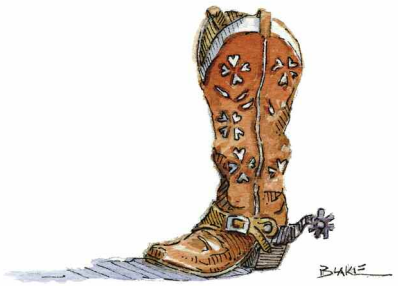

EDITOR'S NOTE

Metaphors

By A.J. Mangum

On a horse ranch south of Denver, a small crowd has gathered at one end of an outdoor riding arena, a patch of earth perhaps an acre and a half in size and surrounded by a white rail fence. Inside the arena, a man in his late twenties, wearing a camo jacket, t-shirt and jeans, leads a horse through a simple obstacle course. The pair navigate a path between two poles; they weave through a set of orange pylons; they complete a figure-eight around a set of barrels.

As the horse and handler progress through the pattern, the small group of onlookers cheers as if points are being added to a scoreboard. This isn't a competition, though. The stakes are much higher.

The duo in the arena approach the final obstacle, a pair of poles that have been placed several feet apart, forming a gap between which the horse is to be backed. The man in the camo jacket struggles to position his horse in front of the gap, and the two turn in circles for the better part of a minute before finally completing the maneuver. Victorious, the handler leads his horse toward the arena gate, and the crowd cheers yet again.

Along the rail, a horseman named John turns to me. He's smiling, mildly entertained by the scene that played out at the final obstacle. "It isn't really about getting through the course," he says. "It's about the metaphors."

John is a Vietnam veteran. He returned from Southeast Asia wracked with survivor's guilt, continually questioning why he returned from combat while so many of his fellow soldiers didn't. Post-traumatic stress disorder made it difficult for him to get along with co-workers and hold down jobs. Alcohol became a refuge. At his lowest point, he contemplated suicide.

Horses, John will tell you, rescued him. He awoke one morning inside a corral, where he'd passed out from drinking the night before. With his saddle horse nuzzling him, John contemplated the notion that his connection with his horse was one of the few positive relationships in his life. Hopeful he could reverse his downward spiral, he vowed to inject into his interactions with people the patience and quiet mindset

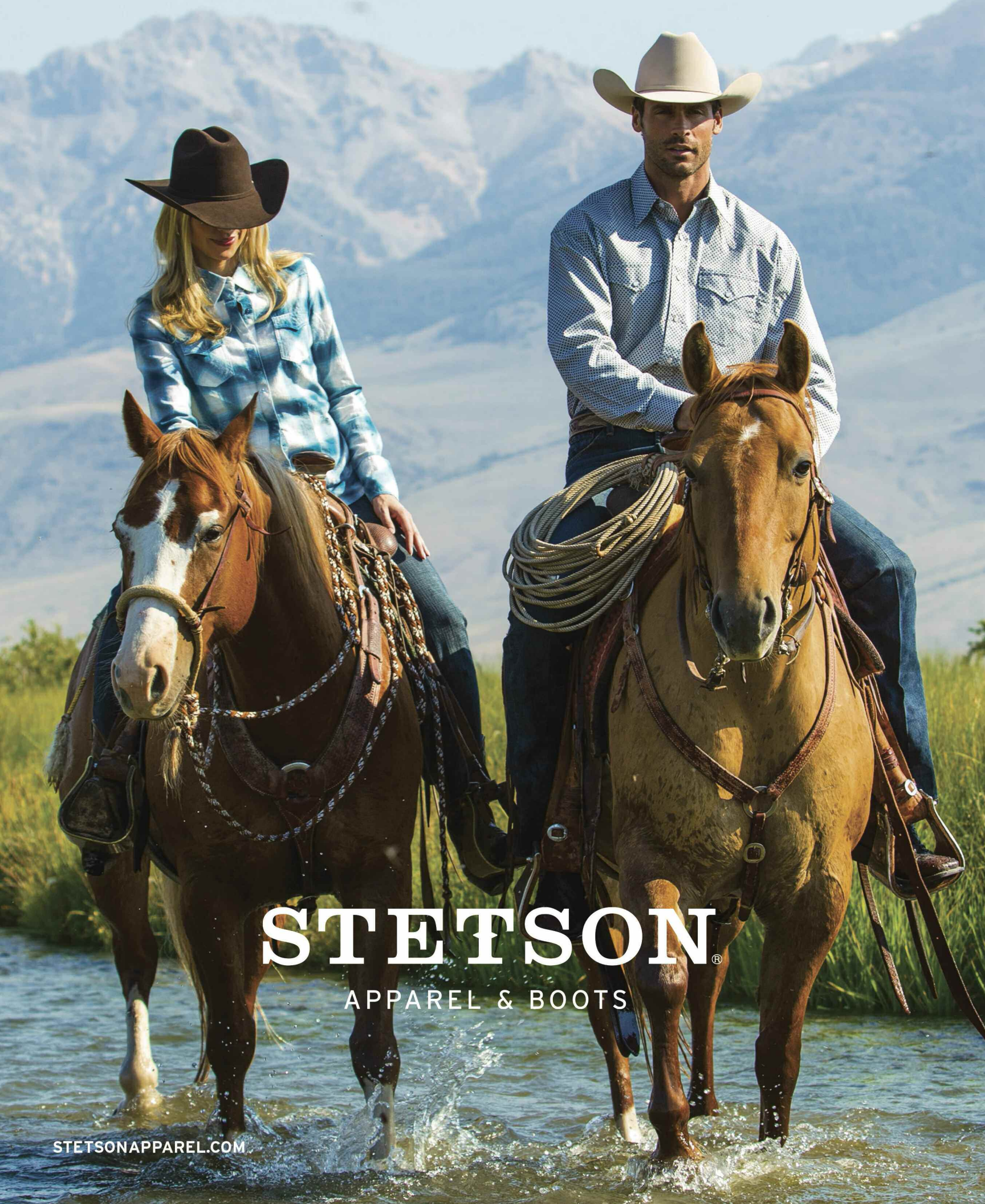
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photo courtesy Semper Fi Fund

Veterans warm up before a Jinx McCain event. The McCain program operates under the umbrella of Team Semper Fi, an athletic program for wounded servicemen.

his horse demanded.

Slowly, John emerged from the darkness that had come to define his life. Eager to help other veterans, he attended workshops on equine-assisted therapy, and reached out to counselors and fellow horsemen. He gradually formed a community of volunteers and veterans. His ranch became a refuge, a place where former soldiers could work with horses and seek the same relief the animals had offered John.

When a newcomer arrives at the ranch, John explains, he's handed a halter and lead rope, and pointed in the direction of a horse turned out on pasture. For an experienced horseman, catching and haltering a horse is the most basic of tasks. For someone with no experience around horses – someone who might not know what a halter is for – it's an assignment that can border on impossible.

The point, John explains, isn't teaching a veteran to halter a horse; the idea is to present a challenge, one that's potentially overwhelming, and let the veteran process it. If he becomes frustrated and angry, odds are he won't get near the horse, much less get the animal haltered. If the veteran controls his emotions, though, and handles the unfamiliar with patience, the odds of success dramatically increase.

At the end of each session, John and the counselors with whom he works ask the veterans in the program to look for parallels between their interactions with horses and their relationships with family, friends, co-workers. When problems have occurred – with horses or with people – what roles have frustration and anger played? If patience had been employed, how might things have gone differently? The lessons, and the metaphors, become obvious.

This issue includes "Semper Fi," my story on the Jinx McCain Horsemanship Program for wounded veterans, including many suffering from PTSD or traumatic brain injuries. The McCain program is part of the Semper Fi Fund's Team Semper Fi, a veterans' athletic program promoting "recovery through sport."

In researching the story, I became acquainted (by phone) with McCain program participant and former Marine Chris Lowe, a veteran whose PTSD went undiagnosed for the better part of a decade. Chris says that, before he began working with horses, he lived in a constant state of anger, with predictable effects on his relationships and prospects. Horses changed him.

"If I'm angry, cursing, no one wants to approach me," Chris says. "It's the same with horses. If I'm calm and quiet, though, they'll come to me."

Having recognized the same metaphors of which John, the Colorado horseman, speaks, Chris has transformed his relationships with people and achieved a much-needed turnaround in his life. Today, the Marine can speak of his demons in the past tense.

"Horses," Chris says, "have given me a sense of relief."