

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 soothing 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 loose 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.