plight of wild horses, and has unintentionally made us public figures; sometimes it seems so far-fetched that we shake our heads in disbelief.

When we were first approached about a television series we quickly brushed it off — we didn't want to be in the public eye any more than we had to, and we didn't need the distraction of cameras following us around while we were trying to focus on taming wild horses. But the more it was discussed the more we realised that television exposure could greatly benefit the wild herds and would ensure that they had the support of the public for another generation. It was something worth considering.

Questions still remained. For example, did the benefits to the horses' long-term survival outweigh the negatives of the unwelcome invasion of our privacy? We knew that, if we agreed to do the series, our lives wouldn't be the same again, and so our decision had to be for the right reasons — first and foremost, it had to be for the good of the horses.

Tentatively we said yes, and from the moment that three-letter word was uttered our lives were altered once again; it's a turning point I'm sure we will look back and reflect on in the years to come. The crew filmed us for five solid months — from the muster right through to the first Kaimanawa Stallion Challenge, the Major Milestone, at Equidays. We'd promised the TVNZ director that there would never be a dull moment, but there was no way we could have known quite what a wild and unpredictable ride awaited us, not only with our Kaimanawas but also with our team of showjumpers.

THIS IS THE TRUE STORY of the wild Kaimanawas we saved from slaughter during the 2014 muster, in particular the horses we were assigned to compete with in the nation's first Kaimanawa Stallion Challenges.

Starting deep in the Kaimanawa Ranges where it all began, we hope that you enjoy our journey and that these horses will become ambassadors for the breed, ensuring the ongoing survival of the wild herds.



TOP
Vicki and Argo enjoying some quality time together in the lead up to the Stallion Challenges finals.

BOTTOM
Dean Whitehead, the main cameraman for the television series *Keeping up with the Kaimanawas*, filming the horses in the stallion pen at the muster.

Our first sighting of
Elder, an aged grey
stallion we would later
save from slaughter
during the 2014 muster.

CHAPTER 1

The Winter King — July 2013





Amanda photographing a bay stallion she saw just metres from one of the gates to the Waiouru Military Training Base.

On one of the coldest days of winter in 2013 we struggled through the snow and ice to venture into the heart of the Waiouru Military Training Base, which is spread over 63,000 hectares of the Kaimanawa Ranges where the wild horses roam. A blizzard had swept through the central North Island, and snow covered much of the winter grazing where the Kaimanawas roamed.

Accompanied by an army guide, we set out in search of the wild herds, another army truck following closely behind to tow us out if the snowdrifts got too deep. Within minutes we spotted a lone horse — a bay silhouetted against the skyline — and as we drew closer we recognised his distinctive markings. He was an older stallion we had photographed in the autumn and he had made a lasting impression when he had led his sole mare and foal to within metres of us, bold and brave. Amanda had sat quietly in the grass while the stallion stood, alert but relaxed, as his foal delicately stepped forward to sniff the grass in Amanda's outstretched hand.

But today there was no chance of getting close, and the stallion's small herd was nowhere in sight. We hoped he hadn't lost them to a younger stallion and, more importantly, we prayed that he would escape the muster the following year; although not lame, he had an obvious injury to his foreleg that would mean he would be one of the horses culled, deemed unsuitable for re-homing.

Continuing on our way, we soon found another herd, although we almost missed them. Pressed in tight between shrubs and knee-deep in snow, they were seeking shelter from the wind; only the slight swish of a tail gave away their hiding spot. When they saw us, the lead mare startled, and moved to higher ground, her head low as she struggled through the deep powder, the rest of the herd following. They quickly disappeared from view and we returned to the truck, gaining altitude as we headed for the Argo Valley.

Major Hibbs, the army liaison officer for the wild Kaimanawas, was struggling to keep the truck on the road and soon it was impassable, the snow too deep to continue. The 150 horses that wintered in the Argo Valley were snowed in and could not be reached by vehicle. Disappointed,

we turned around and headed south to where some of the elusive grey horses grazed.

We soon found a herd of bays standing underneath a grove of trees, only a stone's throw away from us. They watched curiously as we left the vehicle and crept closer, inching our way forward in breathless silence so they wouldn't be frightened. We were so focused on the mares that we didn't even notice the stallion until we were almost on top of him; just metres away from us stood a regal grey, peering through the shrubs, his white coat hard to see against the snow that covered the ground and clung to the branches around him. Spellbound, we paused in mid-stride, captivated by the sight of this noble stallion, mane and tail thick with dreadlocks. He remained frozen in place, unsure whether we were friend or foe.

Relaxing, he resumed eating, nibbling on the shrubs in front of him. Soon his mares wandered over to join him, and together they turned and wove between the trees into a clearing. We followed closely behind. Halting, the grey raised his head and neighed, and we watched as a bay mare trotted powerfully through the trees on the far side with three youngsters flanking her. Eight horses now stood in front of us; we watched as the new mare stepped forward to join the stallion, then together they turned and faced us. Unlike the grey, the mares and foals were plain in appearance and their broad Roman-nosed heads reminded us of warhorses long past; none more so than the lead mare, who stood shoulder to shoulder with the grey stallion, observing us with a calm and unhurried demeanour.

Obviously not feeling threatened, they soon returned to grazing; some pawed at the snow to reach the hidden tussock grass beneath, others reached up to eat the leaves from the trees. Not wanting to disturb them any longer, we returned to the truck. As we settled into our seats we saw a flash of movement to our right and, turning, watched as the grey led his herd towards us, passing close in front of the truck before disappearing around a bend in the road, snowy hoof-prints the only reminder of the scene we had just witnessed.

We listened with rapt attention to Major Hibbs as he shared stories of the grey stallion — the Winter King. For almost a decade the grey



TOP

The old grey stallion in the snow made a lasting impression from the very first moment we saw him.

BOTTOM

Our first sighting of Honor, Elder's lead mare, whom we would later save from slaughter during the 2014 muster.



TOP
A mare and her newborn foal the morning after the blizzard in 2013.

MIDDLE
Our first sighting of the Blaze family from Zone 15. They are easily identified by the white markings on their face and legs.

BOTTOM
This iconic chestnut stallion was mustered and branded as part of Department of Conservation (DOC) research in 1997, before being released again. He is believed to be the oldest Kaimanawa in the Ranges.



had been a favourite among the army personnel, and soldiers often got within metres of the herd before it moved off. Everyone knew the stallion by reputation, and when visitors came to the Waiouru Military Training Base they were often taken out to meet his herd since it was so tolerant of humans.

Not all the wild horses are as sociable as this grey stallion and his herd, or the bay that guards the gate into the Ranges; having spent their lives so close to the army base, these horses are used to seeing people on a daily basis and are the exceptions. The further into the Ranges you venture, the greater the horses' degree of wildness. Some of the herds in the north are actually dangerous, and we had heard stories of stallions and lead mares that had attacked people on horseback when they'd ventured too close to the Kaimanawas' territory.

As we drove on, we kept a close eye out for more horses and soon found another herd, this time predominantly grey mares led by two bay stallions. Among the herd was a wobbly newborn foal, and we were amazed that it had been born during the depths of winter and had survived such a harsh blizzard. Seeing the horses in the snow and ice only emphasised how hardy and tough the wild Kaimanawas are, and made us appreciate the extremes of life in the Ranges.

OUR SNOWY TRIP INTO THE RANGES affected us deeply, and as we made the long journey back north we felt torn, both awed by the experience and heavy at heart in equal measure. Although seeing Kaimanawas in the wild is one of our favourite things to do, it is also something we have come to dread. Most of the horses we see will eventually be mustered, and every year, as more horses become familiar to us, we know that we will be heartbroken when they are captured; especially if horses we know are drafted for slaughter.

Over the past three years we have seen wild Kaimanawas in the snow, the rain and the hottest days of summer. We've seen stallions fighting, newborn foals frolicking in the tussock, horses galloping across valleys and herds being mustered. The sight never ceases to amaze us and each time we are reminded just how much these horses have come to mean

to us. One reason the horses are now so familiar is because of the stories we hear from the army officers who know the herds by name. Over the years we have come to share their extensive knowledge of the land, where each herd grazes and the dynamics of how they interact. We know that a herd of bachelors grazes in the Home Valley, that the old chestnut stallion can always be found in the Argo Basin and that the greys roam in the south near the Ammunition Range. We also know that the Blaze family is found in Zone 15, that the horses in Zone 20 are among the wildest, and that right at the back of the army land an elusive herd of flaxen chestnuts evades capture, their rare and shocking-white manes and tails well known to the soldiers.

Visit by visit, season by season, we see the changes within the herds: stallions that have lost mares, others that have gained them, and the arrival of new foals. Every time we enter the Ranges, we find horses we have never seen before; we have now photographed and filmed at least half of the 400 horses currently in the wild. It's always the stallions that leave us with lasting impressions, though, and each time it saddens us that these horses are the most likely to be slaughtered during the biennial musters because they cannot find new homes in domestication.

The publicity and support we have gained for the Kaimanawas in recent years has been huge, but at the last muster 24 stallions and 48 mares still went to the abattoir; with another muster approaching we knew that something else needed to be done. We understand the need for the musters — the smaller herd numbers are clearly improving the health of the horses and we have no quarrel with the Department of Conservation (DOC) over this. Rather, we believe that it is the public that offers the answer to the unnecessary slaughtering of healthy horses: it was now time for experienced equestrians to step up and offer these horses a home.

The foals and juveniles are much easier to domesticate and are always re-homed, but the majority of the adult horses go to slaughter because, most assuredly, befriending them isn't for the faint of heart. At one time the older horses wouldn't have been given a chance at all, but what we accomplished with our horses from the 2012 muster challenged the

misconceptions. Our success with the stallions in particular had haunted some of the people who had been involved in saving the wild horses. Over the past 20 years countless stallions and mares have been slaughtered and, while heartbroken, those passionate about saving the wild horses had until then been able to sleep at night believing that the older horses were too difficult to tame; a belief that was shattered when they saw Vicki cantering her 17-year-old stallion Major down the beach bareback just weeks after he'd been captured from the wild.

We are fortunate in New Zealand to have a managed herd of only 300 wild horses, resulting in the mustering of about 170 horses every second year to maintain the numbers. Unlike America with over 80,000 and Australia with almost a million, the statistics here aren't overwhelming. As we drove home from the Waiouru Military Training Base we brainstormed, certain that we could come up with a solution to guarantee that the extra horses could be re-homed rather than culled. We knew that the biggest hurdle was finding people with the knowledge needed to tame the older horses. Professional horse trainers have little incentive to take on wild Kaimanawas; the horses are too small for adults to compete professionally, and the time and money needed to train them is extensive. When we finally arrived home in the dead of night, after eight hours of tossing ideas back and forth, we were confident that we had sketched the outline of a successful idea.

The following day we approached Kaimanawa Heritage Horses and asked if they would be interested in launching the nation's first Kaimanawa Stallion Challenges. Although tentative at first, the committee eventually fully embraced the idea. Over the next nine months the KHH team finalised details, sought out passionate sponsors and thoroughly vetted potential trainers. Equidays and the Horse of the Year show, New Zealand's largest and most prestigious equestrian events, were excited to host the challenges, which would collectively offer the nation's leading trainers \$50,000 in cash and prizes in what was to become one of the most financially attractive wild horse events in the world.