

Wa-Tonka, Camp Cowboys

Joe Novara



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Chapter 1

Thoughts kept exploding in Nick's mind like asteroids in a computer game, making it hard for him to fall asleep. *I wonder what the camp looks like? Will I like horseback riding? Maybe riding will be the one thing I'm good at. I never had a job before. Now I'll be a junior counselor doing dishes three times a day. But we're supposed to have plenty of free time between meals to swim and fish and play ball.*

At least I already know one of the JCs, Rob – sort of. Not many seniors pay attention to freshmen. Will I look weird wearing the garage-sale riding boots Mom picked up for me? My size 9 foot in a size 13 boot? I had to cut two inches off the tops so I could bend my knees. But there won't be any girls around an all-boys camp anyway, so who cares? I've never been away from home before. I wonder if I'll get homesick?

An arm flopped across Nick's face. He shoved it away and rolled to his left. Another brother began enthusiastically sucking his thumb right next to Nick's ear to a full accompaniment of swallows, gurgles and grunts.

Naw, I'm not going to get homesick for this, he thought.

"Knock it off, Pauly!" he hissed, half-pushing, half-punching the annoying lump that suddenly disappeared from the edge of the bed. In the moment before the falling body thumped, Nick predicted the next two minutes: a moment for Pauly's surprised awakening; a righteous whine; the "I'm telling" threat; indignant footsteps to the parents' bedroom; then dad yelling, Pauly whimpering, and back in bed.

The parental blast came right on cue.

“Nicky! Cool it!” his Dad hollered.

Nicky – why don’t you call me Nick, like everyone else? he shouted in his head. You expect me to act like a grown up. Why don’t you call me a grown up name? Nick. My name is Nick. You’re always telling me, “Look after the kids while we go out for a while. You’re in charge.” I don’t want to be in charge. That’s your job. What if I do something wrong? What if something bad happens?

“Ma says to quit hasslin’ me too,” Pauly mewed as he crawled back into bed.

“Don’t worry,” Nick said. “Starting tomorrow, I won’t be bothering you for ten whole weeks. I can’t wait to get out of here.” He savored the thought of escaping to north country. Up north. It sounded so good he could almost taste it. Up north. Away from Detroit, away from this cramped house, this crowded bed.

Pauly snuffled loudly until Nick relented and laid his arm over the six year old’s shoulder – gently. With that, the crying stopped and Nick resorted to an old trick that never failed to put his younger brothers and sisters to sleep: he took deep, regular breaths, as though he himself were sleeping. Soon he was sleeping as well.

Chapter 2

Nick spent a week in the back seat of a van slowly inching its way toward Gaylord. Wedged in the jumble of suitcases and trunks, he felt marooned in a balcony watching a class reunion of the returning camp counselors.

Rob, a wide receiver on his high school football team, sat directly in front of him. Nick couldn't help admiring the arm draped along the back of the seat. The muscles stood out, hard and heavy as a marble statue's. His nutcracker jaw was shadowed by a recently shaved blue-black beard and his voice penetrated like the bass keys on a piano.

Just as Nick gave up the dream of ever looking and sounding like the model in front of him, Rob giggled. A high pitched screech like a rusty tricycle.

Well, we can't all be perfect, Nick thought with a silent sigh of relief. But he still wished his skinny arms would look something like Rob's by the time he was a senior.

"So then they called my play in the huddle, a post pattern, on third and two," Rob bragged to his captive audience.

And another thing I wish, Nick brooded while he pounded against a duffel bag to make a better pillow, *I wish I could be good at some sport. I barely played Little League for one season when I was nine. Hockey costs way too much, and soccer – my dad was always working, and we only have one car, so how could I get to soccer? And anyway, I guess I'm not much of a jock.*

"Just two more miles," Jerry, the head counselor, announced as they climbed a steep hill. The circle of pink skin on his balding head peeked over the headrest every time they hit a bump in the road.

“Turtle,” as the JCs called him, didn’t seem to mind the reference to his padded gut and short neck.

The van chugged and lurched, slowed to a crawl, then died.

“We just got it overhauled,” Turtle explained as the car coasted to a stop on the shoulder. “Sounded like it wasn’t getting gas. Maybe it’s the fuel filter...”

Nick crawled over bags and hopped out the back to stretch his cramped legs and look around. Pine trees. Steep, sandy hills. Something felt good. What was it?

The air. The air was different. It smelled cool. Piney. Not like crowded city air. It smelled open, like he would have room to run and ride and swim.

“Who wants to hoof it to camp and tell Mack to send out the pick-up truck?” Jerry asked. Nick and Rob volunteered, starting off at a slow jog to release the day’s pent-up energy.

Chapter 3

Twenty minutes later they crested a hill to find the camp spreading off to the left like a landscape for a model train. A massive, sandy hill held center place. Northern pines and chocolate colored log cabins seemed glued in a random pattern along the top and sides of the giant mound. White stones arranged in eight foot letters spelled CAMP WA–TONKA on the face of the hill.

Nick hurried over the flat land of ball diamonds and volleyball courts and slowly trudged up the steep incline to the mess hall and flag tower on the summit. He was sure that the climb would be repeated, over and over, all summer long, criss crossing like a worker ant from beach, to stable, to bunk house.

It was almost dark by the time Nick lugged his suitcase and duffel bag to the JC cabin on the far edge of the hill. The walls and ceiling reflected warm, amber colors in the light of his flashlight. Names and dates – carved with pen knives, drawn with markers, scrawled with pencil – covered the flat boards of the slanting roof. Six steel frame bunk beds stood three to a side, heads to the opposite walls. All the beds sagged in the middle like hammocks. But he didn't mind, as long as he could sleep alone in his own private bed. All the beds were made-up except one: top bunk, far right corner. Obviously his.

He propped his flashlight on the small shelf next to the pillow and rummaged in his duffel bag for sheets and blankets. It was much cooler up north than it had been in Detroit.

Soon after Nick snuggled deep in his covers, the rest of the JC's stomped in. Cozy and excited, Nick had ringside seats as the older counselors told one camp story after another.

Rob was recognizable by his booming voice and distinctive laugh,

“You guys,” he began, “remember the time Otis shoved those horses into the trailer?”

“Who’s Otis?” Nick asked.

“The cook,” Rob replied, annoyed that his story had been interrupted. “Anyways, these two guys – I guess they used to be campers way back when – showed up with their own horses to ride around the place for old time’s sake. But when they were done, the horses didn’t want get back in the trailer. So there they were in the parking lot, next to the mess hall, making a heck of a racket right when Otis was trying to take his afternoon nap.”

“Where does he sleep?” Nick inquired.

“Shut up and listen,” Rob snapped. “You’re worse than my little brother – always asking.”

“He stretches out on a bench like Snoopy on his dog house,” a voice in the dark answered.

Another voice that Nick didn’t recognize joined in, “And he wears this white apron that barely covers his humungous gut. And when he lays in front of the window he looks like a snow-covered mountain in National Geographic.”

“And then when he starts snoring,” another unidentified voice laughed, “it’s like a volcano getting ready to blow.”

“Hey, who’s telling this story?” Rob demanded. “So, Otis is in the middle of his nap, when all the racket starts down below. Bang! The screen door slams. We all look up. Everything stops for a second. Otis sees what’s going on. He goes, ‘Aargh!’ and barrels down the hill, yanks one of the poles from the hitching post. Then he lines up behind the horses, grabs the pole in the middle...”

“Was he pointing at them, or sideways?” Nick asked.

“Sideways – shut up, would you? – like one of those guys on a tight rope. So where was I? Oh yeah. So he charges. Man, he caught both those horses right under their butts with this pole, and then lifted them up – no lie – and shoved them into the trailer. They never knew what hit ‘em. And old Otis, he just wiped his hands on his apron and went back up to finish his nap.”

“That’s not how you’re supposed to get horses in a trailer, is it?” Nick asked.

“Naw,” someone answered, “you just lightly touch a rope across the back of their legs. You might have to criss-cross two ropes if they move their butts to one side. But it works a whole lot easier than playing Otis the weight lifter.”

Easy banter circled the cabin, soothing, comforting. Nick thought, *I’m going to like it here, surrounded by all these big brothers. I’ll get to play little brother for a change. Someone else can be in charge.*

Chapter 4

The next morning, all twelve of the junior counselors sat at one table for breakfast – the kitchen staff. Two other tables were filled with college-age senior counselors. Rob elbowed the fellow next to him and winked. “Hey, Nick,” he asked, “did you sleep good on your first night here?” heek, heek, heek.

“Yeah, fine,” he answered, puzzled.

“Good, because that’s the last good night’s sleep you’re going to have for a while.”

“C’mon, Rob, what’s the deal?” Nick implored.

“You think you can just cruise into camp without paying your dues? Some night, we’re going to get you.” He looked around the table for confirmation. “Tonight’s the night, right guys?”

Voices muttered back, “Could be,” “Who knows?” “Or tomorrow,” and “Maybe next week.”

“Do what you’re gonna do,” Nick’s voice cracked. “You don’t scare me.”

Turtle banged a cup to get everyone’s attention, then tugged on the lanyard and whistle around his stubby neck. “Listen up, guys. I’ve got a long list here and we’ve got a lot to do this week before the campers get here. But before we get started, let’s welcome our newest JC, Nick Finazzo.”

As Nick stood up, Rob whispered, “Tonight’s the night.”

* * *

Rob and Nick drew fence patrol as their first work-week assignment. It was their job to check the electric wire fence that circled the camp, to repair broken wire and replace rotted posts. As Nick struggled with the post-hole digger and small tools, he couldn't help being impressed by Rob striding ahead of him, a cedar log balanced on each shoulder. Muscles danced along his back and arms.

"This is an important job," Rob said without turning his head. "We have to make sure that the horses can't wander off the property if they get out at night."

"Aren't they locked in the corral or their stalls, or whatever?" Nick asked.

"Yeah. But they can always find a way to get loose at night," Rob said.

When they found their first rotted fence post, he pitched the logs forward and made a comfortable spot for himself next to a fallen tree so he could supervise Nick's digging and explain the mysteries of camp Wa-Tonka.

"The horses are coming this afternoon. They belong to old man Jaremba who rents them to us for the summer. We have to ride them every night during work-week to make sure they're gentle before the campers get here."

"Me too?" Nick asked eagerly.

"Yeah, anybody who wants to can ride."

"Is it dangerous?" Nick's voice cracked. He coughed and started again. Deeper. "I mean, I never rode a horse before. Could I get hurt? Since they're full of beans and all."

“What’s the matter, you scared?”

“Nope,” he said, with more assurance than he felt.

Chapter 5

After lunch, while Rob and Nick chalked the foul lines of the baseball field, a stake truck drove into camp. The heads of four horses swayed over the sides of what looked like a fence. Nick caught glimpses of tan, brown, and pinto between the slats.

“Looks like he brought the best of the bunch in the first load,” Rob remarked.

The first horse down the ramp was a buckskin with black mane, tail, and stockings. She resembled a greyhound with her slender legs, curled-under hind quarters, and delicate, tapered muzzle.

“He looks fast,” Nick said.

“That’s Tara,” Rob said, “and she’s a mare.”

“How do you tell?” Nick asked.

“All these horses are either mares or geldings. The geldings are males that have been castrated. If they were left to be stallions, they would be too wild and dangerous around kids.”

“Yeah, but,” Nick was still confused, “how do you tell?”

“You know what male dogs look like, right? Well horses are the same, only bigger. A lot bigger. Wait till you see a gelding take a leak. It looks like half a fire hose fell out of his belly.”

“Really?” Nick tried to imagine. Meanwhile, Tara galloped for a short stretch. “She’s fast.”

“Nah, she’s okay but she’s not as fast as Jamal or Prince. What she really is, is easy to ride. She has the sweetest trot. Single-foot it’s called. It means you don’t bounce at all when she trots. I like

that. It's easier on the buns and you don't have to learn to ride Western. Tara's my favorite."

Next, a big, black-and-white gelding pounded down the ramp like a giant football player. "That's Jamal," Rob explained. "He's the fastest and strongest horse in the whole bunch. Period."

The next arrival was a small bay mare, almost a pony, that tugged at her halter and tattooed her tiny black hooves across the floor of the truck bed.

"Cutter is fast, but real nervous. She's always fussing with the bit and tossing her head. Not my favorite," Rob said.

The last horse was a magnificent white and reddish-brown pinto. Almost as big as Jamal but not as muscular. He pranced – ears forward, head high. He scanned right, then left, nostrils flared, scoping out his new surroundings. The gelding nickered loudly, bowed his head almost to the ground, and galloped out of a sharp right turn to join the others.

Nick was stunned. It was love at first sight. "What's his name?" he asked.

"Prince. He's the next fastest after Jamal."

"That's going to be my horse this summer and I'm going to learn to ride him like he deserves," Nick vowed.

Chapter 6

Before supper, Nick walked down to the empty stable. There were six stalls on one side, six on the other, backing on a center aisle, a large room at the far end. He ran his hand along the sapling divider to the feed trough. The wood was rough sawn, chewed into a crescent where the horse's head would go.

The tack-room door screeched on rusty hinges. While his eyes adjusted to the dark interior, Nick sorted out familiar closet-smells: leather and wool, but much stronger. And new smells: sweaty blankets, burlap, dust and oats.

He noticed twelve saddles hanging in two rows from the wall. A bridle dangled from each pommel. A cinch strap looped the horn encircling a red, white and black striped blanket. He read the name tacked above each saddle: Jamal, Tara, Rhody, Prince, Cutter, Apache, Beauty, Scout, Shana, Jes, Rosie, and Kip.

I'm looking forward to riding one of you tonight, he thought. I wish I could ride Prince. But I'll ride anything I can.

After supper, Mack, the head wrangler announced, "We got our horses today – all fat and frisky after a long winter. I need volunteers to gentle them down before the campers get here."

Nick was the first one out of the mess hall. He ran to the junior counselors' cabin, slid into his oversized riding boots, and clumped down the back side of the hill to the stable where ten other counselors were busy saddling the string.

Mack emerged from the tack room buckling his riding helmet. "Get yourself a helmet," Mack said. "You'll ride Rhody tonight. Rob, help him with the stirrups."

Nick stepped out of the tack-room a few minutes later, helmet in place. Rob was holding the reins to a mostly white mare with a few brown patches. She looked old and tired. Nick wasn't sure what to do next. He held the back of his hand under her muzzle. *It's what he did with strange dogs*, Nick realized. The mare snuffled. Then he ran his hand along her cheek, patting.

A loud whinny pierced the air. Then a bang. Nick flinched as a stall divider speared the air from the direction of Jamal's stall.

Mack swung his lean cowboy frame onto his horse. "Well, guys," he called, "looks like we need to work the vinegar out of these plugs before they hurt someone. For the first couple of nights we'll stick to the corral – walking and trotting."

Nick scrambled into the saddle. Rob adjusted the stirrups. Rhody automatically fell in line plodding along with the rest of the horses. Nick watched the other riders, held the reins in his left hand, tried to keep his balance, not grab the saddle horn.

He was riding. Nick from Detroit was on a horse, a big horse, not like the pony he rode at a fair when he was four.

Chapter 7

Later that night, Nick left the noisy mess hall and headed back to the junior counselors' cabin. Once past the glow of the kitchen lights, he remembered how dark it was up north. No street lights and passing cars. No stars or moon. He felt as though he had stepped into a closet and closed the door. Why hadn't he brought his flashlight?

He walked slowly, feeling for steps with his feet, reaching out with his hands. He paused at a strange sound. Chewing. Then a snort. Then the thump-thump-thump of slow moving horses' hooves. From the sound of it, the camp horses had gotten out and were grazing all around where the cabin should be. He didn't want to stumble into a horse and get kicked or trampled. What if they all stampeded in his direction?

His eyes finally adjusted to the dark and he distinguished a white, four-legged shape standing between himself and the cabin. "Rhody?" he called softly not wanting to startle the animal. "Is that you, girl? How're you doing?" His voice quavered, partly from the chill night air. The horse lazily ambled over to the long sweet grass growing next to the cabin. He sprinted to the front door stoop. Safe on the tiny cement island, he suddenly felt foolish. They weren't going to hurt him after all.

The first one in the cabin, Nick found it hard to fall asleep with horses snuffling and shuffling outside his window. He missed the background noise of city traffic, sirens, and distant music in the night.

* * *

After his first ride on Rhody, the rest of the work-week flew by in anticipation of the evening ride. In addition to the usual job of setting the tables, serving the meals and washing the dishes three times a day, Nick helped with other camp preparations. He swept out cabins and aired mattresses, planted pine saplings on the slope behind the mess hall, strung floating ropes in the lake, and painted the baseball backstop.

But every evening, no matter how tired, he was the first one down to the stables. He wanted to learn to bridle and saddle. He wanted to become familiar with each horse. But mostly, he wanted to ride.

On Wednesday, after an hour in the corral, Mack took a long look at Nick and said, "I think we're ready for a short run."

At the top of the hill above the stables, someone at the head of the line yelled, "YEE-HA!!"

Rhody chugged into a slow trot. Nick bounced and jolted. As the mare picked up speed, Nick bounced even harder. Something changed. He was in a rocking chair, a big hand pushing him deep in the saddle. Another change. He was standing in the stirrups, like a jockey, floating, no longer pounding the leather. The white stones spelling CAMP WA-TONKA flew by like road signs. The JC cabin blurred on the right. He was a home run ball blasting across the baseball diamond, flying deep into center field and finally rolling to a stop at the edge of the woods.

The horses stomped and blew, danced and bobbed their heads. Nick's butt had been spanked, the insides of his knees rubbed raw. It didn't matter. He liked this place and he liked riding. In the next ten weeks he was going to spend every spare second he could find around these horses.

Chapter 8

After supper on Friday, Mack asked Nick to saddle Beauty, a huge, round, sofa-on-legs kind of horse. She gave Nick trouble with the bridle. Whenever he got the bit near her teeth, she would lean her couch of a body against him.

Watching Nick struggle for a while, Mack finally offered some tips. “Get the bridle and bit in your right hand, Nick. Then reach under and around the horse’s head. That leaves your left hand free to tickle her tongue and guide the bit into her mouth. Simple.”

Sure, Nick thought, *you’re not the one standing next to the leaning tower of Piza*. But he tried it anyway. Beauty easily lifted him off the ground. Hanging on with one hand, Nick used his free hand to shove a finger into the corner of the mare’s mouth. The bit popped in and he pulled the bridle over her ears. *It was simple*, Nick thought. *If you did it right*.

Later as they walked the horses through a cool-down, Mack rode alongside Nick and said, “You’ve come a long way this week. Maybe you’re ready for a horse like Prince tomorrow.” Nick clenched his fist and mouthed a silent YES!

* * *

The next evening, Nick bridled Prince and walked him out to join Mack on Jamal. “Prince is a lot of horse,” Mack said. “You gotta make sure he knows you’re the boss. So, talk to him in a low, firm voice. Get your reins ready, stirrup turned. You want to move smoothly. No fumbling around. Then swing up into the saddle

and sit down hard. Act like you're in charge."

They started out at a fast trot that had Nick bouncing badly. He knew he looked awkward and felt worse, but he didn't care. He was riding Prince. When they broke into a slow canter, Nick could feel much more power waiting to get out.

Mack stopped at the back line of the soccer field and said, "Let's see if Jamal's still the fastest." Then he lurched forward, launching Jamal into a quick lead. Prince exploded into a flat-out gallop in three strides. Nick had never felt that kind of power.

Prince gathered himself and stretched out, the way a swimmer uncoils at the start of a race, over and over again. They couldn't pass Jamal. But for a while, just before they crossed the far end of the field, Jamal and Prince ran side by side.

"You're doing real good," Mack shouted. "You've got enough control to ride behind the campers and make sure there aren't any problems." The head wrangler nodded to himself. "Yeah. I feel comfortable with you riding shotgun on trail rides."

Nick answered with a broad smile – finally, a sport he could be good at. This would be a summer to remember.

Sneak Peek

Take a glimpse of Nick Finazzo's ongoing adventures in the next book of the My First Horse series!

“Hey, look,” Rob yelled, as he bent over a sign in a barber shop window. “There’s going to be a horse show at the Fairgrounds in Gaylord. Speed ‘n Action events,” he read. “Key Hole, Down-and-Back, Flag Race, Pick-up Race. Sounds great. What do you think, Mack? Why don’t you enter Jamal?”

“Forget it,” Mack replied. “That’s out of our league. Those guys start with high class stock. And you can bet they don’t let five different kids ride their mounts five hours a day all summer long. Our horses may be fun to ride,” he said with a smirk, “but let’s face it, they’re just camp horses.”

Nick was shocked. How could he say that? “Prince is as fast as any horse,” he blurted out.

Mack aimed his black, gun-barrel eyes at him. He didn’t like to be contradicted. “Maybe you should learn to ride before you decide how good Prince is.”

Nick looked out of the corner of his eyes as he thought to himself, *that’s exactly what I intend to do, mister. I’m going to learn to ride this summer if for no other reason than to prove you wrong.*

About The Author

Joe Novara, a retired corporate trainer and writing instructor, has published his My First Horse young adult series through Story Shares. In addition, his adult novel, Come Saturday...Come Sunday, is available through Amazon. You can learn more at joenovara.wordpress.com.