



WHEELS RIDE





Worlds converge at the intersection of Alhambra Valley and Bear Creek roads, where Martinez meets Briones. A convoy of BMWs noisily downshifts as it approaches the four-way stop, the turbo-charged moans soon overtaken by the guttural lowing of 80 Angus and Hereford cattle being herded into branding pens by a posse of five people on horseback.

“The cows had coyotes all around them on the hills, so they are a little skittish,” says Frank Nunes, who owns the herd and is a descendant of 19th century cattle ranchers from the area.

Riding down the green spring hills, leading the riders and nudging the cattle with her steed, Kellie Mackin makes a dazzling arrival. Mackin, Nunes’ longtime partner, who lives with

him on his family’s 107-year-old Bear Creek Ranch in Briones, is bedecked in a combination of grit and glitter. Leather “chinks,” a shorter version of chaps, are layered over hip-hugging jeans. Instead of the helmets the other riders wear, she sports a jaunty 10-gallon with a wide brim. Imitation diamonds on her turquoise Western shirt glint in the late-morning sun.

But make no mistake, this is no rhinestone cowgirl. Mackin, at 53, is an honest-to-goodness working ranch hand and champion roper, with the saddles and belt buckles to prove it. Today, she’s wearing her favorite buckle: the turquoise-encrusted one she received for placing second in the 2013 Women’s Team Roping Association competition, one of the twenty-some awards she’s won in regional and national contests.

Friends with cameras and lunch have come to watch the branding, an old-time tradition that requires roping the calves. Understandably, the calves do not like getting vaccinated, branded—which is state

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mandated—and for the males, castrated. “The goal is to make it as low stress as possible” says Mackin. “You have to work quickly and accurately.”

Riding Cody, her trusted 15-year-old gelding, Mackin easily snags three calves in a row, each on her first try. The rope makes a rhythmic whirl as she spins at a slight tilt over her head and zeroes in on a calf. Cyclists stop to stare. The driver of a Porsche slows down to watch.

The speed at which Mackin works is relaxed compared to her speed during competitions, when she emerges from a gate at a gallop and is under pressure to rope older and larger steers with horns quickly. The time it usually takes her to accomplish such a feat: eight seconds. Such speed has made her a fierce competitor, a top female in the male-dominated world of competitive team roping.

But first and foremost, she is a horseback-riding instructor in the Western tradition—who dedicated

herself to the vocation after beating leukemia in 2007—and a preserver of tradition. “People in town don’t even realize this goes on out here,” says Mackin of nearby residents who ride BART, not horses, to work. “This is the last of the Old West.”

She feels a responsibility to expose her young students to a ranching tradition that is dying out as suburbs expand.

“Granted, these kids may grow up to be doctors or lawyers. But at least we’ll have given them this experience,” she says. “At the very least, they’ll know where their beef comes from.”

Mackin has been teaching for 20 years, spending the last 11 on the grounds of Bear Creek Ranch, a complex of barns, arenas, and pastures that includes a 1908 Craftsman bungalow built by local residents. She does not advertise yet has a client roster of more than 100. About 37 are regulars, ranging from the three-year-old daughter of a pro-basketball player to students in their sixties. Mackin teaches all levels of riding and roping, including summer camps for beginners and advanced ropers, and regularly leads trail rides on some of her 16 quarter horses in and around Briones.

Vicki Wisher, 63, found Mackin through a recommendation when pondering what to do after retiring as a secretary for the Contra Costa Fire District. Wisher loved horses, but “didn’t know how to put a saddle on” when she arrived at Mackin’s barn three years ago. After taking lessons and trail rides, sweeping out stalls, and being allowed to “just hang around,” Wisher now helps Mackin by working with students in the arena. She credits Mackin’s appeal as a teacher to her down-to-earth personality. “She has a lot of patience and doesn’t lord over you with her knowledge,” Wisher says. “She makes everyone feel comfortable.”

To her students, Mackin is the go-to horse whisperer, an equine enthusiast who advocates a partnership approach. “You don’t do things in an abusive way,” says Mackin. “You’re saying, ‘Trust me. I am going to lead you in the right direction. We are learning to do this together.’”

Mackin sees firsthand that just being with horses can heal and serve as a salve for tech-distracted kids and adults alike. “It’s way better than the \$150 you’ll spend on a therapy session,” says Mackin.

Chris Viadro—a lawyer from Orinda who joins Mackin’s rides with his 14-year-old son, Keaton—puts it this way when describing the stress-reducing benefits





of trail riding: "It's like golf, with a living golf club."

Viadro's wife, Julianne, sometimes assists Mackin by driving an ATV that drags a Heel-o-Matic roping dummy in the roping class her son takes. "Being out here is so empowering for these kids for so many reasons," says Julianne, who also takes lessons with Mackin. "They are away from the screens, their phones; they are out with nature. They have a big animal they have to tell what to do. They need to have the confidence and the will to sit up there."

One of Mackin's acolytes, 14-year-old Bridget Tague of Orinda—a 2014 champion in Gymkhana, a series of timed obstacle events—has been working with Mackin for four years. On a break during the cattle roundup, Bridget says one of the greatest lessons Mackin taught her through roping is to "keep your cool," Bridget says. "Never get frustrated because then you can't catch at all."

Mackin learned similar lessons at a young age. She inherited her horse sense from a father who, while learning about the ag business at Cal Poly, worked as a cowboy on a nearby feedlot. Growing up in the horse-friendly SoCal community of Norco, where everybody had horses in their backyards, Mackin rode bareback every day.

By age 11, Mackin had a job exercising horses. She also took these horses to shows, winning awards in everything from Western Pleasure (where she got her taste for fancy show clothes) to Gymkhana, where she

developed a love of speed. Mackin broke her first horse at 12 in a gentle style that calls for "working them off of your legs and not their mouths."

In college, she moved north to study business at Cal State East Bay and decided to remain in the area for good. Stints in banking and as a pharmaceutical sales rep never felt right, but teaching and breaking horses did, and she began doing both in Sebastopol and then Briones. In 2000, she began competitive team roping, after carrying the flag for the Salinas Rodeo for seven years.

For Mackin, nothing compares to the adrenaline rush of competitive roping. "I can't think of anything more skillful than running at full speed down an arena, standing up, and trying to rope a moving target that is trying to get away from you. I don't want to discredit what anybody else is doing, but that really requires some skill." Then she hesitates, laughs, and adds, "and cojones."

In 2009, Mackin won two first-place awards in the U.S. Team Roping Championships, competing against men. This victory was especially hard won. Two years earlier, she had collapsed while on her way to a roping competition in Oakdale. She just thought she was exhausted, but she soon learned she had leukemia. "I picked her up and threw her in the car," Nunes says, then he took her to an emergency room. Later, at Stanford University Medical Center—where she received a bone marrow transplant—oncologists

gave her a 30 percent chance of survival. During that iffy period, Mackin started a will, listing which of her friends and family would inherit the 12 horses she had at the time. She also had an epiphany. "I made up my mind that I was not going to die," she says. "It might sound corny, but I realized God had a plan for me. I wanted to devote my life to sharing my love of horses."

After a recovery that took more than a year, she returned to the ranch. Mackin quickly went from barely making it out of bed to getting on and riding a horse.

Just three months later, Mackin won her first-place awards in the U.S. Team Roping Championships. Top prizes from the Women's Team Roping Association followed in 2013 and 2014.

Mackin credits cancer with her steely composure and "don't sweat the small stuff" attitude. "I've learned to be present and smell the roses," she says. She's been in remission for seven years.

Mackin is already on to her next goal: qualifying for a fourth time for the World Series of Team Roping, in Las Vegas, another male-dominated event. Mackin hopes that the calm persistence she tries to impart to her students will pay off for her again. From atop her horse Cody, she looks down and flashes one of her megawatt cowgirl smiles. "Gotta keep trying, right?" ■

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