



Yesi Pilgrim and Slick in the Gem State Mule Company arena during the clinic
Shaun Schlager Photography

Think Like a Queen:

Building Confidence Beyond the Arena (and Redefining Rodeo One Mule at a Time)

by Cori Daniels

At Gem State Mule Company in Rathdrum, Idaho, you're likely to see mule foals sprinting around and finding their legs while repurposed race mules look on and 'remember when.' But for three days each summer, the barn is filled with a different combination of fresh-faced newbies and experienced competitors during the annual 'Think Like a Queen' clinic, a unique event blending horsemanship, mentorship, and the world of Rodeo Queening.

Gayle Stegmann, who co-owns Gem State Mule Company with her husband, Michael, has always believed in the importance of one-on-one mentoring and investing in youth. "I believe in placing myself in a lane that young ladies are going to step into, and I can help them be a better version of themselves," said Gayle.

These efforts began with a well-received "Glitter Girl" clinic, which introduced young ladies to equine, helped them develop riding skills, and fostered friendships within the community while emphasizing confidence, good sportsmanship, and teamwork. It grew into something even bigger when a former chair of the local Rodeo Queen program approached Gayle about collaborating on a clinic that would expand to include professional mentors and more content.

Rodeo Queens are the ambassadors and representatives of the rodeo, association, or region they serve. They participate in parades, community events, and rodeos, promoting the sport to both new and old fans. To be crowned, contestants must demonstrate skills in horsemanship, interviews, public speaking, modeling, and much more. Preparing for these contests is demanding, and for newcomers without mentors or community ties, it can feel overwhelming.

“Rodeo Queens have long been pillars of the Rodeo Community,” said Gayle. “They’re the face of the rodeos they represent and bring fans closer to the rodeo in a more personal way. The ‘Think Like a Queen’ Clinic was designed to help aspiring young ladies explore all the possibilities beyond local saddle club royalty programs.”

Gem State Mule Company now annually hosts the ‘Think Like a Queen’ clinic. Over the course of three days, participants dive into every aspect of competition that goes into becoming a Rodeo Queen, from horsemanship and modeling to public speaking and personal interviews.

It’s a great asset for any aspiring Rodeo Queen. From perfecting the ‘Rodeo Queen wave’ while loping around the arena to learning how to walk with confidence and grace onstage, the girls get tips and tricks straight from seasoned Rodeo Queens who are there to guide them every step of the way. The networking is nearly as invaluable, as the clinic connects aspiring queens with experienced mentors who share their passion.

Sessions on hair and makeup, fashion and wardrobe, rodeo knowledge, etiquette, and even a parent’s session are held over the course of three days. Professional photographer Shaun Schlager taught a session on posing for photographs and offered affordable headshots to use in contests and autograph sheets. He’s offered this service at the clinic for many years, and said he’s watched several of these ladies grow in doing what they love. “I love to be able to make these dreams come true,” said Shaun.

Horsemanship is a cornerstone of Rodeo Queening, and the clinic devotes significant time to it. The girls enhance their riding skills through hands-on training and techniques that help them connect more effectively with their equine partners and perform confidently in rodeo events. “This year we included cattle in the clinic as often the queens assist in getting the cows back into the shoots/pens during the rodeos, and this requires a certain skill set,” said Gayle.

Not every girl who dreams of being a Rodeo Queen has access to a suitable ride, so the Stegmans offer their own repurposed race mules as mounts for participants. Many attendees are surprised by the athleticism and speed of the mules. Gayle’s niece, Sequoia Webb, even used a retired race mule named Blinkie when

Mules and More Magazine



Clinic participants waiting their turn to practice in the arena (above) and working cattle (below) *Shaun Schlager Photography*



she tried out - and won - the title of Miss Spokane Rodeo Queen. “He performed the Horsemanship pattern equally to or better than the horses,” said Gayle. “In fact, one of the competitors alongside Sequoia drew Blinkie to randomly perform the pattern as part of this year’s clinic. She said she was hoping she drew Blinkie’s name as she liked the way he handled the pattern when watching Sequoia compete.” Blinkie and his rider ended up winning the Horsemanship portion of the competition.

This year, Kennadee Riggs, Miss Rodeo America 2023, was the lead clinician. “For young girls, the sport of Rodeo Queening builds confidence, strengthens faith, and shapes you into your best self,” said Kennadee. Expert clinicians Ashley Kerby and Lexy Hibbs also shared their wealth of knowledge and experience with the attendees.

Among the many stories of inspiration, one stood out—that of Yesenia “Yesi”

Pilgrim and her partnership with a retired race mule named Slick.

When Yesi first reached out to Gayle last summer about her Rodeo Queen goals, Gayle immediately recognized her determination. Gayle said Yesi worked tirelessly on her Horsemanship skills with the goal of becoming the Sandpoint Rodeo Queen.

“We have repurposed racing mules that are very accomplished in the show ring, the ‘push button’ type, and I kept encouraging her to ride these mules,” said Gayle. “She kept gravitating to Slick.” Slick is a 16-hand, 22-year-old gentle giant, but no longer a seasoned performance/arena mule. “He once raced on the flat tracks, but his speed index was such that his racing career was short-lived,” said Gayle.

Under Gayle’s mentorship, Yesi and Slick refined their skills, and Yesi was ultimately crowned Sandpoint Rodeo Queen.

Yesenia is a senior in high school with



Clinic attendees working on a variety of horsemanship skills and posing for a group photo



2025 Miss Columbia River Circuit Kaitlyn McKinsey (left) and 2025 Miss Spokane Interstate Rodeo Queen Sorrel Aldendorf (right) riding Blinkie, a 22-year-old retired racing mule at the Sandpoint Rodeo

plans to become an Equine Chiropractor. In her introduction as Sandpoint Rodeo Queen, she said, “I play basketball for North Idaho Christian School. When you can’t find me on the court, you will find me in the barn. Whether it’s cleaning stalls or riding mules, I enjoy all things equine.” Yesi, who grew up in the foster home system, didn’t have an easy road to get to where she is now. Once crowned Sandpoint Rodeo Queen, she held a highly successful Queen Coronation ceremony and was overwhelmed with the outpouring of love and financial support from the community.

“A friend and I purchased a horse trailer for her, and now it has wraps filled with business logos from sponsorships as well as a giant picture of Yesi,” said Gayle. “It brings me such inner happiness to see her face on her trailer. Watching this young lady find joy and confidence has been a true privilege.”

Yesi said her main goal as Sandpoint Rodeo Queen is to show that it just takes a little courage to accomplish your dreams. “I want to help and encourage all foster children to accomplish their dreams, and most importantly, I would like to inspire North Idaho youth to find their passions and pursue them,” said Yesi.

“It has been so rewarding to watch her evolve,” said Gayle. “She is living her dream!”

Another one of Yesi’s dreams is to win another crown - but only if she can win it on Slick.

“Yesi wanted to try out for the prestigious Miss Columbia River Circuit Rodeo Queen, which is a springboard to going on to run as a state queen and then possibly Miss Rodeo America,” said Gayle. “When she learned they did not allow queens to compete on mules, she was proactive in approaching former Miss Columbia River Queen, Georgia Lieb, to see if she had any influence over the committee and if they might change their position and allow her to compete on Slick. She was instrumental in getting this change made and now intends to try out in October.”

This change to open the door for more Rodeo Queens to compete on mules is important, as interest in longer-eared mounts has grown since Slick and Yesi’s debut. Gayle said that when Yesi and Slick walk around the Fairgrounds, they attract young ladies who aspire to be like her like a magnet. She sees more Rodeo Queens riding mules in the future. “During Yesi’s season, she fielded requests from many of the local Queens wanting to borrow our mules,” said Gayle. “I think they draw a lot of attention, and people like to see them out in the arena doing rodeo runs alongside horses.”

Being a Rodeo Queen comes with more perks than just a crown and a sash. It provides its contestants the opportunity to strengthen skills that will transfer into their lives as a whole, both personally and professionally. From sharpening their ability to think and articulate their thoughts under pressure, to developing trust in their own opinions, to the mental fortitude that is solidified under the pressure of competition, it’s a process that shapes young women into confident leaders and role models both in and out of the arena. The ability to be awarded scholarships from companies like Gem State Mule Company is another added incentive for contestants, too.

Just like Rodeo Queening itself, the ‘Think Like a Queen’ clinic is about more than just learning; it’s about empowerment, confidence, and transformation. It’s about creating opportunities, building lifelong friendships and connections, and preparing these young women for whatever arena they step into next.



Yesi Pilgrim and Slick in the Sandpoint Independence Day Parade



Gayle Stegmann, Yesi Pilgrim, and Slick



Sandpoint Rodeo Queen Yesi Pilgrim
at the Spokane County Interstate Fair and Rodeo
Shaun Schlager Photography