On Confidence
By Elle Eberts

In the spring of 2019 I was lucky enough to receive a scholarship from the Backcountry Horsemen of Montana that allowed me to go to Mack and Connie Long's multi day packing clinic based out of the North Fork of the Blackfoot. I'd gone to a few weekend packing clinics in the past, done a few short trips, and while I knew how to take care of my horses, I lacked practice and confidence in the backcountry.

The Long's camp was daunting, but both Mack and Connie (and their lovely team of wranglers) seemed to know just what I needed. They invited me to bring my riding horse, June, and newly acquired vetran backcountry mule, Shirley. We loaded up our gear and headed to the trailhead where we spent a day going over the basics and practicing loads. The next day we headed into the wilderness. The Long's showed us how they set up camp and manage over 20 head of stock in the backcountry. Due to the early season and a heavily used camp from last season the wranglers brought in hay. Mack helped me find a clearing in the doghair trees near camp to highline my two horses to keep them safe and comfortable while their stock was loose. We spent time rehabbing the camp and learning about Leave-No-Trace as the previous occupants had left a lot of examples of what not to do. Mack led us on two day-rides where we practiced leading a string through water and on steep trails. I was incredibly nervous about managing my two equines in the midst of such a large group of stock. Would there be enough grass? Would my mare panic when she heard the thundering hooves and bells of mules galloping by? Could my mare handle riding in such a big group? The Long's not only gave me a safe place to gain confidence in my horses but also in myself. I made sure that my stock didn't go hungry and created a spot where my equines could relax away from the group, both with the help of Mack and Connie. When it came time to hit the trail I chose to be at the end line where I felt most confident.

I'm going to be honest, in 2018 and early 2019 I would nearly barf before I took my horses on a pack trip. There was so much that I just didn't know how to manage. There is still an awful lot I don't know how to manage but after the camp it started to get better. I had gained enough confidence that I spent another four weeks in the wilderness with my stock last season, including being a packer for BCHMT's youth camp which I have to say was incredibly fun.

After the winter season off I worried that I would forget and take steps back in the confidence I had gained during 2019. However, I didn't have time to worry. Last minute the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation needed a packer and asked if I could help. I didn't even get queasy when I loaded up. I've spent a good chunk of the summer now doing packing projects for them, mostly with help from a few lovely mentors that add in their own stock. Now they aren't just helping me, I get to help them occasionally too.

The big key to my confidence growing over the past year and a half is this; If an opportunity to pack comes my way, I take it. Not in an unsafe or unprepared way, I try to get out there with people that are willing to be good mentors as often as possible. These mentors encourage me to try it myself, to stand up for my stock and ideas, and acknowledge there are many ways to successfully pack. My mentors are there for me to ask questions but they aren't instructing my every move. If they did, I might technically know how to pack but I would flounder on my own. By letting me bring my own stock to camp, Mack and Connie gave me a safe place to become more confident in my stock skills. By having mentors that treat me as an equal while at the same time lending a hand when needed I gained the confidence to pack on many more projects than I ever would have on my own.