

Alberta Donkey and Mule Club News: February 2007

March 4, 3:00 Annual General Meeting at the home of Ron and Eileen Rusts, west of Ponoka on Hwy 53, 2 miles past Crestomere Store, then south on RR 283 and 1st place on west side. Phone 403 783-8751 for more information.

The positions of President and 2 Directors are up for election. Please consider volunteering your time in one of these positions. There are only a few meetings a year and the workload is light when shared between the membership. Following the meeting will be a Potluck supper and time for more socializing. Everyone welcome!

I don't as yet have confirmed dates for the Driving Clinic or the Bomb Proofing Clinic. They should all be confirmed by the Annual Meeting and Registrations will be taken at that time as well as for the 7 spots available for the Josh Nichol Clinic in Athabasca, June 5-8. This clinic will fill up fast so if you are interested, you need to act now! Deposits on the clinics are required to secure your spot. Contact Ethel at 403 783 -3083 for more information.

Congratulations to Dave and Teresa Kungel on the birth of a daughter December 12. Kate has 3 older brothers to watch out for her as she grows up. As some of you know Dave, has joined forces with me in maintaining the website www.mammothmules.com. We get a lot of questions pertaining to mules and Dave is especially patient and detailed in responding to such inquiries. The following is one of his replies to a mule owner inquiring about starting her 18 month old, 15.2 hh mule with some ground driving.

TRAINING A YOUNG MULE TO DRIVING

By Dave Kungel

If you are going to be putting a snaffle bit in your mule's mouth, be sure to check his mouth regularly as he may still have new teeth erupting at this age. The other thing to keep in mind is that a mule matures more slowly than a horse; mentally as well as physically. Mules also have a more sensitive nature than horses. I think you have recognized this as you speak about learning to have more patience. So when you combine mental immaturity with a sensitive nature you have an animal that is easily overwhelmed and upset. For this reason I would be reluctant to start him dragging a tractor tire at this young age. If you want to start ground driving with him that is great, just go slowly and don't expect too much from him. Be sure you have prepared him by moving him around with halter pressure from your hand first so he understands what is going on before you go to long lines. If you treat ground driving as a game you will probably both have more fun.

When he is really good at ground driving then perhaps ask him to pull something smaller like a car tire; do this in a small enclosed area if possible. Ensure that the tire can't get wrapped around a post or anything else if your mule should spook. For safety I usually use twine to attach the tire to the traces the first few times just in case there is an "incident". Everything changes when you ask your mule to start pulling something behind him; this "mule eating monster" makes threatening noises and is chasing him everywhere he goes!!! As well if you start with something smaller there is less risk of causing the mule to balk at the unfamiliar weight on his shoulders or chest. Personally I like to start ground driving my animals in a rope halter. I feel there is less risk of hurting the animal if something goes wrong. I attach the lines on each side of the halter at the point where the noseband connects with the cheekpiece; similar to a side pull bridle. This allows the mule to feel a lateral pull and helps to keep them very light. The progression from this to a bridle is then almost always very smooth and uneventful.

I like your idea of letting your mule get used to what he is going to pull; the tire in the barnyard. However I would take it one step further, use a car tire with a rope attached to start with. When you go into the barnyard drag the tire over to the barn with you, let your mule see the tire following you and not hurting you. If your mule gets used to seeing a stationary tire in the barnyard day after day and grows used to this then it will probably scare him when he sees this same tire come to life and start following him one day.

I start my animals driving in an open halter/bridle and then progress to a closed bridle. Mules like to know what is going on, they are very much a thinking animal. Once they decide that what is behind them is safe then they are okay with it, this takes some time though. As well the young mule will derive a lot of his confidence from you the handler, you have a big responsibility! Most blinder bridles are made for horses and do not function as well with mules due to the mule's eyes being set more to the side of their head. As a result a mule can see past most blinder bridles. The blinders are not there to prevent this but rather to help the animal to focus on what is ahead of them.

END

For those of you interested in learning more about driving and how to work with your mule successfully, make sure you attend or audit our Driving, Bomb Proofing and Josh Nichol Clinics!!

See you at the meeting!
Marlene Malcher