



Mel Blount pilots NRR Coles Lightning at the 2022 NCHA Futurity in Fort Worth.

## From the Gridiron to the Show Pen

NFL Hall of Famer Mel Blount is as devoted to the sport of cutting as he was to professional football.

WORDS BY MARIANNE DOUGHERTY  
PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEL BLOUNT EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

As a cornerback for the Pittsburgh Steelers from 1970 to 1983, Mel Blount had it all: size, speed, mental toughness and a work ethic that was honed as a child growing up on a farm in Vidalia, Georgia. Not surprisingly, it is those same attributes that make him a fierce competitor in the riding arena. “My love of animals started on that farm,” said Blount, the youngest of 11 children. While his father had an old pickup truck, the primary mode of transportation was wagons and sleds drawn by mules or plow horses, which he learned to ride

back. A natural athlete who excelled in football, baseball, basketball and track, Blount attended Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on a football scholarship and met Matt Matthews in his senior year.

The cowboy hat that’s become Blount’s trademark? That’s an homage to Matthews, who introduced him to the world of performance horses. “I saw him walking around campus in a big cowboy hat, a starched shirt and jeans and thought, I’ve got to meet that guy,” said Blount. “We got talking, and when he told me that he worked on a ranch outside of town, I knew I had to go out there. I saw this trainer named Freddy Evans working a cutting horse and fell in love with it.”

When Blount got drafted by the Steelers in 1970, he used his \$13,000 signing bonus to buy three quarter horses, which he kept at the family farm in Georgia. “One of them was a washed-up cutting horse, but I knew I could learn from him,” said Blount, who began riding in the off-season.



PHOTO BY RAY CARRINGTON PHOTOGRAPHY

maybe 20 kids would show up at the farm to get my autograph or ask me to toss the football to them,” Blount said. “It was like God spoke to me, and what he said was that there was more I could do for these kids than just sign autographs.” So, he put up the money to open the first Mel Blount Youth Home on his family’s farm in Vidalia, Georgia. Boys live at the home, which offers a structured life that includes working on the farm and church on Sunday. “It’s a Christian-based program that helps these kids thrive physically, mentally, spiritually and morally,” said Blount, “and it’s been more rewarding for my soul than anything else I’ve ever done.”

Blount spends most of his time at the 300-plus acre property he bought in Taylorsville, a small town in Washington County, south of Pittsburgh, where he opened a second Mel Blount Youth Home on the grounds in 1989. Now, more than 30 years after he made the decision to do more with his fame than just sign autographs, he remains steadfast in his belief that his work with underprivileged youth is part of God’s plan.

In Taylorsville, that work includes a Christmas Toy Drive, a Back-to-School Drive, a Youth Summit, and Steelers Rookie Day when rookies from each draft class come to the ranch for a day of community service. The equestrian program has also been expanded so a greater number of kids can spend a day at

ABOVE:

Mel Blount has served as a father figure to the youth who visit Blount 47 Ranch.

the ranch where they learn how to ride and how to care for the horses.

Meanwhile, at 76, Blount shows no signs of slowing down. He’s still riding but not on the circuit right now. Two years ago, he showed his horse NRR Coles Lightning (NRR Cat King Cole x Dualeys Miss Charles x Its Just About Me) at the NCHA Futurity in Fort Worth. He’s also had a lot of success working with his trainer, Tracy Barton. “I’ve probably made about \$150,000,” he said, “which is pretty good considering how little I show.”

Blount feels like he has a responsibility to present himself as a legitimate competitor when he’s in the ring and recalls the time former Steeler and NFL Hall of Famer “Mean” Joe Greene came to Fort Worth to watch him compete in the NCHA Futurity in the early ‘90s. “I made the finals on a horse out there that year,” said Blount, whose old friend got caught up in the excitement. “He said that it felt just like it did when we won the Super Bowl.” Now that’s saying something. ★



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:  
Blount's son Akil, here at the 2022 NCHA Futurity finals in Fort Worth, Texas.

Blount (plaid shirt) and his sons (left to right) Khalid, Akil, and Jibri, with grandson Axtyn.

Blount and his wife TiAnda.

PHOTO BY SETH PETIT



"I bought another cutting horse from a guy in Tennessee named Bud Webb, who told me about a show in Knoxville. He said that all I had to do was go in there and push a cow out of the herd, just put my hand down and give her as much slack as I could." One of the judges that day was a well-known horse breeder named Norman Bruce. "He took me under his wing and taught me how to ride better and to know what good horses look like. Meeting him was one of the best things that ever happened to me."

Then at a cutting horse clinic offered by Helen Grove of the King Ranch family in Staunton, Virginia, Blount met renowned cutting horse trainer Buster Welch, one of the founders of the NCHA, who put him on a mare named Gracie and told him to "go in there and work a cow." Buster Welch passed at age 94 in 2022, but Blount has never forgotten his reaction that afternoon. "Keep in mind that I'm a Black guy and that there aren't many Black guys in this sport, so when I heard (Buster) tell someone, 'I don't know where this guy comes from, but he knows how to sit a horse,' it meant a lot to me. After that, if I saw him at a show, he always took the time to come over and talk to me."

Blount is a legend in Pittsburgh where he was part of the dynasty that propelled the Steelers to four Super Bowl wins in the 1970s. The team's formidable defensive line was nicknamed the Steel Curtain and for good reason, but in 1978 the NFL Competition Committee effectively changed the way the game was played by prohibiting defensive backs from grabbing receivers within five yards of the line of scrimmage. The controversial decision became known as Mel Blount's Rule because it seemed designed to slow the Steelers down. The irony is that Blount and his teammates were so good that the rule change did little or nothing to stop the Steelers from going on to win back-to-back titles in 1979 and 1980.

While Blount will go down in history as one of the best cornerbacks in NFL history, he hopes that he will be remembered for "the good I've done for others." A devoutly religious man, he made a decision in 1983 to open a home for at-risk youth on the farm in Georgia where he was raised. The idea was to offer an alternative to a juvenile detention facility where hard work, discipline and spending time with animals like he did could turn young lives around.

"We had been winning all these Super Bowls, and when I came home to visit, word got out and ten,



ABOVE FROM TOP:  
"Mean" Joe Greene and Franco Harris with Mel Blount (No. 47).  
Mel Blount in his trademark cowboy hat with, from left, NCHA Hall of Famers Buster Welch, Tom Lyons, Keith Barnett and Bill Riddle (top right).