WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF THE LONGEARS! The ALBERTA DONKEY & MULE CLUB is a family orientated group dedicated to the positive promotion and protection of all mules and donkeys. We are involved in organizing shows, trail rides, clinics and events in order to promote the use, appreciation and management of these often miss-understood equines! These booklets are provided to the public to help bring awareness and education in the training and treatment of OUR favorite Equine…the ones with the long ears…[And good memories!!]

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DONKEY AND MULE

THE DONKEY

To most people the donkey is an animal, which has long ears and brays. But, you can also recognize him by his frequently grey or brown coat, (although he does come in other more “sporty” colors) a light nose & belly, a black cross on his back and shoulders, a short thin upright mane and a tail which is tufted at the end resembling the tail of the cow more than the horse. The hooves of the donkey, which he doesn’t like to get wet or muddy, are small and box shaped, and much more elastic than those of his cousin, the horse.

The donkey probably has more names than any other species in the equine family. His Latin name is Equus Asinus or Ass – with the male of the species being a Jack (hence the term Jack Ass). His lady friend is a Jennet or Jenny. Donkey was originally an English name for the Ass taken from “dun-key”. Meaning a small dun or grey colored animal. Those of us in the Southwest use the Spanish word, Burro, for the ass.

Besides having a lot of names, the donkey comes in about as many different sizes, shapes, breeds, and colors as the horse. Visit one of the many donkey and mule shows across the country and you will see four basic size groups: Miniature – up to 36” tall at the withers; standard – 36 to 48” tall; and large standard – 48” to 56”. The mammoth – or Jack Stock is over 56” or 14 hands tall. Within those sizes you will see many colors, gray, browns, blacks, reds, and even spots. Also you will see many body types from deerlike and graceful to strong and sturdy, something for every job or personal preference.

As Betsy Hutchin’s states in The Donkey’s & Mule as a Backyard Hobby, “The most enjoyable thing about Donkeys as members of the equine world is the fact that they are exceptionally loving, almost in the same manner as a dog. They love to be touched and no amount of playing with, or loving will spoil them for work. They are highly intelligent. For some reasons, rumors to the contrary have always existed, but all one has to do is once have a horse and then a donkey and any belief in the stupidity of the ass is banished. They also have a definite sense of humor, sometimes mischief, and a great love of human company. All in all, whether you ride or drive your donkey, or just love him, he is an unexcelled pet in the large animal category.”

THE MULE

To produce the hybrid equine called a mule, mate a male donkey (jack) and a female horse (mare). The opposite cross, using a male horse (Stallion) and a female donkey (jennet) is called a hinny. Even though the mule and hinny hybrids have the same sexual characteristics and drive as their parents, they are sterile due to an uneven number of chromosomes – 63. The Mule gets some of its characteristics from the sire, which tends to come out in the extremities. Thus, a mule….has a short thick head (if the jack has a short thick head), long ears, a short mane, thin legs, narrow hooves, a narrower body than a horse, and no hindlimb chestnuts, like an ass; in size, shape of neck and croup, speed, strength and type of tail, it is like a horse. A hinny is smaller and more horse-like than a mule, with shorter ears, a larger head and broader hooves; but has the ass’s calmer disposition. (Note: while these things are generally true, the truest thing is that animals vary so much from individual to individual that sweeping generalizations are not to be taken too seriously)

Contrary to popular belief, a mule is neither vicious nor stubborn, but will respond as he is treated. The mule which is well cared for and not abused makes an excellent riding or working animal.
Mules come in all sizes, from the small miniature to the giant draft mules. The smallest mules come from miniature jacks and miniature horse mares. The draft mules come from Mammoth jacks and large draft mares. Saddle mules are being bred from Quarter horse mares, thoroughbreds, and other pleasure riding type mares and standard & large standard sized jacks. Hinnys come in about the same sizes, but as E.C. Porter states in A Breeder’s Notebook, It is simply the very low conception rate of the jennet (even to a Jack), which makes the breeding of hinnys much less sure and not at all profitable, compared to the breeding of mules.”

Mules today are used for packing, pleasure riding, “coon” hunting and jumping, driving, and even racing. Because of their strength and sure-footedness, mules are being used more and more by cross-country and endurance riders as good, dependable mounts. As a matter of fact mules today are being used in many areas that were thought of as the exclusive province of horses such as fox hunting, dressage, combined driving, cow work and all sorts of recreational uses.

ORIGIN OF MODERN AMERICAN BREEDS OF ASSES

The donkey is one of four members of the equine family, whose most common member is the horse. The following species make up the equine family:
1. Equus caballus – horse
2. Equus asinus – ass (donkey)
3. Equus zebra
4. Equus hemionus – onager, kiang, kulan, khur

The mule, since it is a hybrid, is not considered a species.

Domestic donkeys descend solely from the wild asses of Africa: the Nubian wild ass, now extinct, or the Somali wild ass. Donkeys were domesticated long before the horse.

A number of Asiatic wild asses also evolved, all of which look quite different and have different chromosome counts. Three are endangered in number and none are domesticated. These include the onager, kiang, kulan, and khur. The onager appears more horse-like, and is the wild ass referred to in the Bible.

The breeds of donkeys in North America are now so mixed that they are classified only as to size. Various countries of origin have been identified, however.

Miniature donkeys were bred from animals imported from Sicily, Sardinia, other Mediterranean locations, and Ethiopia.

Standard donkeys arrived with Columbus (six animals) but mostly with the Spanish Conquistadores.

Mammoth donkeys were also imported from Spain, particularly Catalonia and Andalusia, as well as from Malta and Majorca. Another interesting import, although in small numbers, was the rare French Poitou, a large, coarse donkey with extremely long, wavy hair, used mostly for mule breeding but also introduced into Mammoth donkey bloodlines.

Miniature and Mammoth donkeys with proven bloodlines from specific foundation stock can be registered with the Canadian Donkey and Mule Association and the American Donkey and Mule Society.

AMERICAN BREEDS OF MULES

The old breed terms of Cotton, sugar, mine mules etc. are not relevant today. The breed names are now the following. Keep in mind that these breeds are not differentiated so much by size as by the type of mare the mule was bred from.

Miniature Mule: Bred from various types of pony mares or miniature horse mares, Fifty inches is usually considered the cut-off point for miniature mules.
**Saddle Mules:** Bred from mares of saddle horse breeding. These vary in size from small to very large but have riding type conformation and looks.

**Pack/Work Mules:** Bred from mares with some draft blood or of heavy work rather than for saddle type conformation.

**Draft Mules:** These are the largest mules and are bred from various breeds of draft mares. Belgian mules are the most common, valued for their bright sorrel color, but mules from, Percheron, Clydesdale, Shire and other draft breeds are popular also. The larger and heavier the better with these mules, but refinement is desired as well.

**WHAT IS A MULE?**

The mule is a hybrid equine produced by mating a horse mare to a donkey jack (stallion). Sounds easy, but most donkey jacks will not cross the species line to breed horse mares! Donkeys intended to be used for mule breeding need special raising and training so that they will breed mares.

Male mules are called horse mules and should be gelded around six to nine months of age.

Female mules are called mare mules or molly mules.

Hinny refers to the opposite cross from the mule. This equine hybrid is the product of mating a donkey mare (jennet) to a horse stallion. The hinny resembles the mule very closely but tends to be more horselike in general appearance.

**WHY OWN A MULE?**

Mules have been bred for some 3,000 years. Mules were used by the Jewish people before the time of King David and by the Ancient Greeks and Romans for harness racing, as draft animals, in farming, and as saddle animals for the nobility and clergy.

The mule combines together many of the good features of both parents such as the intelligence, longevity and sure-footedness of the donkey with the size, and rounded body conformation of the horse. Because mules are a hybrid, they exhibit hybrid vigor and are noted for their stamina and endurance.

Mules are highly intelligent, and like the donkey parent, have an extremely well developed instinct for self-preservation. This instinct makes them less prone to injuries to themselves and their handlers.

Mules are noted as easy keepers and are renowned for their strength and endurance, and ability to withstand heat.

Mules come in a variety of colors and sized ranging from miniature to saddle and draft types. They are a “made to order” animal that is created in just one generation.

Most mules today excel in the recreational field – trail riding, endurance riding, packing, driving, and cutting cattle to packing out big game – a good mule is worth his weight in gold.

**Mules Are More**

By: Jerry Tindell

Have you ever considered why mules are so unique? Think of the donkey and the horse as the bookends for the mule. The breeding of your mule influences how they think and operate, since they take traits from both the horse and the donkey.

Let’s consider the characteristics of the donkey. There are two main breeding lines of donkeys: the small Spanish Jacks, which more often have quicker movement with a slender build, and the Mammoth Jacks which are a heavier boned breed with a slower demeanor. By nature, donkeys are more conservative in all aspects because they slow down and protect themselves in a slower manner.
It can be said that donkeys usually do everything in moderation. They reserve their energy and are more thoughtful and logical, especially when thinking through a problem. It is like the story of the old bull and the young bull that were standing on a hill admiring the cows down in the valley. The young bull said to the old bull “Let’s run down there and mate with one of those fine-looking cows.” But the old bull replied “Let’s walk and we can mate with all of them.” When donkeys find themselves in a tough or unsure situation they slow down and can also shut off their movement; they don’t panic. This behavior is most often viewed as being stubborn, when in reality they are much more in control of their self-preservation. Donkeys are also more timid or afraid, which might not be exhibited through his behavior, but he is still afraid on the inside. In general, the donkey shows less concern on the outside and this helps maintain his overall confidence in response to situations he finds himself in.

Now let’s consider the characteristics of the horse. The saddle or pleasure horses have quicker movement and therefore the draft horse is used differently based on their body types and agility. Horses display more energy and movement than donkeys do, but the horse’s response to difficult situations is revealed in a different way. The horse gain confidence and courage by leaving the perceived threat or danger. The further they distance themselves the braver they become. They develop courage by being afraid and leaving the threat or concern behind. Both horses and donkeys have a high level of self-preservation, but each handles it very differently. For example, a donkey will only go the distance he needs to get away from the threat, which may be only six inches, versus a horse, which may run a quarter of a mile in order to insure more distance between himself and the threat or concern.

As a result of the characteristics of the donkey and the horse, mules possess sure-footedness, better movement, durability, and the ability to operate better under tough circumstances. We must take into consideration the characteristics of the animals we are breeding and the results we are getting. If the mule takes the dominant gene of the Jack you will have more donkey-like characteristics in the mule. If it receives more of the gene from the mare you will have more dominant horse characteristics. If you have a balance of genes from the Jack and the mare you will have a little bit of both qualities in the mule. This is the best of both worlds! With this in mind, we need to be more careful about what we breed. If you breed to a Jack of lesser quality with a bad disposition or poor conformation to a bad dispositioned, high-headed, flighty mare you will get a mule that is wired for sound with the ability of a black-belt martial arts expert when you go to confront him. But if you breed a Jack with good movement, good temperament, and good conformation to a mare with the same characteristics, then you will have a good chance of producing an excellent mule. Keep in mind, its best to consider what the mule will be used for, then breed or purchase one for that use.

If a person gets a mule and expects him to act like a horse, but they don’t factor in the donkey side of him they might not understand why the mule acts the way he does. When all is said and done, donkeys, horses, and mules are all the same in that they walk, trot, lope, stop, and turn around; but how they think, process, and react to situations can be very different. They are similar to people in that we are all different, but we are all human.

Jerry Tindell of Tindell’s Horse and Mule School is a professional horse and mule trainer from California. He has been training and shoeing horses and mules since 1971. His unique training abilities help mule owners understand and apply proven techniques to communicate in a soft, safe, and secure manner with their animals. He can be reached at [www.jerrytindell.com](http://www.jerrytindell.com) or 1 877 820-2033.

The ALBERTA DONKEY AND MULE CLUB has hosted several of Jerry’s Clinics here in Alberta in the last several years. His program of understanding and training is exceptional and is strongly recommended for consideration in mule and donkey training. Please contact Tindell’s Horse and Mule School or the club website for his next clinics.

ARE MULES FOR YOU?

By Jane Lambert

Are you considering becoming a mule owner? Perhaps you should ask yourself the following questions.

How experienced with horses are you?

If you have not ridden or owned horses, you may not have enough background to deal with mules. They are smart, and if you make mistakes with them, they will take advantage of you. You must understand equine psychology and be able to read horse or mule body language – something that takes time and experience. If you allow your mule to outsmart you, he will.
How patient are you?
It takes patience to own mules. You have to be able to outthink them, not overpower them. If you start trying to force a mule to do something, instead of convincing them that he wants to do it your way, you will have problems. Working with mules involves a lot of head games.

So….do you enjoy head games?
If you like to match wits, you will enjoy mules. They are highly intelligent animals who are always thinking. Mules don’t program like a horse, so in your training you need to mentally challenge your mule, keep him interested, quit before you bore him, and give him praise when he responds well. If your mule gets mad, or is in a bad mood, you might as well forget the day’s training session.

Realize, when you have a well – trained mule, that he is humoring you by responding correctly to your cues. Make him mad and watch him ignore you.

What kind of facilities do you have?
I’ve decided mules need electric fence. If you have barbed wire, they eventually cut themselves. If you use smooth wire, they lean on it and stretch it out. If it’s wooden, they eat it. For their own protection and for the good of your fences, consider a hot wire.

Do you have a decent rolling area- a good “dust bowl”?
If not, your mules will make one, even in your irrigated pasture. Simply expect it.

Do you have other animals?
Mules are very social and do not like to be by themselves. In fact, some people feel you can make a mule bond to you by making yourself the only animal your mule sees. You should know that if you have horses, especially mares, your mule will become herd-bound. This is good if you are in the mountains, as you can just turn your mule loose, and he won’t leave his horse friends. This is bad when you need to take your mule out by himself. It bothers him a lot to be tied alone, ridden alone, and hauled alone, and takes time for him to know that he will get to come home and be with his buddies again.

Also, mules trample small animals. Do not put mules in with sheep, goats, hogs, colts or calves. Watch out for our dogs and cats, and I would not advise letting small children be unattended near strange mules.

What type of riding do you do?
Select a mule to meet your needs. Because mules can come from any breed of mare and from different sizes and types of jacks, try to select you mule with the mental and physical aptitudes you need. Keep in mind that the jack will contribute to size, disposition, and soundness, but the majority of the mental attitudes and athletic ability will come from the mother. Know what you expect from you mule before you buy him, and select him to meet your expectations.

Do you “have mare, need jack”?
If you have a mare with the attributes you want in your mule, then find her a mate. My main advice in selecting a jack is to look at this offspring from similar mares. Jack beauty lies in the quality of his get. If you can’t see his get, get another jack.

Mules can be your dream come true or your worst nightmare. I love mine and thoroughly enjoy their unique personalities, surefootedness, and the mental challenge they present. But in deciding if mules are for you, realize that a mule is not “like a horse.” He is much more than a horse and is not for everyone.
A VETERINARIAN SUGGESTS YOU RECONSIDER THE MULE

By Robert M. Miller, D.V.M.

Soundness, a trail-wise disposition, and sure-footedness in hazardous terrain make the mule an attractive mount for country horsemen.

The place is Bishop, California. Memorial Day weekend 1977. Mule Days. The three-day celebration, exclusively for mules, is in full swing. Warm sunshine and clear blue skies bless this town on the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Immediately to the west loom snow-topped peaks; the grandstand is packed with mule fanciers, curious horsemen, and bemused tourists. All through the day, and on through the evening, they watch the varied events.

There are chariot races, a mule parade, packing contest, jumping events, roping competition, driving and pulling contest, trail classes, reining classes, and many other horse show and rodeo events. All limited to mules. We see mules cutting cattle, roping steers, and bucking in the wild mule-packing contest. The mule’s range in size from miniature teams to draft mules with teams representing the western national parks. There’s also a hilarious braying contest – performed by humans; one lively contestant loses his false teeth in his enthusiasm.

And there are races. Mules run sprints ranging form 50 yards to a quarter mile, and races vary in length up to a mile. At the finish line five veterinarians inspect the winners. Although they are not designated race officials, their fascination is professional. They look at racing mules seven, eight, ten year of age; many have been racing since they were two. Some are entered in many events each day.

One mule runs several sprints and a mile race in a single day, in addition to barrel racing, stake racing, and a variety of regular show classes. Their legs are clean and sound, Not a splint or a windpuff can be seen. There isn’t a single big knee, a bucked shin, or an enlarged tendon. None are lame. Why? How do they stay sound?

Seeking answers, the veterinarians – all of whom are equine practitioners exposed daily to the tragedy of lameness in beautiful horses – look at the mules, run their hands down the tough little legs and wonder.

Recently, an older veterinarian mentioned to me that he was thinking of retiring. “What are you doing to do?” I asked. “Oh,” he said, “retire to my ranch and maybe raise mules.”

“Why Mules?” I asked, not mentioned my own interest in those hybrid creatures.

“Because they stay sound.” He explained.

The fact the mules usually stay sound probably explains the interest many veterinarians have in the animals. But there are other qualities that attract horsemen to mules, and one does not have to be a veterinarian to appreciate them. What Qualities? The beauty of the beast? Their noble heads? Not likely. There is little prestige in being mounted on a mule; one has to value the mule, and ignore the impressions of society.

My own interest in mules began several years ago when I asked a fellow equine practitioner why he was raising mules. “Well, after you’ve trail ridden a few good mules, you’ll prefer them to horses.”

I snorted: “Come on now!”

My friend looked hurt. “Okay,” he said. “I’m going to loan you a good mule for a year, and you’ll see what happens.”

A couple of weeks later, he delivered a 27-year-old gelding named Jerry to my house.

Over the years I’ve had a bit of experience with mules. I packed salt on a mule one summer when I was cowboying. She was a perverse gray creature, and constantly led the horses over low spots in the pasture fence and over cattle guards. Later as a veterinarian I treated a couple dozen mules, usually anticipating great difficulty, but was usually pleasantly surprised at how well I got along with them.

Jerry taught me about mules. He took me up steep canyon walls. He taught me to respect his judgment. I learned that if he refused to cross a creek at a given point, it was because he had spotted a shallower place downstream. If he refused to slide down a shale slope to the bottom of a wash, it was because he had observed a game trail that was easier going a few yards ahead. I tested all the myths I had heard about mules on Jerry and learned they were not myths. After a 20-mile trail ride on a summer day, he refused to drink water for four hours – unlike a horse; an overheated mule will usually not founder himself by drinking too much water.

At 27 years of age, Jerry stayed fat on a minimum of good feed. He relished poison oak and chaparral. He never gets excited. His flinty feet never needed shoeing, at least not for the riding I was doing. Most remarkable of all, after a lifetime of matched racing, pulling a stagecoach, herding cattle, arena roping, and countless miles on the trail, he was still absolutely sound. He covered the miles in a smooth little running walk that never faltered.

Finally, I took him on a trail ride; sixty-five riders gathered one Saturday morning. Sixty-two were on horses representing almost every breed. Three of us were mounted on mules. It was hot, and our destination was a
mountain peak, uphill all the way. We started out with most of the horses jigging with excitement and the three mules (a two year old molly, a three year old molly and old Jerry) placidly taking up the rear. Several hours later the three mules were up front, still patiently stepping out, sweating only behind their long ears, which paddled rhythmically in cadence with their feet. Behind us were 62 wrung-out and strung-out horses, lathered and heaving, the sweat pouring off their fetlocks in a steady stream.

That ride did it. My riding was now confined to trail riding, either alone or with a group. I had to have some mules, and I decided to raise my own. I started by breeding my wife’s fine Quarter mare (of racing lineage and schooled for dressage) to a jackass.

My current project has been greeted with some scorn, particularly from some of my clients who own good thoroughbreds, or Arabians, or other well-bred horses. Their contempt can’t be based on past poor performance by mules. After all. The record for high jumping was once set by a U.S. Army mule, and wasn’t the Bicentennial cross-country race won by a mule?

Perhaps it’s just that mules, despite their desirable qualities, suffer from a form of blind discrimination. Mules are, of course, a hybrid creature; the sterile offspring of a mare and a jack- a male donkey. I believe that much of the mule’s fabled intelligence can be accounted for by virtue of his sire’s characteristics.

For example, horses when frightened will usually panic and flee blindly, often injuring themselves in the process. A frightened mule, on the other hand, will usually assess the situation, and avoid injuring himself. The first time a horse entangles himself in barbed wire; he will usually fight the wire and may inflict severe self-injury. By contrast, a mule enmeshed in wire will usually quietly wait for help. Why this difference?

The horse evolved on the open plains. When frightened, his best method of survival was instantaneous flight. The donkey, on the other hand, learned to survive in rocky and rugged terrain. Rash and hurried flight there, when frightened. would have meant death or serious injury; so the wild ass learned to first judge the situation and then react. In each case, nature equipped the species to respond in the best manner to insure survival.

Horses and asses have different chromosome counts, and a mule is a true genetic hybrid, not just a kind of long-eared horse. The equine-only endurance rides that prohibit the entry of mules are therefore biologically justified in their decision. A mule is only half-horse.

The hybridization not only explains the judgment and decision-making ability of the mule, but also accounts for his amazing strength and stamina. Hybrid vigor is a recognized characteristic, and examples abound in both a plant and animal kingdom.

As a horseman, I am attracted to the mule by his endurance, his smoothness of gait, his calmness, his versatility, and his easy-keeping qualities. As a Veterinarian, I am fascinated by the mule’s resistance to disease, his longevity, and his tendency toward soundness.

Most of all, as an amateur animal behavior scientist, I am intrigued by the personality of the beast. He does not respond blindly to training; he makes up his own mind. The mule is said to be unforgiving, and if abused will eventually settle the score with the person who hurt him. It’s a common saying when it comes to training. “Mules will separate the men from the boys.” Crude and quick techniques that often work on horses won’t always work on mules. I like that. If mules force us to use more patient and scientific horsemanship and fewer gimmicks, then I am all for them. Physically and psychologically, what we learn from mules will, I hope, benefit horses.

**What makes a Mule?**

by Marlene Quiring,

Mules are gaining in popularity in the western provinces of Canada. I attribute this directly to the quality of mules being bred, raised and trained in this country. As mules are becoming more visible to the public eye through trail rides, shows and exhibitions, more people are willing to take a second look at these “horses with the long ears.” Some folks who have been secretly desirous of a mule are now stepping forward and actively searching for the right mule for them.
For those of you who are interested in or curious about this vigorous hybrid, let me give you some of the facts, ‘right from the horse’s mouth,’ so to speak!

First of all a mule is the result of breeding a horse mare of any breed to an intact male donkey. The resulting mule can be a Quarter horse mule, a Belgian mule, an Appaloosa mule, a Tennessee Walker mule, a Miniature mule and the list can go on. Whatever breed you particularly like can be used to raise that ‘type’ of mule. Thus, in my way of thinking, mules are non-prejudiced, as they can originate from any horse breed. Likewise the father of the mule, the donkey jack can be of any size of donkey. The Mammoth donkey, the largest, is in demand for saddle and draft mule production. However Standard donkeys, specifically the Large Standard donkey can also be used in saddle mule production. Likewise, a Miniature donkey can be crossed with a Miniature horse to produce a Miniature mule. So, the resulting offspring can vary from very large draft mules over 17 hands high to the tinniest of mules under 36 inches. You can create the mule you want in one generation.

An interesting occurrence in mule production is the unpredictability of the end product. Sixteen and seventeen hand mules have originated from 14-hand mares and vice versa. Therein lays the genetic gamble that you must be prepared to take when you are desirous of a certain type of mule. Our personal experience has been that there are some mares who are quite consistent when crossed with the same Jack in the similarity of the resulting offspring, but other mares will throw a surprise every time. I really don’t know why this is but it seems to be more of a phenomenon in mule production than in the horse-breeding world. [It helps to be a gambler at heart!]

A donkey has 62 chromosomes and a horse has 64, leaving the mule with an uneven number of chromosomes at 63 rendering the mule sterile. However male mules or johns as they are often called, still carry all the ‘equipment’ and will become unmanageable to handle if not castrated. This should happen between 5 months of age to a year. If they are castrated too young, there appears to be a higher risk of excessive bleeding or evisceration. We have experienced both of these scenarios and consider them lessons learned the hard way. Never would we consent to mule castration without anesthesia. Mules have a very good memory and will remember the person or persons they consider caused them pain for a long time afterwards.

Although female mules or mollies are born with all the equipment needed to produce and care for a foal, they are also sterile. There have been reported cases of mollies giving birth but this is an extremely rare occurrence and has not always been proven. Mollies do have heat cycles, but generally do not show like a horse mare. Of the mollies that do show a heat cycle, our experience has been that they can become really irrational but generally the cycle is short lived. If heat cycles become a problem, having the molly mule spayed is an option. There are differences of opinion on whether mollies make better mules or johns. Personally, we don’t have a preference, as in our opinion a good mule is a good mule no matter what the gender.

Mules come in all sizes, colors and shapes. While the donkey has a strong influence on the build of the mule, the most desirable mules have a conformation more closely resembling that of the horse. The exception to this is the inheritance of the donkey’s ears; to the confirmed mule lover, the longer the ears the better! Conformation is important but to us it is secondary to having a good disposition. The bad reputation that still precedes mules in many areas of North American is a carryover from when horse mares that were not desirable as breeding stock to reproduce more of their own kind, were bred to a Jack to produce something of value. The result was often an animal that could work but carried the same undesirable disposition as its mother, and was generally difficult to handle. Good mares were not bred to good Jacks, thus the mules that were raised for a time in the development of the west were often cantankerous and unpredictable.

Thankfully, those days have passed and now it is becoming more predominant to raise mules out of only good, proven mares. The results are mules that excel in beauty and disposition. Mules are not stubborn. They are however self-preservers and they come by that desirable trait from their father the donkey. When a mule is faced with danger, he is more likely to freeze or only flee for a short distance. Because of this, he is much less likely to do anything injurious to himself or his rider. That is one of the reasons mules make
such excellent trail-riding animals. They have been used to carry thousands of tourists down the Grand Canyon for over 100 years with never a casualty. Their sure-footedness and sensibility when faced with danger has made them the choice mount for climbing and travelling in treacherous terrain.

To us, one of the most appealing characteristics of mules is their very distinct personality. I find young mules are comparable to dealing with a creature that is a cross between a child and a dog! They are attention seeking, comical, jealous and affectionate all at the same time. Even mature mules will show extreme jealousy and will pout if things don’t go their way. To top that off many mules appear to have a very warped sense of humor and you had better be prepared to share in their humor if you really want to get along with them. I can think of several instances when I’m sure my saddle mule was laughing at me; and many more times when he has caused me to laugh at him. Mules appear to spend a lot of time thinking, and generally it’s for their own benefit! If you cannot leave your ego at the door when you go out to work with your mule you should probably not own one. Mules love mind games so if mental stimulation is not your idea of a good time, we suggest you stick to horses.

Some of the comments that we have heard over the last several years since mules have gained more exposure via participation in various demonstrations and competitions is that many people are very surprised to see that mules can run. They are in fact extremely athletic, agile creatures and they can turn on the speed, when they want to! Being cautious and self-preserving by nature, they are generally more reluctant to over-extend or over-exert themselves, especially for long periods of time. Mules can indeed gallop with the best of them, but not all mules really want to set any world records. That being said, mule racing is a growing sport in certain areas of the United States. The mules run on regular racetracks and set some very fast times. In the famous words of Ogden Nash “In the world of mules, there are no rules!” My translation of this is “Mules can do anything… if they want to!”

Whether you desire a mule with a lot of speed or not, mule riders appreciate the more comfortable ride that they get from a mule. This of course depends somewhat on what type of mare the mule was raised out of but even mules raised from draft mares are generally quite rideable. The mules narrower body and his inherited gait from his father the donkey is much easier on your hips and knees and generally makes for a much smoother ride than what most horses can offer other than naturally gaited horses such as the Tennessee Walker or the Peruvian Pasco. A horse tends to give you a lot of side to side motion while a mule gives more of a “rocking chair” motion. This is one reason why mules make such excellent pack animals – a load that has less movement is easier to carry and stays on better.

Mules are harder than their horse cousins; they require less feed and can thrive on lower quality. This is all due to their donkey parentage. They will generally remain useful for a longer time and will outlive most horses. Their feet although smaller than a horse’s, are tougher and more upright. I have never seen a mule that is flat-footed. The mule’s self-preservation instinct makes them much less prone to injuring themselves. Over the years, we’ve had several horses cut and injure themselves sometimes with fatal results. During that time, the worst injury any mature mule ever sustained on our farm was a sprained ankle. Personally I like an animal that is ‘easy’ on the vet. bill!

Mules are very social animals and like the horse prefer to stick with the herd. However, it is not unusual for a mule foal to walk away from his frantic mother and visit with her human admirers. Adult mules that have been raised in a nurturing atmosphere will also more readily seek out human companionship and often display a very loyal, loving affinity towards people. They much more readily will become attached to the person who spends the most time with them, sometimes so much so that they will not work as well with anyone else and will display shyness around strangers. Quite often horse people are afraid that the mule might be aggressive towards horses – quite the contrary – mules love horses and are easily bossed by a horse. In my opinion, this is because a mule appears to remember his mother and her kind, long after he has been weaned. A mule, it would seem forever holds his mother in high esteem and that respect stays for life. It is a well-known fact that outfitters often keep a horse mare with their herd of pack mules as the mules will never leave camp as long as the mare is there.

As far as we’re concerned, there are many more pluses than minuses if you are considering adding a mule to your life. However mules are not for everyone and it is best that you do your homework first before you decide to take that step into the “world of the longears!” Many folks find mules addicting and even though they are sterile, mules have a way of “reproducing” at an alarming rate! My only consolation to you if you get yourself into this position, is to remind you that you are ‘in good company!’
BREEDING FOR A MULE

By Marlene Quiring

For those of you who are interested in breeding your mare to a jack in the hopes of getting your very own baby mule from the mare of your choice, let me give you some helpful information and some experiences we have had. We don’t claim to be experts but we have learned some things the hard way and why not pass some of our knowledge on.

First of all please remember that most mares will not willingly be bred by a jack!! This seems to come as a surprise to most people. Stop and think about it. Unless the mare lives with donkeys as pasture mates, a donkey, especially an aggressive or noisy jack will likely scare the daylights out of her! This fact alone is often the most difficult obstacle to overcome in the quest for a mule foal. If your mare has never been around a jack, it will likely be imperative that she spend enough time at the breeding farm beforehand for her to be able to see, smell and hear the jack without jumping out of her skin. Some jacks are very quiet and gentlemanly but some can be very aggressive and boisterous and will terrorize a mare if allowed.

Because most mares are scared by the jack, that also means that they will not “show” to the jack like they would to a stallion, thus making detecting their heat cycles very awkward unless there is a teaser stallion available. Even so, once in full heat, most mares still will not willingly show to the jack. Thus the need for the mare to at least not be afraid of the jack even through she begrudgingly lets him mount her. Take it from me, it is not a pleasant experience on anyone’s part to try and get a mare bred who’s wishes do not correspond with the jack!!

Most breeders who will stand a jack to outside mares will only hand breed. This is the safest and best way to know if the mare has actually been covered. Pasture breeding may work for some but there are many risks involved if that is the route you choose to take. The jack can savage mares and if she has a foal at her side, some jacks will kill the foal. The jack can also be hurt by the mare and most breeders cannot risk having their jack injured either. Beware of the backyard breeder who will “turn your mare out with his jack” for a nominal fee and assume that his jack will breed mares. Some folks still don’t realize that unless a jack has been raised with horses, not donkeys, he will not breed mares. He must be raised to think that he is a horse! Otherwise he will not cross the equine line and he will only be interested in jennets.

Now that you are armed with some information on the work it will take in breeding for a mule, you must take a look at the mare you are considering turning into a mule momma. She should be at least 3 years of age. Some 2-year-olds will catch but it really isn’t fair to them, as they haven’t finished growing themselves yet! The few times we have tried it and the fillies foaled, they would be barren the next year, telling us that their bodies needed some time off to grow up! Of course the other extreme would be an aged mare that’s never had a foal. Her chances of carrying are not all that good but not impossible. With any mare, you should at least have her palpated by an equine vet. A biopsy of her uterus will tell you what her chances are of conceiving and save you a lot of time and expense if she’s a mare that has a low chance of carrying a foal.

In order to acquire good mules, you must start with a good-minded mare. Long gone are the days when a mare that was hard to get along with was considered suitable to raise a mule foal. If your mare is easy going friendly, willing and eager to learn, then so will be your mule baby. Yes, a good minded jack is important but not near as critical as the mare. The baby will spend all his time with his momma and will pick up her vices and characteristics, good or bad.

Secondly will be to consider the mare’s conformation. Minor flaws can often be strengthened by the jack’s influence, but if the mare is unsound she can also pass along her hereditary weaknesses. Both parents should have good conformation in order to guarantee a good looking and useful mule.
Very important with any baby and we believe especially with a mule foal is to establish a human relationship from day one. Foals that are handled with kindness from day one learn to adore people and are so much easier to work with as they get older and bigger. Mules that do not trust people whether from being mishandled or mistreated are next to impossible to change. Their naturally self-preserving nature and dislike of being hurt make them very challenging animals to reclaim and may take years be turn around.

While it is important to handle your mule baby lots while he is young, you also need to teach him to respect you. Do not misinterpret love for your animal into spoiling them so that they become unsafe to handle. Baby mules do not need harsh discipline; usually a firm voice is all that is needed to correct improper behavior. They are very intelligent and easy to work with and respond so wonderfully to human handling. We get so much joy out of handling our baby mules that I find it incomprehensible that some people never touch their young foals, somehow believing that that is better for them. It is our belief that this is the most critical and opportune time in the making of a good mule. The trust they learn at this time in their early life will make them easier to teach and more reliable as a mature animal. There is much more of a bond with a mule that has been handled since birth than one that was raised without human intervention. The same level of trust is just not there. The mare you present to the breeder must be well broke to handle. She must be halter broke to lead well and must be able to stand tied without pulling back. If there is the possibility of kicking, the mare must be able to accept having breeding hobbles put on her back legs. Make sure if she is shod, that you have her shoes pulled. In other words, she must have the handling and training on her that will make her safe for the breeder and his jack and thus ensure a better chance of delivering to you that mule baby you have your heart set on. There is nothing so entertaining and delightful as a baby mule, you will be rewarded with one of the best experiences in life. Good luck to you!

HANDLING YOUR NEW MULE BABY

By Marlene Quiring

I believe in early handling of donkey, mule or horse foals. It is the easiest stage of life to desensitize the animal to outside stimuli and sensitize them to others. Mule babies rarely have any fear of people at birth, whereas horse foals usually exhibit a more instinctive fear of humans. Handling them soon after birth aids in bonding them to you and all humans.

Proper handling should include picking up all their feet, one at a time, and tapping them on the bottom to simulate trimming and possible shoeing later on in life. Done properly, that is, releasing the foot once the foal is relaxed with the touch, will desensitize that foot for future handling, especially when it’s repeated several times. On the other hand if you release the foot when the foal is still struggling, you will only teach the animal to be even more resistant next time. Of course at no time should you use force to hurt the animal. If the foal is thrashing with the foot, hold on as lightly as you can without losing it, and move with the foot until the foal realizes it doesn’t hurt and quits resisting. Once he quits struggling, then that is the time to release the foot. This will desensitize the animal to having his feet handled and is the same approach to use on handling the rest of his body, including his face, ears, girth area, under the tail, etc. Release, or quit the stimulation when they have accepted it and are relaxed with it. If you quit to soon you will teach them the wrong thing. Use common sense in all instances and do not turn this into a
muscle match! Your role is that of a teacher, leader and protector of the animal so don’t jeopardize that by causing that baby unnecessary pain.

If you are unable to handle your baby shortly after birth, don’t think you can’t do anything if the foals is several hours, or days old. Remember this animal is going to need this handling at some time in his life and the sooner the better if you want to keep him out of the killer market. And for those of you who may acquire an animal that has never been handled, it can still be done but will require a lot more skill and patience. That’s why I think it is such a shame when breeders don’t handle their stock as youngsters. The average owner doesn’t have the skill or knowledge to take an unhandled mule and make anything out of him and so the mule is deemed as untrainable.

Mules, unlike horses, are best to teach to tie before teaching to lead. Never use this order on a horse foal. Mule foals, when tied, rarely panic and become frantic like a horse foal would. Still, never tie up a baby mule and leave him unattended. Remember to tie up to a stout post and never tie up to a rail or fence which can break; also be sure to use a quick release knot and make sure the rope is not too long so your baby cannot get a foot over the rope. Also check that the tie is at least at the height of his withers. Short tying lessons are the order of the day for the baby mule. Mules will lean back on the rope, but once they figure it out they tend to accept their lot and will not hurt themselves by panicking. Tying them first also helps them at their leading, as they have learned to give to the pressure of the halter.

Whether you start with your mule as a newborn, weanling or yearling, you still need to take them through all the same steps. They will learn to accept and love scratching and massaging all over the body, from head to tail, and don’t forget those ears. Donkeys and mules will learn to have their ears handled and scratched and will love it and that solves any future bridling problems right there.

Never leave a halter on any animal and especially not on a baby. Why? Because it’s darn dangerous. An animal can easily get a foot caught in the halter or hung up on a fence or any object and choke to death or break its neck. Please, just don’t do it. When you leave your animal, take the halter with you!!

While an animal is young, it is very advantageous to introduce them to as many “fearful” things as possible. Take your animal for walks, over rails, bridges, around obstacles and through puddles. Anything he might encounter as your future driving or riding animal is easiest at this age to desensitize him to, than when he is older and much stronger. If your animal is dreadfully afraid of something, back off and give him the time to get use to it. You cannot force an animal to be unafraid of something. Can you learn anything when you are scared? I suspect not! Well, neither can they, so have some patience and understanding and try to think and see things from their point of view.

Another difference between baby mules and horse foals, which has scared many a visitor to the farm, is the fact that baby mules will walk towards you with a very intent look on their face and their ears laid back! This alarms most people, but it’s a false alarm, believe me. This behavior in the horse world signals dislike and aggression and should warn you to back off… in mule babies it is only their intense concentration and focus on you. Baby mules are very possessive and jealous and have targeted you as their next conquest for attention. Mules that are mad will have their ears pinned really flat and the look on their faces will convey to you the difference.

Babies will sometimes want to play with you, and while it’s hard to do when they are so cute and young, try to discourage it as soon as possible, but keep your discipline within reason. For attempted kicks, a firm swat on the behind and a firm “NO” will be enough, also with “nips” a firm “NO” and turn your attention elsewhere will get them where it hurts. Donkeys and mules love to be loved and sometimes just ignoring them will be painful to them and punishment enough. Remember babies and young animals have short attention spans, so keep your lessons short. They’re kids, so don’t expect them to learn everything the first time around.

Along with leading lessons it’s important to teach your animal to back from the ground. We accomplish this with our young mules as part of their training when we bring them into the barn and tie them in a tie stall for their daily feed of oats. This way they learn to stand tied and when we take them out they are taught to back out of the stall, and then we always turn them away from us, just like we would in a halter showmanship class, and then lead them out of the barn. Turing them to the right isn’t just for show, its real purpose is for safety, so they learn to stay out of our space. Pulling an animal into you can be hard on your toes and teaches the animal to think its okay to invade your space.
There are many things that can be taught from the ground, so even people who never plan or want to ride, can have an animal very well trained, by just doing a lot of ground work. Donkeys and mules are supposed to have the reputation as being hard to teach to back but we have never found that, so maybe teaching them to back up as weanlings is the secret, as it is with many other things. The main idea is to do as much as you can think of to do with your animal while he is young. Many problems can be totally prevented and avoided by consistent, firm and kind handling from the ground. You’ll end up with an animal that will fit into someone’s life, be it yours or someone else’s and you will be leaps ahead of your neighbor, who thinks it best to leave his stock run wild until its time to bring them in and “break” them. Quite often that’s what happens…. something or someone gets “broke” and that’s the end of their story. Your story should have a much happier ending….. It’s up to you!

**WHAT YOU CAN DO BEFORE HE’S TWO**

By Betsy Hutchins

www.lovelongears.com

Every young equine should have learned a number of lessons before the age of two. One of the most pitiful sights I know is to see a group of unhanded two year old mules go to the killer’s because people are afraid of trying to handle and train them. An unhanded two year old mule or horse is one of the most unsaleable animals known to man—and can be one of the most dangerous. Donkeys are not so bad, even an adult is easily trained, BUT PEOPLE ARE AFRAID TO TRY!

Anyone who takes on the responsibility of breeding young stock also takes on the responsibility of making that young stock gentle and trained enough to get a decent home for life. Anyone who buys a weanling or yearling should work with it to train it as much as possible before riding age, so that nobody gets hurt or scared or disappointed when the time come to ride or drive.

Here is a list of things you should do. (And some you can do if you want to)

**Yearling to two year old**

When your colt is a “teenager” it will have a bit longer attention span and can concentrate a little bit longer than when it was a yearling. Do keep the lessons SHORT and HAPPY!

1. By now your young mule should be able accept the halter, lead from either side, accept being handled all over from head to tail and you should be able to pick up all four feet. If not you must be sure they are all learned well before you go on to anything else.

2. Teach your yearling to stand tied. This is crucial and will take time and tact with some animals.
3. Accustom your yearling to leading through gates, into odd places and through traffic and such things.

4. To get ready for the above, thoroughly get him used to being sacked out. Rub him all over with a cloth (use a cloth on the end of a fishing pole or bamboo or other stick if he is jumpy and dangerous to you). Then when he is calm after being rubbed flap it all over him until he practically falls asleep. TAKE YOUR TIME, DO NOT SCARE HIM- the idea is to teach him that this thing WILL NOT HURT HIM not to make him afraid of it!!!! After he is used to the first cloth you can try other objects. One good one (but take it slow) is a plastic trash bag with some empty soft drink cans in it! – Do be careful though!

5. Teach you yearling to pivot on his front and then on his hind feet and at the same time to respond to pressure on his sides. I use the butt of my riding crop to provide the pressure for him to move away from. This comes in very handy when you finally get on and use leg pressure.

6. Teach you yearling to accept the feel of a saddle and girth. A training surcingle and even a child’s saddle pad with stirrups and girth come in handy for this. Again, take it slow, and do not scare him.

7. Teach the yearling to accept a bit. Use a RUBBER snaffle, not metal, and just let him carry it some each day, drink and munch some hay to get used to it. Be sure it is adjusted carefully, one wrinkle at the side of the mouth is just right. Do not leave it on too long and get him disgusted at it.

8. Teach the yearling to drive in the long reins. Use the halter for control (do this in a fenced area). Later, just before he is broke to ride you can start long reining with the bit, but just now, let him carry the bit but snap the reins to the halter instead.

9. If you plan to show, practice for a few minutes a day the pose you wish your animal to assume in the ring. In most parts of the country this is the four square stance used by all the western horse breeds. Do not get discouraged – one day he will CATCH ON but it may take a while!

10. Once your yearling is leading really well teach him to trot next to you on the lead rope. This is always important. A good method is to stand at his shoulder, holding the lead in your right hand and a long whip in the left. Reach around back (looking innocently forward) and encourage him forward with the whip. It may take a helper the first few times.

11. Start teaching him to back up now. Most donkeys and many mules have a very rusty reverse gear, so teaching him to back first by halter and later in the long reins is very important to future training (and your future temper!)

12. Teach your foal and yearling to load and ride in the trailer now while the pressure is not on, you will be glad of this sooner than you think!

See what I mean - there are more things, limited only by the imagination, but since you only have two years here – this may be all you can get done. Just imagining the difference between this animal after the two year period since his birth, and the one that your irresponsible neighbor has left running with its dam for two years, or worse in a stall or small lot, with no training – which one is going to sell well, be a happy animal, have a good home and be a credit to its breed-!

WHEN IS A DONKEY OR MULE READY TO RIDE? [OR DRIVE]

Many owners and horse trainers are in a rush to be riding 2 yr. olds and even younger in order to be ready for the many paying classes that horse events and shows offer for youngsters. Some are driven to win because it is necessary for their living. Unfortunately, the horse [mule or donkey] pays the price of such early ‘training’. Many of these animals are physically hurt by too much pressure, physical and mental at an age when their minds are not matured and their bodies are still growing. Bones have NOT fused and muscles and ligaments are stretched and damaged. Quite a few are lame before they even hit maturity.
After reading the information below, you may want to reconsider getting on that 2 or 3 yr. old mule or donkey!! If you want your longears to have a long, healthy life you will make sure that you do not damage them physically by forcing them to carry or pull heavy weight when they are still physically growing. It is not unusual for mules to grow until 8 or 9 years old!

Dr. Deb Bennett is known as an authority on the classification, evolution, anatomy, and biomechanics of fossil and living horses. Her research interests also include the history of domestication and of individual horse breeds. When she talks about horses, we need only to substitute that with ‘‘mule’’ or donkey’’ and also remember that both the mule and the donkey mature even slower than the horse! The following are excerpts from what Dr. Deb Bennett has to say on maturity in stock

"Owners and trainers need to realize there's a definite, easy-to-remember schedule of fusion - and then make their decision as to when to ride the horse based on that rather than on the external appearance of the horse. For there are some breeds of horse - the Quarter Horse is the premier among these - which have been bred in such a manner as to LOOK mature long before they actually ARE mature. This puts these horses in jeopardy from people who are either ignorant of the closure schedule, or more interested in their own schedule (for futurities or other competitions) than they are in the welfare of the animal.

The process of fusion goes from the bottom up. In other words, the lower down toward the hoofs you look, the earlier the growth plates will have fused; and the higher up toward the animal's back you look, the later. The growth plate at the top of the coffin bone (the most distal bone of the limb) is fused at birth. What this means is that the coffin bones get no TALLER after birth (they get much larger around, though, by another mechanism). That's the first one. In order after that:

2. Short pastern - top & bottom between birth and 6 mos.
3. Long pastern - top & bottom between 6 mos. And 1 yr.
4. Cannon bone - top & bottom between 8 mos. And 1.5 yrs.
5. Small bones of knee - top & bottom on each, between 1.5 and 2.5 yrs.
6. Bottom of radius-ulna - between 2 and 2.5 yrs.
7. Weight-bearing portion of glenoid notch at top of radius - between 2.5 and 3 yrs.
8. Humerus - top & bottom, between 3 and 3.5 yrs.
9. Scapula - top & bottom (weight-bearing) portion - between 3.5 and 4 yrs.
10. Hindlimb - lower portions same as forelimb
11. Hock - this joint is "late" for as low down as it is; growth plates on the tibial & fibular tarsals don't fuse until the animal is four (so the hocks are a known "weak point" - even the 18th-century literature warns against driving young horses in plow or other deep or sticky footing, or jumping them up into a heavy load, for danger of spraining their hocks)
12. Tibia - top & bottom, between 2.5 and 3 yrs.
13. Femur - bottom, between 3 and 3.5 yrs.; neck, between 3.5 and 4 yrs.; major and 3rd trochanters, between 3 and 3.5 yrs.
14. Pelvis - growth plates on the points of hip, peak of croup (tubera sacrale), and points of buttock (tuber ischii), between 3 and 4 yrs.

and what do you think is last? The vertebral column, of course. A normal horse has 32 vertebrae between the back of the skull and the root of the dock, and there are several growth plates on each one, the most important of which is the one capping the centrum.

These do not fuse until the horse is at least 5 1/2 years old (and this figure applies to a small-sized, scrubby, range-
raised mare. The taller your horse and the longer its neck, the later full fusion will occur. And for a male - is this a surprise? -- You add six months. So, for example, a 17-hand TB or Saddlebred or WB gelding may not be fully mature until his 8th year - something that owners of such individuals have often told me that they "suspected".

The lateness of vertebral "closure" is most significant for two reasons.
One: in no limb are there 32 growth plates!
Two: The growth plates in the limbs are (more or less) oriented perpendicular to the stress of the load passing through them, while those of the vertebral chain are oriented parallel to weight placed upon the horse's back.

Bottom line: you can sprain a horse's back (i.e., displace the vertebral growth plates) a lot more easily than you can sprain those located in the limbs.

And here's another little fact: within the chain of vertebrae, the last to fully "close" are those at the base of the animal's neck (that's why the long-necked individual may go past 6 yrs. to achieve full maturity). So you also have to be careful - very careful - not to yank the neck around on your young horse, or get him in any situation where he strains his neck."

Dr. Deb Bennett

Differences between horses and mules  [ taken from the Internet]

When talking about the differences you have to include the donkey – because the mule is a hybrid differences also vary from animal to animal.

- The angle of the larynx at the back of the throat (top of the trachea) of the donkey is different than in horses, and donkeys have a pharyngeal diverticulum (pocket) in their throat, excess tissue in their pharynx, and elongated laryngeal saccules (part of the airway that aids in vocalization).
- Nasal intubation also is more challenging because donkeys have narrower nasal passages than horses
- Donkeys tend to grow longer, coarser coats that lack the protective undercoat that horses have in the winter. The coat does not provide the protection needed during periods of weather extremes (colder and wet weather).
- An obscured jugular furrow (the place where blood samples are taken or tranquilizers are given). The cutaneous colli muscle is much thicker than in the horse and hides the middle third of the jugular vein. It is easier to find the upper third of the jugular.
- The nasolacrimal duct of the donkey is located on the flare of the nostril rather than the floor of the nostril as it is in the horse.
- Some medication can produce complications such as breathing in donkeys
- Higher doses (typically 1.5 times the horse dose) of a number of drugs are needed in donkeys. An exception is guaifenesin (a centrally acting muscle relaxant). Horse doses of this drug in donkeys can cause respiratory arrest.
- Lungworms are reported to be more common in donkeys than horses
Mule compared to the horse

- Higher mean value for corpuscular volume
- Lower white blood cell count
- Lower monocyte
- Red blood cell tend to be lower
- Mean platelet volume tends to be lower
- Normal temperature is similar (normal temperature for a resting horse is 37.5 to 38 degrees C)
- Mules metabolize most drugs similar to horses but still the sedation may wear off sooner
- Mules tend to show signs of acute pain and generally it’s easier for an owner to detect an issue
- When restraining avoid ear twitching and consider a humane twitch or pharmaceutical restraint
- Mules are very social animals
- Mules can survive on coarser pastures
- Hooves are tougher and more elastic, they are narrow in shape. Weight is placed directly on the frog portion of the foot. The hoof wall is rounded and thick in the toe area, more pinched in and thinner at the quarter and flared out and thick at the heel. The bars are thick and prominent, length of the hoof wall itself is relatively long and upright
- Mule offspring have 63 chromosomes (donkey 62 – horse 64)
- Internal parasites are typical for other equine species therefore the recommendations for control and treatment are those that are used for horses
- Protocols for a vaccination program are usually adapted from those recommended for horses
- Mules are able to cow kick

DENTAL CARE FOR MULES [and donkeys]

By Marlene Quiring

Mules or donkeys experiencing pain or discomfort can exhibit various kinds of negative behavior. Ill-fitting equipment can cause “bad behavior” and along with many other reasons, so can dental problems. It is much too often assumed by the handler of the animal that negative behavior has no cause and needs to be dealt with by disciplining the poor beast.

I am often amazed at our lack of understanding that animals, like us, usually have a very good reason for their actions.

All domestic donkeys need routine dental care, as they are not living on the abrasive diet of their feral counterparts. Unlike human teeth, equine teeth are constantly pushing up through the jaw, and should wear with grazing at the same rate. For this reason holes or decay are not a problem as they just wear with the tooth and eventually disappear. However, various other dental and mouth problems do occur, and should be treated. Problems can occur at every age so the donkey’s teeth should be checked at least yearly and preferably more often.

General Signs of Dental Problems:

- Sudden condition loss or variable condition.
- Eating problems. The mule will drop food or be unable to chew properly resulting in bolus formation.
- Undigested food in the dung.
- Digestive problems such as souring or colic.
- Foul breath.
- Biting problems due to the bit or noseband pressing on sharp molars, causing head tossing.
- Drooling or excessive foaming at the mouth.
Also beware if you discover any kind of discharge coming from your longear’s nostrils, particularly if it’s only on one side. If this persists or reoccurs, it could be a sign of dental problems. An abscessed or broken tooth can cause an infection which often spreads to the sinus cavity. This can be a serious problem which may require surgery to treat the primary cause and current infection. As donkeys and mules can be very stoic about showing pain, realizing that they are in distress can be an added difficulty.

The incisors (front nipper teeth) do not as a rule cause any problems. However, the molars, which are the grinding teeth, do. They tend to wear unevenly depending on the mule’s chewing action and very sharp edges can form which cut the cheeks and the tongue. The dentist (or vet) will rasp the sharp edges (called floating). This is painless to the donkey and most don’t object at all.

Teeth shedding – the deciduous teeth (caps) can cause problems by not dropping out but remain sitting on top of the permanent teeth. This can result in an uneven chewing surface and food caught in the teeth can cause inflammation from the cap root spiking the jaw. The cap will need to be pulled out.

Missing Tooth – When there is no grinding surface for the opposite tooth, it will grow down into the hole. This is very painful (also unusual).

Wolf Teeth – The wolf teeth (first premolars) are now missing in some equines. Do not confuse them with canine or bridle teeth that males get, but females usually don’t. They usually appear in the upper jaw, just in front of the molars. They can be quite small but sharp, and can be very irritated by the presence of a bit, ANY BIT! The only way to handle them is to have them removed by an equine dentist or a veterinarian. You can check for them yourself by looking into their mouth or by inserting your “least favorite finger” in the interdental space between the molars and incisors and feeling for the presence of this offending and useless tooth.

Bolus - ball of unchewed food (usually due to caps) that sits in the cheeks and causes inflammation and must be removed.

Mouth Abcesses - are often due to seeds (especially barley awns) lodged in the mouth and tongue. The seeds will have to be pulled out, and the inside of the mouth hosed out. Uneven surfaces of the molars contribute to this problem.

Old Age – Old mules and donkeys need extra tooth care, as they are more prone to tooth loss due to infection than younger donkeys. Uneven wearing of the molars can occur due to deafness and blindness because both conditions can cause the donkey to chew unevenly. In extreme old age the teeth can wear down until they wear out. In such a case, soft feed and vitamins will have to be poured into the donkey. Mules’ teeth do seem to wear better and last longer than horses’ teeth, probably the reason why mules are more long lived.

CARE OF A LONGEARS

By Marlene Quiring

Are you thinking you might like to buy or raise a mule? If you have decided that a mule [or a donkey] might be the animal for you, the following will give you some helpful information.

Mules are not very demanding, however those of us who were raised with equines or have had them for years forget what new ownership of an equine especially a mule, might mean to a person who has had no past experience or knowledge to fall back on. In reality, sometimes that can be an advantage, as new owners are often more open to suggestions and better training methods. So, whether you are new to
the ownership of a mule, donkey or a horse, or have been around them all your life, you may pick up something useful in this article.

Although I specifically want to address the care required for a mule, I couldn’t do that without often referring to and including the mule’s father, the donkey, who is the originator of the mule’s uniqueness. The mule’s dam, the horse passes on her size and beauty but also a flight instinct that can sometimes get the mule into trouble. Horses in general resort to flight to flee from danger as compared to the donkey’s instinct, which is to stand and fight. The mule often inherits a combination of these instincts, which can make life interesting! Mules who flee from danger, generally do not go far before they stop and look back to study the situation. However, mule, donkey or horse, their basic needs vary little from one to the other.

MULE PSYCHOLOGY AND HANDLING

Mules benefit from human contact from the moment of birth. In my experience this is even more important than with a horse foal because a mule left unhandled until weaning can be a big handful and few people have the ability to deal with such a mule successfully. They must be taught to respect their human handlers so that as they grow and mature they always recognize humans as their “herd bosses”.

However, a warning to those who think that in order to teach respect to a mule you have to rule over them with an iron rod. That won’t work with a horse and even less with a mule or donkey. No animal can learn when he is hurting whether physically or mentally. Make sure when you handle or train your mule that you do not take out your frustration or anger on them. If you do cause them any unnecessary pain they will remember it and will not forgive you as easily as a horse will and you will have taken 3 steps back in your training program.

Handling a foal does not mean that they should be spoilt, but raising your voice is often sufficient discipline in correcting any offending behavior. Young mules need a lot of consistent, gentle training and should never receive harsh treatment.

Mules are generally quite jealous creatures and really hate to be ignored when others are getting attention. Withholding your affections is often very sufficient punishment for a mule, especially one that adores being the center of attention. Some mules will sulk and pout when they think they have been treated wrongly, often it’s best to let them “stew” on their own and give them time to “get over it.” And as long as you have not physically hurt them, they will “think” about it and usually learn quickly not to repeat any offending behavior. This method combined with a sharp word such as NO, works very well with young mules that get over rambunctious and think they can play with you by nipping or kicking at you.

I find that young mules that are born less trusting or for whatever reason have received a scare, respond very well to a “soft” voice and touch and soon are back on track. We use to try and push ourselves on these foals and demand that they fall in line, but the results were less than satisfactory. My theory is that you cannot fight with a mule and win. I find that if I have a problem with one, such as teaching them to lead, or picking up their feet, instead of trying to “bully” them into accepting my demands, I have had very good success with a non-aggressive approach. It may sound simplistic, but in essence I just make sure that I never give them anything to push or pull against.

How do I do this? First of all I make sure that I have a mellow frame of mind when I go to work with a mule that has run into some handling problems. I know that I can never physically out muscle this mule so I never have any intention of trying. With the attitude that we will get done what we get done, it really doesn’t matter if it takes one hour, one day or all week. When my mental vibrations and body language can be read by the mule as being non-threatening, soft, slow and quiet, I have the best results. I talk a lot to my mules and in a gentle soothing voice. In tough situations, I can literally “talk” them out of trouble. A loud voice is used only for reprimanding or later for commands.

While your mule is learning to respect you, he will also be learning to trust you. I have successfully convinced young mules to load into a trailer for their first time with only my re-assuring voice and minimal give and take pressure with a halter and lead rope. They loaded because they had learned to believe that I could be trusted, even if it meant doing something that looked scary to them. Trust is a very important key in getting your mule to work for you and it just doesn’t happen overnight. If you take the time and the patience to get to know your mule and stay
away from abusing or harming him both mentally and physically, he will develop a trust and a bond with you that is akin to a loyal dog and his master. You will have a lifelong partner. Don’t miss out on this very important link in your relationship with your mule.

When you acquire an older mule with serious problems, you will have to find ways to out think them so that when they get themselves into a pickle, you can rescue them and they in no way relate that you caused their distress. It will take a very long time to build up trust with a mule that has been hurt or mistreated in some way by man. For some of us, we do not have the patience or know how, to bring such a mule back to usefulness. They do have good memories and this can work against them when trying to retrain such a mule. A spoilt or abused horse will be easier to retrain than a mule in the same situation.

Another notable trait of mules, is their ability to pick whom they like and whom they do not like. I think most mules know when someone likes them or not and often behave accordingly. Mules are very sensitive and will learn to trust and be comfortable with one handler but can get scared and anxious when their handler changes. Mules do bond with certain people and do tend to make strange with people they don’t know. With time and patience they will accept you if your behavior with them is kind and consistent. Be aware of this trait when you go looking for a mule and don’t necessarily judge a prospective mule by his first reaction to you.

John [male] mules must be castrated or they can be much more dangerous than a rank horse stallion. Castration is advised between 6 to 9 months of age. Castration at a younger age increases the risk of excessive bleeding with possible tragic results. Mule colts left past yearlings, because of their strength and size can be more difficult to handle. Thus, waiting until 6 months of age but before they are yearlings, is the best time to call your veterinarian for the job. By this time the youngster’s stomach wall has strengthened and the danger of a tragic outcome is greatly decreased. I also prefer that the veterinarian suture the stomach wall as this would have prevented the death of several mule and donkey colts that I know of that eviscerated after surgery.

Dr. Suzy Burnham of Texas advocates ‘Anesthesia with amnesia’ I strongly agree with her advice. Mules remember pain for a very long time and will relate it to a person or persons who inflicted it whether intentionally or not. Some mules will blame their present pain on the person who they remembered handled them last. Some “forgive” quickly but others carry a grudge for a long time and may become very defensive of their back end.

Have a veterinarian who has taken the time to learn about the differences in sedatives for mules or donkeys and is willing to learn about them, work on your animal. If they say they are no different than horses to castrate, look for another vet. Mules will generally require more sedative than a horse but not always. This fact can make them challenging patients to sedate safely and effectively.

**WATER, FEED AND TEETH**

While mules generally show more personality characteristics than a horse and do require you to be on your toes to out think them when you are handling them, they in no way require any less basic health care than a horse. Mules are tough, but that doesn’t give anyone the license to purposefully neglect their basic needs.

Donkeys, and to a lesser degree mules, require less feed than a horse and actually cannot tolerate feed that is too rich. It can be fatal to them if they are forced to exist on a high protein diet. However that knowledge has been taken to extreme in some cases and people have been known to severely malnourish donkeys because they thought they didn’t need to eat anything but straw. You can feed donkeys and mules less than horses and they do well on a lesser quality feed, but they do need to eat and they do need some protein.

Most mules will not gorge themselves if too much food is presented to them. They tend only to eat for their needs and leave the rest. However there are some who will overeat and these are the ones who can founder, just like a horse. We had an older mule that would founder if she got too much fresh grass in the spring, so we had to keep her corralled during this time. Unfortunately, over the years, we did not always catch her in time and this happened more
than I’d like to admit. Last time I thought her coffin bone must be rotated, but x-rays showed very little rotation. Each time we were able to bring her back to usefulness, but I often thought if she had been a horse and foundered this many times, she would have been a lost cause long ago. She’s tough, and I have reason to believe it’s ‘cause she’s a mule!

An added warning to all equine owners; do not ever be tempted to feed fresh grass clippings from your lawn to your animals. The clippings can produce toxins that are deadly.

Fresh, clean water must be made available at all times to horses, mule or donkeys. Ice cold water deters them from drinking as much as they should, so make sure their water supply is kept at a reasonable temperature. Equines can survive on snow if necessary but that is only when there is lots of clean fresh snow available. If left to eat snow for lack of water they will require more feed as it takes them much more energy to convert that snow into water for their daily need which is 10 to 15 gallons per animal.

Free choice salt and minerals should be available. Loose salt enables them to get their required needs more easily but is not always practical, in which case a salt block will do. According to Dr. Lori K. Warren, Provincial Horse Specialist, Alberta Agriculture, blue salt or red salt is suitable for equines. In general white salt is plain sodium chloride, red salt is sodium chloride with added iodine and blue salt contains sodium chloride, iodine and cobalt. The only nutritional difference between red salt and blue salt is the added cobalt in the blue salt, which is not harmful to equines. White salt lacks iodine, which is usually lacking in feeds so is not recommended. Brown salt usually contains trace minerals and may or may not contain sodium chloride.

Because donkeys originate from the desert, both donkeys and mules are more susceptible to problems caused by heavy rain or cold and need proper shelter from rain and cold northern winters. Donkeys are especially deceiving with their fluffy coats, but they do not carry the same insulation value as a horse’s coat. However, mules and donkeys do tolerate heat very well and will be fresh long after your average horse has succumbed to heat exhaustion. It is very hard to get up a sweat on my saddle mule as compared to when I rode horses. You can ride a horse “into the ground” but a mule may quit you when he’s had enough.

Mules do need to have their teeth checked and dental care provided if necessary. Tim Barton, College instructor in equine anatomy and outfitter for over 30 years says ‘‘ Horses [or mules] don’t die of old age, they die of bad teeth ’’. Mules and donkeys can have all the same dental problems that a horse can have, such as caps that won’t fall out on their own, abscessed teeth, over bite or under bite, sharp hooks, uneven chewing surfaces, or they may lose a tooth by being kicked. Since equine teeth keep growing, if not attended to, the tooth opposite the missing partner has nothing to grind against and will grow into the jaw and face of the poor animal. One of our Jacks had a missing front tooth and so we had to get the corresponding tooth cut down when it became too long. Periodic dental checks for all equines are a must.

All of our mules have had wolf teeth that needed removing. These small, usually shallow rooted teeth just in front of the upper molars [and sometimes bottoms] if not removed can cause pain when your mule carries a bit. You can check for these un-necessary teeth yourself by running your thumb in the interdental space [where the bit would be carried] and feel for a small, hard, and quite often sharp bump. This is a wolf tooth and needs to be removed before you ask your mule to comfortably carry a bit.

**HOOF CARE**

A disturbing myth that is still being circulated is that mules or donkeys do not need their feet trimmed. If donkeys were in their natural native habitat, the desert, this would be so, but it is certainly not true for today’s domesticated donkey or mule. They need their feet trimmed just as often as a horse, which is roughly every 8 weeks. It’s not terribly uncommon to see neglected donkeys or mules, with severely overgrown feet, in roadside pastures or abandoned in auction market pens waiting for their fate. It would seem that their owners thought they would require no care, including foot care.

Most people are aware that mules do have tougher feet than horses. Just pick one up and look at the thick hoof wall and the nice cupped foot as compared to a horse’s foot. Because of this, mules do not need shoeing for everyday riding. However, they do need to be shod if they are being ridden or driven on pavement or used in the mountains.
for any length of time. When spring comes to Alberta and I want to get my saddle mule in shape, I have to put the miles on by riding gravel roads, so unless I shoe him up, I will excessively wear down his hoof wall. Our mule teams are always shod up with borium spot welded on their shoes for traction before they go out to spend the summer in the mountains where they are used for hauling freight and passengers over rocky roads. If their feet were not shod, they would wear down to nothing on the sharp shale.

Mules are extremely sure-footed in rough terrain. It will only take one trip to convince you of this if you are riding a mule on some seep trails behind a horse that is scratching and scrambling to get his footing. Your mule is climbing effortlessly and silently on the same terrain. A mule’s eyes are set further on the side of his head, thus enabling him to see where his back feet are going. This combined with his survival instinct and greater agility and strength make him a better mount for treacherous terrain. This is why it’s mules that have been used to carry folks into the Grand Canyon for well over 100 years without incident.

The mule does have a more upright hoof and must not be trimmed to look like a horse’s foot that has a lower angle. The rule is the same for all equines: follow the angle of their pastern. I have seen several mules where the owner has trimmed their feet to be too low in the heel like a horse and the angle of the foot becomes broken. This is very hard on their tendons and can result in soundness problems. If you do not have the knowledge yourself to trim your mules feet, call a qualified farrier who knows the differences in a donkey’s foot versus a horse’s foot. If your farrier says he trims their feet the same as a horse’s foot…..LOOK for another farrier!

Mules have a reputation for sometimes being hard to trim or shoe. There is some truth to this. This goes back to their very protective nature; if they for whatever reason have never fully trusted man with all of their body parts, especially their feet and legs, they can be a real problem. Although a mule has never kicked me, I have been in situations where they have sent me a message by the use of their feet. By this I mean, I have had mules talk to me about something going on that they don’t like by lifting and subtly threatening me with a foot. While I always let them know, this kind of communication will not be tolerated, I really do believe they do talk with their feet and the rest of their bodies much more so than a horse does. After I reprimand them, [usually my stern voice is all that’s necessary], I always make sure I find out why they felt threatened in the first place and make the necessary adjustments where I can. Sometimes it has been their feet that has been ill fitting or rubbing them the wrong way. Sometimes they are just mentally distressed about their situation, but one thing I have learned is; they always have a reason for their actions and it’s up to me to find out what they’re trying to tell me and fix it if I can.

Because of what I believe is their easier inclination to use their feet to display their emotions than a horse, I especially believe it is very important to teach young mules to become trusting of you handling their feet.

Because of the mule’s cupped foot, when shod they do pick up rocks easier than a horse with its flatter foot. Sometimes the rocks can become so wedged in that they are very hard to get out. Make sure you check your mule’s feet often if they are worked a lot on rocky terrain.

**HEALTH AND SAFETY**

Vaccinations should be discussed between yourself and your veterinarian. Authors, Dr. Tex Taylor, Dr. Nora Matthews, and Dr. Terry Blanchard from Texas A&M, state in an article published in the New England Journal of Large Animal Health [volume 1, number 1, pages 21 – 28] ‘’Few if any currently available vaccines are specifically approved for donkeys and mules. We vaccinate them the same as horses under similar circumstances.’’ As to anesthetics they say: ‘’Donkeys and mules don’t seem to respond as well to most of our short-term anesthetics as do horses. It is common to not get good relaxation or to have a shortened period of down time.’’ Under drug metabolism they say: ‘’Research into the metabolism of the common medications used to treat horses continues to confirm that this process is not identical in horses, donkeys and mules. It also suggests that there are differences between the different size donkeys….regrettably we cannot make specific recommendations for dosage changes nor treatment intervals at this point in time.’’

While there is still much to learn about the differences between donkeys, mules and horses, it is generally accepted that they should receive the same vaccinations as a horse. Tetanus, East and West Sleeping Sickness, Influenza, Rhinopneumonitis, and West Nile are the main vaccinations you might want to consider. Strangles, Potomac Horse
Fever and Rabies are other vaccinations that may be recommended by your personal veterinarian. A holistic approach to health care is becoming popular and can give owners an option to some of the above vaccines.

Many new mule owners do not realize the importance of deworming. Please do not try and save any money here. Mules are tougher than horses and less prone to diseases but I do not believe that an overload of worms can do them anything but harm. We use an ivermectin-based product to deworm our mares a month before they foal. The foals themselves are dewormed between 1 and 2 months of age. A good program for us here in our cold winter climate is to deworm our young stock once or twice throughout the warm weather followed by a late fall [after several “killing” frosts] and then an early spring worming. It is important that the fall worming is a brand that will also take care of “bots.” The trend now is to find better natural treatments to keep worms at a minimum and this is definitely something to consider instead of the chemicals we have come to rely on.

Mature animals running on ample clean pasture may only require deworming in the fall and then again in the spring. However this is the absolute minimum treatment that you should consider. Animals kept more confined will require treatment more often as they will recontaminate themselves easier by close quarters with other animal’s feces.

Please don’t turn any equine out with barbed wire lying around, old farm machinery and parts scattered everywhere or any other junk littering their pastures. Eventually someone will get hurt. Why take these unnecessary risks? Your animals should not be credited with the ability to figure out for themselves that they are to avoid these traps. They’re smart, and they can reason to a degree, but they cannot be expected to know that if they rub against, or worse get a foot hung up in that piece of machinery with all the sharp corners and edges, that they can be cut to shreds. I have heard of several animals hurt and killed by people leaving junk lying in their pastures that I would wonder why some common sense didn’t prevail in the first place. These are injuries and fatalities that we can prevent.

While a mule is less likely to harm itself in junky pastures or inadequate and poorly constructed fencing than a horse, you still need to make sure your fencing is safe, secure, visible and free of broken planks, stray wire, protruding nails and anything else that could possibly cause injury to your mule. Barbed wire is not a great choice for any equine; however mules do fare better in it than do horses. Smooth wire can still cut but the results are usually less disastrous. Electric fence is good, but you must make sure that you give your mule a chance to be “educated” by it first with you nearby. We almost lost a young just weaned molly that got her head stuck between a “safe” pipe fence that had an electric wire running next to it for good measure. With her head trapped, she was getting a continuous shock. Thank goodness, we were right there when it happened and were able to rescue her before she was seriously hurt.

Any fence can be dangerous. Pipe fences are visible, solid and will last forever, however if a mule gets run into one, there is no give. On the other hand a wooden fence has some give, but it can splinter and cause damage. Also wooden fences seem to make tasty snacks for some equines and require much upkeep. There are some new fencing products on the market that appear to be quite safe with low maintenance.

If you have animals in pastures next to each other, make sure you do not have a wire running close to the ground. Horses or mules who sometimes paw at fences or antagonize their neighbor over the fence can easily get a foot caught on this low wire. I had a mare that cut off part of her foot in this way. After much doctoring and a wait of 5 years, the mare became sound enough to ride again, but I consider myself lucky in my outcome. That last, low strung barbed or smooth wire between pastures is a disaster waiting to happen. We have removed the bottom wires from our fences and have had no more of these types of injuries.

The same folks who have junky pastures and unsafe fences also often insist on leaving their halters on their animals. Halters left on can become lethal weapons. Animals can get a hind foot hung up in their halter when they go to scratch an itch on their face. Those of us who own mules know how often they love to reach up with a hind foot and get just that right spot under their chin or above their eye for that perfect scratch. They are experts at marksmanship; however they do not know that they risk snaring their foot in their halter every time they do this. Halters, even if fitted properly, can get snagged on trees, limbs, posts or any object in their pasture. Animals can be choked to death this way. When you turn your mule out, take his halter with you. It’s best to come back to a live animal even if he’s hard to catch then a dead one. You can prevent this accident from ever happening.
A few years ago a neighbor of ours, unbeknownst to us, thought he would “teach” his mule baby to be halter broke. So he haltered the foal and left a rope trailing from the halter. Then, he left the foal in his machinery cluttered pasture and went away on Holidays!! Needless to say, when he came back, he found a really “dead” broke halter mule. What a needless tragedy! No animal should ever be left unsupervised with a halter and a lead rope.

If you can’t catch you mule, you can work on that. May I suggest you beg, borrow or buy a videotape by Brad Cameron, well know mule clinician, titled ‘‘Catching the hard to Catch Mule’’. In this very well produced tape, Brad shows you how you have to work on the mind of the mule before you can get the body to follow. Indeed, capturing the mind of a mule in any circumstance is the key to successful mule handling.

**TACK FIT AND POSITIONING**

While taking care of all these requirements for your mules, don’t forget that they also need special consideration in the fit of any tack you will want to put on them. Pack or riding saddles must be modified so that the actual bars of the bare tree will mirror your individual animals back. This is essential so that weight is distributed evenly and pressure points are eliminated. No animal can work with ill-fitting gear. Many are forced to but problems can result from sore, grouchy animals to runaways and buck offs. Whether horses, donkeys or mules, behavioral or training problems can be traced to tack that is not fitted properly for that animal and is causing them pain. The only way they can let us know is by their reaction, and we, with our superior intelligence sometimes miss the source of their bad behavior.

The position of your saddle is also an area that needs to be addressed for mule riders. I see many equestrians who ride with their saddles much too far ahead, seriously impeding their animal’s ability to perform. This, combined with an ill-fitting tree can cause a myriad of problems, not the least of which is a very unhappy and hard to handle mule.

The front of the tree in your saddle must sit at least two inches behind the end of your mule’s shoulder blade. If you are not sure of where his shoulder ends, follow with your hand from the front of his shoulder upwards and towards his back until the firmness of his shoulder blade drops off and you feel a slight dip and softer tissue. This should be the end of his shoulder and the front of your tree should not sit on or in front of this area, but behind it. Most of us have been “educated” into thinking that we have to have that saddle pushed right up on the withers to secure it. Wrong! Get that saddle moved back and make sure your saddle rigging will keep the cinch at least 4 inches away from your mule’s elbow. You will be amazed at the improvement in your mule’s disposition and by the way he moves out with his new freed-up stride. The same positioning of your saddle applies to a donkey or a horse.

Bridles must be made to fit the generally larger brows and jowls of the mule. Bits must fit the animal’s mouth and must not be severe. Don’t start a mule in a bit with a shank on it and expect to end up with a soft-mouthed mule. Although mules do have stronger necks than horses do, they can be taught to be just as flexible and giving to the bit. This can only be taught by the use of a bit that allows for lateral or side to side pull. A shanked bit only teaches them to brace against the pressure if they have not been first started properly in a snaffle bit.

If you want to drive your mule, the same good fit of tack is necessary. The collar must fit your individual mule’s neck and shoulder. One size does not fit all, no different than individually fitting a pack or riding saddle. Your britchen must be adjusted so that it is neither too tight nor too loose, it must not be too high or too low. All the straps and buckles must be adjusted to the size of the individual mule. Make sure that your mule is comfortable in his “working clothes”. It will make a big difference to his attitude!

I hope that I have touched on some of the basic requirements that need to be addressed if you plan to, or already share your life with an enchanting creature with long beautiful ears [or the short – eared variety if that is your choice]. If you are not prepared to supply them with these basic needs, please don’t buy one. If the one you already have is not getting the care he needs, please rectify his situation or find him a different home, one that has the time and knowledge to provide him with a good and useful life. Their care rests in your hands.

Marlene has raised mules in central Alberta for many years but now mostly just enjoys and promotes her favorite equines! If you would like to contact her you can reach her at:

Box 29, Site 5, RR 2, Ponoka, Alberta, Canada, Phone: [403] 783-1723, email: marlenequiring@hotmail.com
WHY A MULE?

By Betsy Hutchins
American Donkey and Mule Society  www.lovelongears.com

Over and over the question is asked, “Why would you prefer a mule to a horse?” So many mule lovers just cannot answer it fully and completely. It is a hard question to answer. It is too much like trying to describe your best girl or favorite beau to somebody and expecting them to understand why you love that person. Have you ever tried to put into coherent words the personality and behavior patterns of someone to a third person? It is very difficult!

Of course you can start with the accepted physical superiorities of the mule. That is more factual and easier for people to see. You can even number some of them such as:

1. The mule endures heat much better than the horse. I will never forget the double show we attended here in Texas on a hot day. There were beautiful palominos in one arena and fine mules in the other. They were all performing in the same classes except that the individual mules would go in many classes, such as western pleasure, barrels, single driving, coon jumping, halter and probably an egg and spoon and pole bending class thrown in, whereas the horses were more specialized and only went in one or two classes in most cases. The thing that impressed everyone who noticed it, was that the palominos were absolutely black with sweat. They were dripping, frothing, and drenched in it. I purposely examined most of the mules. They were sweating – under their browbands and saddlepads! The animals I had at the show drank one bucket of water each the full day and they each went in 7 classes! If you looked around you didn’t see any mule owner hot walking his animal – only in really exceptional cases such as endurance riding or exceptional activity in very hot weather is a mule walked until cool. Most are turned loose to roll in the sand and cool themselves out. Cautious riders withhold water, some never do. Because the donkey has a built-in mechanism (this has been proven by scientific research) similar to the camel in which the donkey when water starved will only drink enough to replace its lost body fluids- the mule has inherited this in almost all cases. Water founder in a mule is so rare it is something to be noted when seen. (The small ones, however, from pony mares, will grass, grain or road founder sometimes, so the idea that mules never founder is not really true.

2. Feeding. There are less feeding problems with mules than there are with horses. It is the custom on many farm areas to keep grain in front of the draft and work mules at all times when they are not working. Mules that are often kept together in pens with feed in front of them at all times, don’t founder or even overeat. Many a man has cussed at the mules he wanted to fatten for market because they wouldn’t eat enough and he had to spend extra money buying them richer food to put the fat on. Mules are happier with plain hay. No fancy hay is needed for them (although many use it), just clean, fresh hay which is suitable for equines. Many people have bought cheaper hay with weeds and other unsightly things in it only to find that their mules clean out the weeds first! Some mules will indeed get in to the grain bin and overeat to the point of colic and founder, but most actually won’t. Some people are greedier than others too. Mules eat less. If they are not working they usually don’t need grain at all. Good pasture or clean hay is the usual maintenance ration unless extra fat is required for show purposes. When working, their grain ration is usually about 1/3 less than a horse their size, although of course they have to have enough for their particular size, metabolism and the work they are doing.

3. Physical soundness. Mules excel here. They have strong, tough, flexible feet and many are never shod at all. Mules that work on pavement, stony ground etc. are shod. But most pleasure animals or mules that work on softer ground never see a shoe and regular trimming keeps them just fine. Their feet are usually not as brittle and shelly as those of a horse and there is less problem with splitting, chipping and contracted heels. Mules naturally have soft, upright boxy feet, which is part of the secret of their surefootedness. Mules also stay extremely sound in the legs. Leg problems are far less likely and when they occur, far less severe. Not only legs, but also wind, “innards”, and all the other parts of the mule including his hide are tougher and longer lasting and more durable than the horse. Hybrid vigor explains a lot of this – the tough physical and mental qualities of the donkey explain the rest. Mules last longer, are more “maintenance free”, and less expensive at the vet’s office than horses on the average. The fact that they are inclined not
to panic, to think about what is happening to them, and to take care of themselves physically, prevents
many accidents that might happen if they were horses.

4. **Self Preservation:** This may belong in personality – but it is one good reason why mules last longer
physically. If they are overheated, overworked, or overused for any reason the mules will either slow down
to a daft pace or just stop completely. So far we have never heard of a messenger running a mule to death
the way the legends say they did their horses!

5. **Longevity:** Mules as a rule of thumb live longer productive lives than horses. In farming days when an
animal’s value depended on how long it could do a day’s work it was estimated by experts that mules
averaged 18 years to the 15 years of horses. A quotation from the pamphlet “Jacks, Jennets and Mules”
may help to illustrate. “One of our members employs 160 mules in harness. He buys 3-year-olds only, and
never sells one. When they become unfit for work they are humanely destroyed. His records are exact. Of
89 mules bought in 1921, twenty-eight were still at work at age 24 year in 1942. The average age of death
of the 61 which had passed away was 20 years” These days when a mule is almost always a companion and
even a pet, the lighter work, better medical care, better feed and good management, the modern mule gets,
means that many of them are still giving their owners good riding at up to age 30, and 40 years old retirees
are not all that uncommon.

6. **Mules can be handled in large groups:** Another quote from “Jacks, Jennets and Mules.” “Mules can be
handled in large groups, 30 or 40 in a corral on farms or up to 500 in feeding pens, without injuries of
consequences. It is common practice in the South to pull the harness off mules noon or night, and turn
them loose in a big corral or lot with access to all the water, hay, and grain they want. They usually will
first roll in a sand pile, which should be available. They will then eat hay for a while, drink a little water
and after a while eat a little grain; then back to hay and water at intervals; but they do not over-eat on grain
– that is. They will not eat enough to injure themselves; though if not at very hard work they will eat more
grain than is necessary.”

7. **Mules are surefooted and careful:** On the trail, in the mountains and between narrow rows of tobacco and
cotton mules have proved their worth over and over again. The surefootedness of the mule is partly
physical and partly psychological. The mule always has a narrower body than a horse of the same height
and weight. He gets this from the ass side of his family. His legs are strong and his feet are small and neat.
This narrow structure and small hoof configuration enables him to place his feet carefully and neatly. His
other advantage is psychological. Mules have a tendency to asses situations and act according to their
views (most of which have to do with self preservation). Many riders don’t like this. Smoke Elser and Bill
Brown say in their books “packin’ in on Mules and Horses” that “a mule’s placid disposition often masks
the fact that she is extremely alert and has a strong urge to look out for herself. Even the most tractable
riding mule rarely places the same degree of trust in her rider as a good horse. When things start to go
wrong (in the mountains) a mule will often react in unexpected ways and can be slow to respond to her
rider. When we’ve got to move fast to untangle a pack string, catch a loose mule or straighten a pack that
has slipped, we prefer to use a mount that lets us do the thinking. Bill and Smoke have this to say about
their pack mules. “Mules travel more easily then horses in the mountains, a difference which show up
clearly when they must pack dead weight. This is largely because horses and mules are put together
differently, and consequently have different ways of moving. A horse is built along the lines of a frog, with
long coiled hind legs for power and shorter front legs for balance…on the level about 60% of a horse or
mule’s weight is over the front legs. Downhill the percentage goes up and to save his knees a horse has to
get his hind legs way up under him and take the longest steps he can without interfering with his front feet.
The result is a rolling, side gait that a pack picks up and exaggerates. The swaying load makes the horse
work harder and makes the saddle and load harder to keep in the middle of the horse’s back. Even though
mules too are built on the frog pattern, they are leveler, with reality longer front legs. This gives them
smoother way of going, particularly downhill where they take shorter steps and sway less. Mules also seem
to have better balance. Narrower feet and a generally narrower build help them traverse steep terrain where
a horse’s wider and more oval feet are a hindrance. But much of a mule’s edge as a mountaineer, may be
mental. On steep slopes or in heavy deadfall where horses tend to become panicky, a mule merely becomes
more intense. Her big ears point forward, and she keeps her eyes on what she is doing. Mules can be led
safely into country too steep for most horses… mules have strong, straight backs that aren’t likely to break
down under heavy loads. Handled properly, they learn to like people and are easy to catch. That’s
important in the hills as in their tendency to quickly become attached to the animals they run with. You can
picket you saddle horse with your mules loose and get a good night’s sleep knowing that you mules will be
there in the morning. Donkeys also throw some light on why a mule can balance a heavy load well. For
some physical reason, which is not immediately obvious, the marked swaying which occurs when a horse walks is not present with a donkey. People who are used to riding donkeys and who switch to a horse remark on the side to side movement that a walking horse has compared to a donkey. Many mules inherit this level sort of walk and trot which enables them to have better balance of heavy loads on their backs.

8. **Veterinary expenses are less:** It seems odd and unprovable but to a confirmed mule owner, horses seem to be a vet bill waiting for a place to happen. Hybrid vigor accounts for a good deal of the sturdy health of the mule as a race. The toughness of the ass accounts for other aspects. Perhaps the instinct of self-preservation which shows up in such diverse ways as not drinking or eating too much when hot or not panicking when caught in barbed wire accounts for the rest. This is not saying that mules never get sick, injured or otherwise “damaged”, it is just that they seem to be tougher from the hide in than horses and take care of themselves better.

9. **Mules look different:** This is the thing that is most obvious to the casual observer – of course they look different. Well, you see, mule lovers LIKE to look at mules. We love those beautiful (even magnificent) big ears. We love to watch the flop in a relaxing rhythm on a placid trail ride, or prick rigidly forward when something interesting is spotted. We begin to think there is something wrong with horses – they look deformed – oh yes, those tiny little useless looking ears! Oh well, each to his own taste. We like the look of strength without bulk, the streamlined look of our mules with their manes roached and their shaved tails. We actually enjoy being different! We know that a mule will draw attention where only the most outstanding and expensive horse will stand out from the crowd. Everyone looks at a colorful appaloosa but everyone oohs and aahs over a colorful appaloosa MULE. People who ride saddle mules often like to have a mount that stands out from the rest both in looks and stamina and so they ride a mule. (We like the way they sound too – kinda silly but fun!)

10. **And finally, personality:** This is the hardest thing to define, and I will do a very incomplete job of it – as anyone must who turns to words. Yes, they are intelligent, they can be very decided about how they want to do things; they are magnificent at running bluffs! They get this from the donkey, I suppose. All our donkeys are noted for the mannerisms that they have which makes them perhaps refuse to do something until they are ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE that you are going to make them do it. Then they give right in and cooperate like angels. Anyone who is going to train or use mules should be aware of this quality. Rather than put your strength against a mule’s (which is tremendous) always either outthink him or use physical means too calmly (that word is emphasized) CALMLY, outmaneuver him. By physical means I mean gadgets – yes that horrifying word. Things that come immediately to mind are tying up a front or hind foot, draw reins, twitches, chain leads, etc. All these used carefully to achieve a specific goal allow you to call your mules bluff and once you do that you have won. The key to handling mules is do things simply, calmly and firmly. Don’t lose your temper and don’t push too hard until you are ready and sure you can make it stick. Don’t assume he is human but don’t assume he is stupid or you will be in trouble! Young mules seem to have more fear of humans and more fear of strange situations than young horses or donkeys. Young mules with no experience thrive on routine and quiet calm care and MUCH HANDLING! THE BIG SECRET TO CALM MULES THAT NEVER KICK AND DON’T HAVE BAD HABITS IS HANDLING THEM FIRMLY BUT GENTLY FROM THE TIME THEY ARE BORN OR FROM THE TIME YOU ACQUIRE THEM. Ground work done on a mule repays itself time and time again so don’t be in too much of a hurry to ride or drive- spend time on training, discipline and ground work first. Don Merrit, an experienced mule trainer says, “When a mule resents something and resists from then on you can expect a fight. You can’t make as many mistakes with a mule as you can in training a horse. You must be especially persistent. You must quietly ease a mule through all of the initial steps of training until he accepts it. Then you’ll have no trouble.”

11. **Mules are not stubborn:** Neither are donkeys, for that matter. Too many mules and donkeys have been carelessly broken or not trained at ALL and expected to know what to do and to obey immediately. Too many mules have been treated roughly and frightened when young instead of made confident in their handlers. And, too many handlers have failed to take into account that strong sense of self-preservation that a mule has. Yes, if you want him to work too hard for his own well-being, especially in hot weather he will be “stubborn”. Yes, if you want him to cross that rickety wooden bridge with no proof to his mind that it will be safe, he will be “stubborn”, and yes, if you try to frighten or hurt him to make him cross he will definitely be “stubborn” and may even fight back and a mule can AIM a kick for best results – believe me.

Donkey and mules generally dislike dogs, so be careful. Once a mule gets used to dogs most mules will ignore them and some even play with the family dog, but strange dogs may be chased and pawed.
Some mules, (usually gelding) and some horse gelding I have known will play roughly with and even outright kill foals, goats, sheep and other small livestock. This seems to be an extension of their dog fetish; so don’t put you mules in with this kind of stock until you are sure they are not that kind.

Mules pal up. Yes, I know, so do horses. But donkeys and mules are the original Damon and Pythias. Don’t buy ONE of the team of mules and expect any good work. Except for the occasional very independent individual mules that have been kept in a team need a teammate, if they don’t have one they can’t concentrate on their work and may be totally useless. They will also have inseparable friends in their pasture. This is something that has to be taken into account. We have a good riding mule that has to be tied to a tree all the time we are out with his horse buddy or he will try to jump the fence and follow. Train them early to leave their friends no matter how rough it is. Then make them do it, and make them accept separation even if you DO have to tie them to a tree! Older mules get better if they have been carefully handled in this respect when young. Young mules are rather insecure animals and the natural herd instinct is exceptionally strong in them because of this. The favorite pal of any mule is a horse, probably because his mother was a horse, but given if they have no horse to become attached to, they will become fast friends with a pony, a donkey or another mule.

MULES ARE NOT LONG-EARED HORSES!

The trouble with mules is that too many people try to handle them as if they were horses. That is the belief of Don Merritt of Helena, Montana.

Merritt, a professional guide and packer, has made a close study of mule psychology and habits because he uses the animals in his business. The only way to get good service out of a mule is to understand how he thinks because the beast doesn’t give a bray what you think. He is a willing worker, but he will do things his way or not at all. In handling mules, cooperation is the better part of valor.

“It is poor business to make a mistake in breaking and training a mule,” Merritt says. “He takes a long time to forget, if he ever does. In the latter stages of training a horse, you can romp on him a little if he deliberately pulls something nasty; he will straighten out. But don’t ever try the same tactics on a mule. The mules may not only become difficult to handle, but he will hate you for life. I make it a rule in training mules that the only punishment for bad behavior will be assignment of “extra duty.”

A mule understands that sort of correction and will accept it. As a general rule, Merritt believes, mules are considerably smarter than horses.

“There are exceptions,” this experienced packer admits. “I have known a few smart horses and a few mules that were not overly bright.” He adds that a mule has a stronger sense of self-preservation than a horse.

“Even when frightened.” Merritt points out; “a mule will rarely do anything to injure himself. He will not founder himself by overeating or overdrinking, as a horse will. If hung up in a packsaddle wreck or caught in wire, he will almost never fight and injure himself, as a horse will. A smoothing word will calm a mule until you can get him untangled.”

Merritt dismisses the popular notion that mules are naturally stubborn. He is convinced mishandling is what makes a renegade mule.

Methods that are effective with a horse do not always work on Old Long Ears. A horse forgives and forgets. A mule doesn’t.
“When a mule resents something and resists, “Merritt warns, “from then on you can expect a fight. You can’t make as many mistakes with a mule as you can in training a horse. You must be especially persistent. You must quietly ease a mule through all of the initial steps of training until he accepts it. Then you’ll have no trouble.”

A good example of this is shoeing. It is a standard belief that mules hate to have their feet handled, that they have to be scotch-hobbled, immobilized in a squeeze chute, or thrown and hog-tied to be trimmed and shod.

“Except for just one time, we have always shod all our mules standing up,’ Merritt reports, “even the broncs. Some mules do have strong opinions about surrendering their hooves, their defense weapons, to a farrier, Many will submit to having shoes hammered on their front feet, but will struggle when a hind foot is taken away from them. If a mule decides he has had enough, he can sure leave a farrier upside down in a hurry.”

Generally, if the shoeing business is introduced gradually, and if the farrier is not an aggressive type, mules will stand to be shod.

Abused horses can usually be reclaimed. Kind treatment and time will restore the average horse’s trust and confidence in his handler. He may never forget former mistreatment, but he is willing to forgive.

A mule, however, will seldom forget a bad experience and he will never forgive the person who gave it to him. Not only that, but he draws no distinction between the individual who roughed him up and any other person. He does not separate good guys from bad guys. The mule sees all humans as either friends or enemies.

People familiar with mules will tell you that mules dislike dogs. Why should this be so? In Merritt’s opinion, it’s not that the two are natural enemies. But it’s a good example of the mule’s strictly black and white view of the world.

“On any ranch, horse or mule spread,” Merritt observes, “at times a dog might try to drive a mule as he would a cow. Sometimes the dog heels the mule, nipping at him. The dog may be in earnest or he may be just playing, but that makes no difference to the mule. From then on he looks on all dogs as enemies.”

From then on all dogs had better stay clear of that mule. Most horse will resist a dog that harasses them, kicking backwards, but Merritt has seen only wild horses strike at dogs. A mule takes the offensive.

Chased by a dog a mule will adroitly maneuver to reverse positions. He becomes the chaser with the dog as his quarry.

“The dog then best be mighty fleet and good at dodging,” Merritt declares, or the mule, striking accurately from behind, will break the dog’s spine.”

To a horseman’s eye, the average mule hardly looks like a speedster. Appearance is deceiving. Mules cannot only run, they have a niftier, shiftier change of pace than an all-pro running back. “I used to think that a mule couldn’t run as fast as a horse,” Merritt says. “Then I learned that a mule will not overexert himself unless he feels he has to. On one trip, one of my wranglers was running a couple of new pack mules across a meadow to corral them. I noticed they were running barely ahead of his saddle horse. “Later,” Merritt recalls, I said to him: “You know, Bob, I’ve never seen a mule get out and really run as fast as a good horse, I wonder why they can’t do it? “Do it?” he asked. “I once ran those two mules across an open flat with my fastest calf-roping quarter horse. I was trying to rope first one and then the other. I’d gain on them going full tilt, but each time I thought I had them they’d let out an extra spurt and were out there at least three yards beyond the end of my 35-foot lariat.”

A good pack mule shows this same deceptively effortless speed when walking. Most mules are smooth walkers. They don’t shake a pack. They may appear to be slow, but on a mountain trail a string of leggy 1200-pound pack
Mules will out walk most saddle horses. Merritt has seen mules make a Tennessee Walker really get out and go to stay ahead of them.

“Pound for pound, a mule is stronger and more durable than a horse.” Merritt says. “He is an easy keeper, able to thrive on less feed than a horse. He paces himself, walking always at a steady gait. A mule is much more surefooted than a horse. He has smaller hooves with a deeper cup, and a mule usually can go barefoot much longer than a horse.”

Merritt tells of Alaskan outfitters who shied away from using mules because they believed it took a horse with large feet, feet that needed a number two or three shoe, to walk the muskeg and bogs. After trying mules the Alaskans changed their minds. Now they come to Montana to buy pack mules. A mule handles a bog better than a horse. A mule never plunges. He places his feet more deliberately. A mule seems to roll his weight from leg to leg without sinking deeply. He can extract his hooves from a sticky mud hole more easily than a horse can. Merritt can give examples of mule’s agility on rough, mountain trails. A year ago, near the end of the hunting season, he was bringing the last of the camp out in crusted, three-foot deep snow. His saddle horse was floundering in the steep hillside as it struggled through the drifts. “I looked back,” Merritt relates, “and my head lead mule was calmly and deliberately picking out only the straight ahead tracks made by my horse in the snow. The mule was placing his hooves exactly in the horse’s track, whether the steps were long or short. All the other mules behind the leader were doing exactly the same thing. Steadily and deliberately, without any missteps or floundering, those 1200 - 1400 pound mules came around the mountain.”

Merritt has known only two mules that showed any affection for members of their own kind. These were jennies foaled about the same time and grew up together. When they were broken as 4-year-olds and put to work in a pack string where they mingled with horses, they both adopted the same mare as their surrogate mother and showed no further interest in each other.

Normally, mules do not buddy up as horses do. They frequently kick and bite one another for no apparent reason. They seem to recognize no sexual difference among themselves. A male will not hesitate to attack a female. A mule’s attitude towards horses is different.

“A mule has strong affection for a horse.” Merritt says. “After all, his mother was one. A mare in particular is the mother image. A mule, whether 2 years old or 20, will pick out a certain mare and attach himself to her. Take that mare out of the herd for a spell and the mule will run around braying and crying its head off for days.”

If there is another mare in the string or one added to it, the bereaved “orphan” will latch onto her. If no mare is present, a mule will adopt a gelding as its mother. This mother fixation in mules is so strong that Merritt says the mare can be meaner than sin to the mule and the mule will accept such punishment without resistance. That is why mules can be turned lose in camp at night. If the horses are picketed, the mules are tied to the mother’s apron string. They will still be there in the morning.

Merritt’s mules are an amazingly friendly bunch. When guests walk out from camp after a day’s ride, it’s not unusual for some of the pack mules to tag along. These animals are content because Merritt has taken the time to learn the specialized training that mules require.

“At least, it can take a lot longer,” he explains. “A mule is not always so quick to submit to man’s will. It takes longer to convince him that he is not going to be hurt. Some of the old-time wranglers who have worked for me were convinced that a mule was “just getting to be good when he was bout 12 years old.”

**MYTHS AND FALICYS ABOUT SADDLE FIT**

By Marlene Quiring

‘’The **basics** of good saddle fitting applies to all; horse, mule or donkey.’’

**MYTH:**

1. **“A saddle will naturally find its own sweet spot on your horse/mule.”**

**REALITY:**
Not so, a saddle will naturally follow the path of least resistance…. even if that means sliding ahead on a horse/mule that has a downhill back and pushing against or riding up on that animal’s shoulders, which besides being uncomfortable for the animal, also seriously impedes his range of motion. That spot is neither ‘sweet’ to you or him!

**MYTH:**

2. ”*If a horse/mule has good withers, he will hold a saddle well.*”

**REALITY:**

Not necessarily so! While having good withers is an asset, his overall conformation, such as the shape of his barrel, whether he has a long sloping shoulder or a straight shoulder, short back or long back, sway backed, etc. needs to be taken into consideration when fitting a saddle. An animal that has an ‘uphill’ back or at least a ‘level’ back will stabilize a well-fitting saddle better than one that is **‘low on the front end’** or has ‘mutton withers.’ However, **many horses/mules that have ‘high’ withers still have DOWNHILL backs!** You do not look at the top of the withers and the top of the croup to determine if an animal has a level back. Instead draw a line from the top of the loin and follow that down to the front of his shoulder muscle. In most cases you will see that the back dips down. That is the angle that the saddle will want to follow. High withers will prevent the saddle from coming over his ears…. but many horse/mule’s backs are definitely ‘‘downhill.’’ If you are relying on his withers to hold the saddle on you are making a mistake.

**MYTH:**

3. ‘’*If you have your saddle too far back, you are going to hurt those kidneys!*’’

**REALITY:**

You couldn’t hurt the kidneys of a horse/mule even if you hammered on his loins. His kidneys are a suspended organ well protected by bone, muscle and tissue; out of reach of any damage that could be caused by pressure on his loin area. You can however cause sore loin muscles or loss of hair by tree skirts that are too long or a tree that has bars that are too long for that animal’s conformation.

**MYTH:**

4. ‘’*Saddle and harness marks and scars on a horse or mule is just the sign of a well broke/worked animal.*’’

**REALITY:**

Not true! Saddle or harness marks and scars should not be the mark of an animal that has been well used, they do however reflect an animal that has been carrying improperly fitted or positioned tack. There can be other reasons for ‘‘marking’’ up a critter such as scalding from heat retention and so on, but most animals we see are simply not properly tacked up or have not been in the past.

**MYTH**

‘’*The only way to get a good fit on my mule is to order a saddle with mule bars. [Or order a custom made saddle.]’’

**REALITY:** While either of the above is usually a step in the right direction, it may not solve your saddle fitting problems. For starters, a saddle built on mule bars still has to have the correct width, angle, twist, belly and length of bar for your mule. If that information is not available or evident when purchasing the saddle, you are relying on pure good luck that that saddle will fit your mule. Many folks are not aware of the shape and size of the tree that their animal will require and get caught up or dazzled by all the other information available such as seat size, cantle height, leather tooling, etc. While this information can be important for your comfort, it is more important to find out first if the tree will fit your animal! Just like horses, mules have backs that differ one from the other. Makes pretty good sense then that one ‘‘mule saddle” **does not fit all mules!** So, be wary of ordering a saddle just because it is advertised as having ‘‘mule bars.”

Likewise, often a saddle that is custom ordered is sometimes made to fit the rider and not always to fit the animal that will have to pack it. Just because that saddle is comfortable for you, in no way means it fits your horse/mule. Of those saddlers that will fit a tree to your animal before they build the saddle, there are some that may not know how
to properly fit a tree or where it should sit for the conformation of the animal. Many will want to set that tree up on
the mule’s shoulders, thus if they build the saddle to fit with the tree riding the mules shoulders...what have you
 gained? If you plan to order a custom saddle do your homework and make sure that besides the saddle fitting your
butt, it is built to fit your animal. That means that you must make sure the saddle maker has taken into consideration
the shape, angle, and length of your animal’s back and understands the need to keep the bars of the saddle off of the
horse’s/mule’s shoulders!

Now, that we’ve dissected some of these “myths” we can go on to some things you can do to achieve a better fit on
your animal with the saddle or saddles you presently own as long as the tree fits your animal reasonably well and is
not too narrow. There are ways to help a saddle fit better if the fit is close but not perfect. However, there is
absolutely nothing you can do with a saddle that is too narrow but to look for another!

Selective padding and the use of “shims” whether bought or handmade can help saddle fit but again, if the tree is
too narrow for the animal, extra padding only makes it worse. A tree that is too wide can be made to work by using
correctly angled and fitted shims. Riders need to educate themselves first about their animal’s conformation and then
learn how to work with that conformation so that that animal can perform to the best of their ability with the least
amount of discomfort. A saddle with a too narrow tree, no matter what the “quality” of either, cannot be made to fit
an animal with a wider back.

I believe that many of us saddle our horses/mules much too far forward and that many horses and mules have
downhill backs. I’ve had many folks nod their heads in agreement but then go and saddle their horse or mule right
up on the withers. While most animals will ride that way, you never get the performance out of them that you could
if you moved that saddle right off of any moving parts of his back, namely his shoulders! If you position the front of
the tree of your saddle so that it is behind the end of his shoulder blade or muscle when his leg is extended forward,
you are allowing his shoulder to have full range of motion. However, if you ride with your saddle so that the tree
rests on his shoulder or wither area, your weight in the saddle forces your animal to tolerate constant pressure on his
moving shoulder muscle and seriously constricts his movement. How would you perform if every time you extended
your arm you encountered resistance? It’s likely that you would soon learn to limit your motion to try and avoid the
pressure.

During my constant search for more information on saddles and saddle fitting problems I came across an article in
my collection of Western Horseman magazines dated November, 1989 written by Dave Jones titled “The Shoulder
Blade Problem. “In it Dave discovers that many of the horses he was getting for training stopped their behavioral
problems when he discovered a way to keep the saddles off of their shoulder blades. To quote from page 102 ‘ The
horse’s pronounced shoulder blades pushed the saddle back, and we noticed that he was a lot more at ease when
this happened. It was a little hard to keep the saddle sitting that far back, for we had to use a lot of blankets to keep
the fork off his withers, but he stopped fearing his rides. The dim idea that the saddle bars shouldn’t rest on a
horse’s shoulder blades had lodged back in the murky recesses of my brain.” End of quote. So this idea that a saddle
should not be sitting up on the withers has been “discovered” before.

White spots in the shoulder area can indicate an ill-fitting or too narrow tree but often they are a sign of saddles that
have been ridden too far forward with the shoulders being constantly “jammed.” Since many horses or mules
actually have downhill backs, it becomes necessary to know how to “level” a saddle and how to keep it from riding
downhill. Many of us do not even realize that we are being thrown ahead by a downhill back. Once you learn to
recognize this it is very easy to see [and feel!] Once corrected it makes an amazing difference in your comfort and
your animals too. This is accomplished by building up the front end of the saddle with shims or making the
modifications to the tree itself. Then, the use of a properly designed and positioned back cinch will aid in stabilizing
the saddle and holding it in position. The back cinch should not be “optional” but is indeed very necessary in
keeping the saddle in the proper position. The trend today even by trail riders is to leave the back cinch loose or even
throw it away. **In reality, you would be much better off to use your breast collar and back cinch and throw your
front cinch away.**

Tim Barton is a retired college instructor in equine anatomy, guide, packer and driver with over 35 years’ experience
in the wilderness. None of his horses or mules have any white hairs or other signs of bad fitting tack except for one
horse that was loaned out to a friend to pack with one summer. All Tim’s animals pack, ride and drive and earn their
keep each and every summer in the Canadian Rockies; most are well into their 20’s and still going strong. Geriatric
horses look and act like young colts and the only white hairs they have on their bodies are from old age! Tim has been an advocate of properly fitted and positioned tack for a very long time and a wealth of information on the subject. You can check out his Mountain Retreat at www.outpostatwardenrock.com and find more information there on saddle and tack fitting.

There are other people besides Tim who are dispelling the myths about saddle and tack fit and are doing their part in helping to educate horse/mule owners. The proof is in the use of horses and mules that perform beyond the normal expectations, simply because, NOW THEY CAN!

Many of these people are professionals in their own right who do understand equine anatomy. One is a human and equine chiropractor who told me years ago that most of the problems we experience in our animal’s backs are caused from riding with our saddles too far forward. Another ‘believer’ is a saddle maker who also runs a prominent saddle and tack shop in southern Alberta. He told me that he first learned of this through an instructor in the States that was to teach those from his company on proper fitting of a western saddle. The instructor was ridiculed when he suggested where the tree of the saddle needs to sit [off of the shoulders] and most of the pupils walked out of his class, but not this fellow. He decided to test this ‘new’ idea out and found that he got so much more out of his horses when he moved his saddle back that he has been an advocate of this ever since.

Ultimately it is your responsibility to make sure your animals have their tack fitted and positioned properly. Thanks to such people such as Tim Barton, there are a few more of us that are doing a much better job of making our animals comfortable and enabling them to do their best for us. They can only talk with their actions, it is up to you to ‘listen’ to what they are telling you!

Castrating Mules and Jacks

by Heather Smith Thomas

Unless a male donkey is destined for breeding, he should be castrated, preferably while he is still young and has not yet developed typical male behavior. All male mules should be castrated, since they definitely won’t be used for breeding. Even though male mules are infertile, they will still try to breed females and can be a dangerous nuisance if they are not gelded.

Gelding a mule or a jack is not as simple as gelding a young male horse. Extra care is needed when castrating donkeys or mules. It is wise to castrate them before 6 months of age, if both testicles are descended. This is recommended for two reasons—to prevent aggressive male behavior, and to get it done before the testicles and blood vessels become large, to avoid excessive bleeding.

The late Dr. Tex Taylor (veterinarian at Texas A&M who was a well-known authority on donkeys and mules) wrote a handout for veterinarians some years ago, entitled Elementary Assology, to help educate practitioners who were treating mules and donkeys in their veterinary practices. The booklet discussed differences among horses, donkeys and mules, their behavior, foaling (donkey and mule foals), using jacks as breeding animals, health issues commonly seen in donkeys/mules, and castration of mules and donkeys.

Nearly all male mules are castrated at some point in their lives, and an increasing number of jacks are castrated unless they will be used for breeding. Taylor mentioned that donkeys, and some mules, have more
tendency to bleed excessively after castration than do horses, due to several factors. According to Taylor, donkeys and mules don’t respond as well to most of the short-term anesthetics commonly used, and may not relax as much. They may also “wake up” quicker. This may contribute to a more hurried procedure by the person doing the surgery, and also increased blood pressure in the animal (if he is not as relaxed or begins to try to get up too soon).

Another factor is that donkeys and some mules have larger testicles than horses of the same age, with larger blood vessels supplying the testicles and more tissue to deal with during the surgery—and more chance for bleeding. Many donkeys also have thicker scrotal skin and larger blood vessels at the surface, but this is not as common in mules.

As male donkeys and mules mature, the scrotal area gets more fat deposits than in a horse. If the veterinarian cuts off the bottom of the scrotum during castration (a technique used by some vets) the chances for scrotal bleeding are increased. Most veterinarians now advocate ligating (tying off) the spermatic cord as well as using an emasculator (which crushes as well as cuts it), in donkeys—and also in mules, when in doubt regarding the risk for bleeding.

Taylor preferred to ligate the entire cord (as high as possible) and to use the emasculator tool below the ligature. By including the surrounding membrane in the ligature (tying off the whole structure), Taylor felt that the chances of bleeding and the risk for evisceration (intestines coming down through the opening) are reduced. He felt that evisceration is always a worry when castrating mature jacks because of the very large size of the spermatic cord.

Even though thousands of male donkeys and mules have been successfully gelded without taking this precaution, the chance of complication (with possible fatality) makes it worth doing. Taylor tried gelding several of his own animals without ligation to see if bleeding was a problem, and it was. Ligation (tying off the cord as high as possible) can often be difficult in the standing animal, and Taylor always preferred to not geld mules standing.

There has always been some debate regarding the best age to geld male foals (whether horse, donkey or mule). An increasing number of owners geld them early in life because then they don’t have to deal with the development of aggressive male behavior. Some mule owners also feel that early-castrated mules will have more refinement, as well as growing taller than the males castrated after puberty.

The main drawback to castrating foals in the 2 to 3 weeks of life is a slightly higher risk for evisceration, due to either scrotal hernia or an enlarged inguinal ring (the structure surrounding the canal that allows the testicles of the male fetus to descend into the scrotum at about 9 to 10 months of gestation. If the testicles of the mule baby are in the scrotum at birth (as they should be), the boundaries of this inguinal canal are larger and less defined than at any other time of their life. But the veterinarian doing the castration can easily palpate and check for a hernia and close it with a stitch.

In a few instances, however, when castration is done very young, even tying off the cord or closing the inguinal ring with stitches may not prevent evisceration—just because the strength of these tissues at that young age may not be adequate to hold the stitches. According to Taylor, tissue strength increases greatly during the first 30 to 45 days of life. During this same time period, the internal inguinal ring contracts from as large as 3 to 4 inches down to about one inch or less. This is why the ideal time to geld a mule foal may be at some point after 2 to 3 months of age but before weaning--while the foal is still on the dam (for emotional security and self exercise following mama around the pasture).

Taylor recommends that any foal (especially mule or donkey foals) castrated any earlier than 2 to 3 months should have the external inguinal ring sutured, or at least a tying off of the spermatic cord. Routine castration techniques are probably effective after that age.

MULEPSYCHOLOGY 101— THE RULES

By Cindy K. McKinnon

To conclude the Mule Psychology 101 series, once again here are the rules. Like the admired schoolteacher that can identify and relate to each of her students, you must develop the ability to identify true behavior problems so you can relate to your mule.

First we must adopt some rules that shan’t be broken. These are rules that I have adopted for myself. They are nonnegotiable.
1) No one gets hurt – you or the mule. Because of this rule, risks or short cuts will not be taken. Not ever!
2) Have a goal or purpose in mind and shoot for it. Never compromise this.
3) Read as much as you can and don’t get stuck on one thing. Learn the many different riding disciplines and never lose interest in learning. Learning is a lifelong process. We will all leave this world only knowing so much.
4) Train the mule quickly and efficiently. Why quickly? Simply because the mule is a “get to the point” kind of animal. And, we don’t want to bore him.

5) Train the mule with the least amount of conflict. Meaning, keep your disagreements to a minimum.
6) Learn the many languages of the mule, so that you many speak his language and then there will be no disagreements.
7) Give the mule the right amount of credit for his intelligence. Too much credit to his IQ will get you into trouble as well as discounting him.
8) ALWAYS match the punishment to the crime when correcting your mule. NEVER over reprimand and NEVER lose your temper. You can get mad; just don’t lose your temper. Once the proper correction has been quickly and effectively applied, forget it and move on.
9) WHEN you do make a mistake, forgive yourself, and then forgive your mule. Move forward. Learn together.
10) REWARD you mule for his good behavior, with kind works, caressing his neck, and/or treats.

11) When behavior problems develop, stand back and find out why. Investigate, is their pain from ill fitting equipment? Does he need time off from the hectic show schedule? A change in his routine? You are the professor and you are responsible for finding out what is troubling your student.

12) Respect you mule and let him be himself. That’s right, let him be a mule. The unique, bold, calculating, inquisitive, suspicious, independent, athletic, hybrid creature deserves to be himself. Altering his behavior is one thing, but to change him is another. Accept him as he is and you will both learn from each other.

Now that we all know the rules, we can begin. The biggest mistake that people tend to make regarding their mule’s training is not being able to IDENTIFY the less favorable behavior. In other words, they know that what the mule is doing is incorrect, or the wrong response, but are not able to pinpoint the CAUSE or the reason for that behavior. Gadgets or training aids are abruptly applied and to add to this, the owner is frustrated, the mule SENSES this and ANXIETY worsens. Usually, a bad habit is quickly developed as a result, then a frantic phone call to the trainer. What if, you received a set of “instructions” that came with your mule? A booklet that explained all of his moods, temperaments and the how’s and why to all of his quirks? Would you feel less intimidated by him, if you clearly understood him? Would you have more confidence in your schooling techniques if you possessed the knowledge? Are you able to act or apply when needed, and to quickly access each training incident with an open and objective mind? Can you be creative with your training so that you both keep a keen interest? Would you feel more at ease in your training techniques if you knew the rules to the hybrid mind? Yes, there are rules that are ever so in black and white, according to the mule. It doesn’t matter in the least what you think, not according to the mule. It does matter, however, WHAT YOUR MULE THINKS. You see, we can’t change the way of thinking. We can adjust his attitude, but more intelligently, we can think on his terms. We can present our methods to him in the manner that he likes. The talk that he wants to hear. Because we know that the mule learns best when he teaches himself. Not when you or I attempt to apply something to his world. To be successful trainers, we have no choice, but to learn the mule’s language. So that we can keep his mind fresh and willing. Not heart, but will. We must learn his language, so that we may communicate our wishes to the mule to get positive, favorable responses in his training. THAT is the key to a successful trainer. Keep an open mind, a hybrid state of mind, where both mule and rider win.
Dr. Suzy Burnham of Graham TX traveled to Olds, Alberta Canada April 23rd to 25th 1999, to provide a seminar, Pearls of Wisdom. The Friday sessions were specifically geared to veterinarians and farriers. The following is some of the things I gleaned from the Saturday and Sunday sessions.

Dr. Suzy is such an energetic, informative, engaging and enthusiastic speaker, and makes one feel like she is your friend and partner in this love of longears. Dr. Suzy spent a lot of time demonstrating on how to scratch and massage your animal, from head to toe and all places in between. She advised using gloves so as to get deeply into the skin and give a really thorough rubbing. Test done on miniature donkeys at 54 months showed the knees were not closed yet, they mature very slowly as compared to horses. So back off on riding your donkey or mule until they are about 4 years old. They can do some driving before this, but remember they are slower maturing and don’t push your animals until they are physically and mentally able to handle it.

Worming is, of course, necessary and should be done every two months if your animals are in close confinement. In Texas, animals are building up immunity to Ivermectin, so Dr. Suzy recommends you rotate wormers yearly. Ivermectin still does get bots and lungworm, but they are finding it isn’t controlling pinworms, roundworms, etc. Donkeys can also carry tapeworms.

Castration in donkeys or mules is different in that they have extra blood vessels, and Dr. Suzy says to just crimp and cut is not adequate. She always does a figure eight suture and makes sure it holds. Mules should be castrated between six to nine months; otherwise they can become difficult to handle. Dr. Suzy advocated, “Anesthesia with amnesia,” in other words, always lay a donkey to mule out for castration, as mules especially are very unforgiving of any pain. Mules have been said to be susceptible to Tetanus, however this has mainly been because so many were castrated with a dull, dirty knife in dirty corrals without vaccinations or penicillin, and contracted Tetanus and died, or bled to death. Make sure you keep animals up to date on vaccinations applicable to your area. Tetanus is always a must!

Dr. Suzy on Mules: Sadly, mules are very difficult to do research on because there are such differences between animal to animal, even the same parents can produce such different offspring, making them difficult critters to study. Seventy percent of mules born are mollys! And yes, there have been very rare instances where a molly has conceived and bore offspring. Donkeys have 62 chromosomes and horses have 64 and the mules’ ends up with 63, so it is next to impossible for this to happen, but you know that they say about things being impossible! Whether you’re breeding a donkey or a mare, don’t breed the animal until it is at least a three-year-old. If you breed as a two year old you are depriving that animal if its own growth.

Imprinting is a must in Dr. Suzy’s books, especially for a mule. When the baby is born get your hands on it and HABITUATE it to such things as having its feet handled ears and any place on its body touched, clippers, etc. Habitation means to repeat the stimuli enough times so it no longer bothers that baby. Once the resistance has stopped, repeat the stimuli at least seven more times! They must get over their resistance to the point where they remain calm, and accept the pressure. This is of utmost importance and will reduce the stress on handling as they get older.

When a mule gets a bad habit they’re difficult to break, so don’t let that happen. In order to train a mule he must think it’s his idea. Put the pressure on him and wait, don’t scream, use a whip or get harsh… just wait, wait for the correct response. He’ll find the way and think it was his idea. Give him a problem, say take away his front foot, then be his savior and give it back to him. Take on the job as his”life saver”. Make sure every time he’s in a predicament, or in a problem “you save his life”.

When tying a mule, make sure you have good strong equipment that won’t break. Tie him to a tree “with deep roots”. Generally a mule will pull once, then twice, and then will stand still. He realizes he’s caught. Immediately turn him loose, that’s his reward… you saved him! It’s all a psychological game with the mule. A mule has to bond with you. Young mules get bored so quickly that you have to keep changing thing for them, even if it’s just arranging the cones a different way for a pattern. Their minds need to be kept entertained as they’re always thinking. Mules love routine, but because of this, can get so they don’t work well if their routine isn’t adhered to, so it’s important to vary their activities and not let them get into a rut. Don’t do everything the same every day, keep things interesting and teach them to accept variety.

Because mules Love horses and bond to them quickly,) that’s why outfitters never need to worry about where their mules are when they have a lead mare) you will need to plan ahead so you will be able to ride away from their horse friends.
If you’re on a trail with your mule and you come across something that’s going to eat them, let them stop and face the danger. Don’t punish them for being afraid, but encourage them by speaking to them or singing and **Exhale** your breath. It will encourage them to take a step or two forward, until they realize their bogeyman is okay.

Tail wringing is often seen in mules and Dr. Suzy feels it should be tolerated to a degree. She will not penalize a mule for tail wringing in a class when they’re being obedient in everything else. Mules seem to like to have that “sass” from the back end. (To me it seems to say they always have the last word!)

A nervous mule needs to be trained to lower his head and look you in the eye. He must “hook up” with you. They need to learn to bond with you and look to you for help, otherwise you may still have a mule that will work for you, but will only tolerate you and will not desire to be with you.

Mules respond well to music. If you need to do some arena work, put on some rousing music and you will find your mule keeping up the rhythm. Dr. Suzy, like many of us, admitted to singing to our mules and you know what, they like it!! Dr. Suzy says there’s nothing better than a good mule and she has sold her horses and committed to her 17-hand thoroughbred molly mule, Ramona. Donkeys and mules, with their challenging and free thinking spirit, are such fun to work with, Dr. Suzy can think of nothing better!!

---

**Move their feet!**  
By Jerry Tindell  
[www.jerrytindell.com](http://www.jerrytindell.com)

“Move their feet”, is not a training concept put together by all equine trainers or widely used by them. Having a true understanding what “Move their feet “means can be difficult for students who typically ride only through their hands.

Jerry Tindell has worked around horses, donkeys and mules his entire life, but early in his career he began to think the feet were the most important key to training stock. A top notch farrier, Jerry evaluated horses’ movement through their feet, and made mental notes how to correct the horse’s hooves to help gain fluid movement. As his passion grew to train stock and to help their owners so did the belief that everything started with the feet.

In the real world movement is vital to prey animals to have the ability to flee whether it’s for the pecking order of the herd or from a predator. The movement is quick, precise, and decisive; little thought is given to the movement other than to flee. As a natural horse/ mule trainer Jerry had studied their movement and understood the how, when and where they move their feet. To work with the mind of the mule you have to listen to what the feet are telling you.

The concept of “Move their feet,” begins by observing the two kinds of movement in the mule; Subtle, soft, and safe movement or fast, stiff and defensive. Look at the cadence of
the mule and the components of their foot falls. Basic movements such as a walk (four beat gait), trot (two beat gait) and lope (three beat gait) allow the mule movement for performance. Check for soundness, how they use their feet as they work through these transitions, rate the speed and how their feet hit the ground. Are the feet heavy and pounding or are footfalls subtle and light? Powering out of control or brace identifies fear or self-preservation in the mule; with fear the mind gets troubled. The mule’s body becomes stiff, the head is high. Hindquarters become very powerful; feet are locked and loaded as concern builds for the flight response. A secure mule’s head is down with natural expressions that are soft and relaxed. Feet are light bringing the body into a correct position, allowing the mind to be quiet.

Rarely do we think of the feet as we ride. It is very difficult to learn to focus on each moving part and what the movements represent in small incremental parts. The ability to lift one foot or square up all four feet begins when we become aware of the feet. As the “Move their feet” concept begins to make sense, keep in mind the following training exercises:

**Allow movement:** We cannot succeed if we are holding the face and body.

**Build on the movement:** Be aware of how your posture affects the mule’s movement, for example leaning your body puts weight on the foot you want to be picked up softly.

**Build cadence and rhythm last:** Just moving the feet does not make the change you want; change comes when you arrange the feet correctly for the body to follow. When you can arrange the feet for soft body control, then you can settle the mind when troubled. If the mule can hold together through support, the fear will dissipate more each time.

“It’s not the face running off, it’s the feet!”

Jerry Tindell's childhood links him to a time when mules and horses were a vital part of the American story. The 8th child of a Missouri timber man, Jerry grew up watching his father work with both draft horses and mules to support the family by skidding logs. That connection shaped his life, and he has followed his love and respect for animals to build a successful career which now focuses on training both equines and humans.

Coming to California in 1971, Jerry worked as a farrier with his older brother Duke. This led to working with law enforcement units, first as a farrier and later as a trainer, work he continues today. Currently his schedule is filled with clinics throughout California, Nevada and Alberta. A regular at Bishop Mule Days and Back Country Horsemen events, his clinics focus on learning to support the animal in making the right choices. Jerry's methods open a window into a logical, humane, and effective method of increasing the communication between riders and their mounts. Jerry has several DVD’S and articles on training. You can reach him through his website at [www.jerrytindell.com](http://www.jerrytindell.com)

This Booklet is put together and sponsored by the Alberta Donkey and Mule Club. All of the photos are of Club members and their animals. We hope you enjoy the information that we have compiled within.

For more information on donkeys and mules INCLUDING more articles, please contact the Alberta Donkey and Mule Club at: