



3,000 Miles Later

Unbranding Ben Masters

All pictures were provided by unbrandedthefilm.com



EMILY FOREMAN '17

Lightening flashed in the distance as a mountain thunderstorm loomed closer, but Ben Masters '12 ignored the danger. He stood in knee-deep water continually casting his fly-fishing rod, savoring every moment the river had to offer that summer afternoon. This unimaginably breathtaking scene was captured on video over two years ago near the end of a 3,000-mile horse ride Masters embarked on with three other former Aggies.

Unconventional Education

As a freshman at Texas A&M University, Masters began in the May's Business School, but chose to switch his degree after two semesters. He declared a major in wildlife and fisheries sciences.

Towards the end of his freshman year, Masters said he had a heart to heart with himself about the direction his life was taking.

"Do I want to spend the next few years of college playing with calculators or doing something that might be more along the lines of my passion?" Masters asked.

The WFSC department was very supportive of internships and experiences outside of the classroom. They worked with Masters to create a custom graduation plan that was adapted to his needs. He asked them if not going to school in the fall was an option, because of hunting season. Masters said the department simply said sure that would be great.

Masters did not spend his college summers at the pool or in the classroom; rather he was on the back of a horse leading trail rides

in Yellowstone National Park. He guided elk hunts in Wyoming each fall and worked at Jacalon Ranch, outside of Laredo, Texas, during the winter. Masters' approach to gaining a bachelor's degree was unconventional, taking courses only in spring semesters, but he rose to the challenge.

Unyielding Friendships

During his time at Texas A&M, Masters grew close to Jonny Fitzsimons, Thomas Glover and Ben Thamer, fellow riders on the 3,000 mile journey.

Fitzsimons graduated in December of 2012 from the College of Liberal Arts with a degree in history. He was raised on a ranch in South Texas and learned to ride almost as early as he could walk. During his college years, he spent his summers working on a ranch in Argentina, chasing poachers in Tanzania and riding for a working dude ranch in southern Wyoming. Masters said he met Fitzsimons during their senior year of college and made a connection through their similar passions.

A native of Houston, Glover claimed to be a city boy whose heart belongs to the mountains. He graduated from the College of Architecture with a degree in construction science in 2012. Much like the other two riders, he did not spend his summers lounging around. Glover guided trail rides in Rocky Mountain National Park and took one fall semester off to guide elk hunts in Wyoming. Masters met Glover earlier in their college careers because he was a good friend of Masters' girlfriend. This led to them working at a few of the same outfits during the summer.

Above: The Wasatch Mountains provide a stunning backdrop for the four Aggies ride through Utah.

Unlike the other riders, Thamer immersed himself in college. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in agricultural economics in 2012. Thamer said he started heading down the conventional path to a job in an office, wife, kids and a house on a cul-de-sac. He said that he always felt pulled in a different direction and when Masters asked if he wanted to go on the ride Thamer could not say no. These two met before A&M in Amarillo where they grew up together.

When Masters asked these three to take on his monumental idea, it only took them about a week to completely commit. Masters said the timing in their lives was right for the crazy adventure they were about to embark on.

"It was before we had a ridiculous amount of responsibilities and was something that we all thought would be a great way to wrap up our college," Masters said. "Since then it has done a lot for our careers and given us something very interesting to put on the resume."

Uncovering the West

All of this culminated into a journey that, some said, could not be done. It involved 3,000 miles of backcountry, stretching from Mexico to Canada—across Arizona, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming and Montana. Masters said he wanted to show others that there was still enough open space in the west to go on such an extensive ride.

Below: Fitzsimons and Thamer take in the scenery as they near the end of their journey through Glacier National Park.





Above: Five mustangs adopted and trained for the 3,000 mile ride enjoy the lush meadows of Wyoming.

The idea for the journey began in 2010, while Masters was on a pack trip from Colorado to Montana. Masters said that looking back he thought if somebody had filmed the ride people would want to watch it, simply for the crazy stuff they saw.

The four Aggies agreed to complete the 3,000 miles on horseback and they used only mustangs to fill their string. Besides the advantages of being cheap and plentiful, Masters said that many of the mustangs are well-made and good horses for the price.

“I also think that they have a really interesting story and by using only mustangs we would be able to tell that story of where they came from and a little bit of what is going on with them right now,” Masters said.

More than 50,000 mustangs stand in holding pens, waiting for the day they might be adopted. This management issue is a topic Masters wanted to bring to light.

Unbranded is a 105-minute documentary showcasing the four Aggies’ journey and addressing the problems with the current management of mustang herds. After raising the money to produce the documentary through a Kickstarter campaign, a cameraman tagged along to video their journey of a lifetime.

The film showcases breathtaking vistas, gut-wrenching mishaps and the hilarity that occurs when you put four twenty-something males on the backs of horses in the wilderness.

When asked if he ever thought Unbranded would become as big as it has, Masters’ immediate response was no. He said that he knew it would be good but never thought it would impact so many people.

“We get emails pretty often of people saying they watched our

film and decided to adopt a mustang or decided to go on this epic journey they’ve always wanted to go on,” Masters said. “To see it have a quantifiable difference is actually really satisfying.”

Along with the documentary, Masters authored a book that incorporates aspects of the journey that would have been too detailed to include in the film. This companion book features topics including how they selected their mustangs, the training of the horses, the meticulously planned route and the variety of hardships they faced on the trail. The 188-page Unbranded book was published by the Texas A&M University Press and provides astonishing views of the journey to anyone who chooses to open it.

“It’s almost as if we have a lot in common with the horses, there’s not enough room out there for them and sometimes I feel like there’s not enough room for us.”

—Ben Masters; Unbranded film

Unexpected Opportunities

It has been more than two years since Masters and his fellow Aggies finished the ride, but the journey has had a lasting effect on their lives.

Masters said he tried not to be involved with the editing of the movie. As a character, he did not want any prejudices influencing the film. Instead, he dove into the creation of the book.

Since completing the ride, Masters has launched new projects, worked with a variety of organizations, promoted Unbranded across the country and was given the opportunity to be the backcountry columnist for Western Horsemanship magazine.

“I did not realize how many doors it would open and it’s really hard to take on all of them at the same time,” Masters said.

While at a film festival, Masters was introduced to people from National Geographic. Now, he creates short films and writes articles for publication on their website and blog. Masters said that it is such an honor to create stories for an organization like that.

His first video was published October 2015 and was included in the fifth and final part of his first article series, A Backcountry Recovery in Yellowstone. This series covered Masters’ journey through the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem with veteran Green Beret Ray Knell. He reached out to Masters earlier in 2015, requesting advice for the 1,000-mile ride he was about to embark on. The purpose of the journey was to inspire wounded veterans and to heal his PTSD through the human-horse relationship and wilderness experience. While in Wyoming, noxious weeds poisoned Knell’s lead horse and Masters jumped at the chance to help Knell complete his journey, on the condition that he allow Masters to accompany him through Yellowstone.

Masters said that right now he has more opportunities in his life because he decided to take a risk and do something unconventional. When the idea for Unbranded was first formed he said it really was not that good of an idea. Masters was in college debt and the most financially intelligent thing to do was to graduate and immediately get a job. This was also the path he felt the most pressure to follow from those around him.

“I took a risk in that Unbranded was an adventure, but it was

also a business venture, in a business that is full of sharks, is not lucrative and is difficult to get into,” Masters said. “You know it was very possible that everything could have failed, but it didn’t and now I have so many more opportunities in my life.”

He claimed that he doesn’t have a lot of wisdom due to graduating only a few years ago, but he is happy with the path that he took. Masters said that he believes there are a lot of people who

have a desire to go on a big, soul-searching journey or an adventure to explore what they want to get out of life. Yet, there are only a small percentage of people who actually take the risk and go on that journey, that ride.

“I think the most interesting thing is that it’s still possible. People think it’s the year 2015, with all of the technological advancements and the amount that we’ve

changed the landscapes—the highways, the railroads, the power lines and the fence lines—it is really difficult to go anywhere on a horse, the world is set up for cars. The fact that there is still a 3,000 mile stretch of land that anybody can access and do these big epic trips, I think is really, really cool,” Masters said.

For more information on Unbranded or to watch the documentary visit <http://watch.unbrandedthefilm.com>.

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Below: Masters leads the herd through some of the most picturesque public lands in the United States.

