

# Mules Motivation & Learning

By Cindy K. McKinnon

Motivation and learning in the mule is rather interesting. A good trainer knows how to motivate his student. Motivation: meaning the desire to learn or improve upon.

There are four motivation factors in the mule. They are:

1. To please
2. Food
3. Fear
4. Curiosity

**MOTIVATION TO PLEASE** is far more common in mules than in horses. The mule's desire and ability to bond with one person is proof of this. There has to be a strong attachment between both rider and mule in order to motivate the mule to please. A friendship such as this, excels in competition. I feel the mule can learn at a faster rate when a positive relationship has been developed with his trainer. Somehow, this matters to the mule. Your positive approach attitude with no apprehension is the most beneficial to training your mule.

**MOTIVATION BY FOOD** is where the mule and horse differ again. Horses can almost always be "tricked" or motivated by food at any point of their training. Enticing a horse with grain to load into a trailer is one example. The mule however, may be enticed or motivated by food, but not always. The conditions have to be "right". For one, the mule cannot be fearful, anxious or suspicious or even mad. In my experience, mules have refused food if they were fearful, anxious, apprehensive or angry. A horse is more apt to eat under stressful conditions, where as a mule will not. Mules of higher intelligence and or with shorter temperaments are less likely to be enticed with food. And really, mules of this type of caliber do much better without using food as a reward in their training program. Mules with slower learning abilities and with easygoing attitudes are more easily trained with food used as a reward.

However, there is a negative side to using food while training your mule. It can produce anxiety behavior, simply because the mule is anticipating what comes next. For example, a mule may perform or rush through a task simply because he is expecting his reward. I decided to retain a barn sour mule using food as a reward. The fist several days after riding a certain distance from the barn, I rewarded the mule with handfuls of grain. Of course, she anxiously beat feet back to the barn until she got the hang of it. Upon returning to the barn, there was no reward or comfort to speak of. I had made life miserable for her, for many hours after returning to the homestead and in no time at all she was more then willing to leave the barn. I continued to reward her with grain even after riding several miles out. She became very confident and would ride alone with no

problem at all. On her "off" days, she would step out and even trot to get to our destination knowing that she would be rewarded. I knew if I kept up my "tasty" reward program, than my problem would soon be reversed. Young mules do well with food as a reward and I use it often when asking a correct response to a difficult task.

**MOTIVATION BY FEAR** can be beneficial to a mule's training, if it is NOT excessive. Horses on the other hand, are forgiving and can tolerate excessive or more abrupt training techniques when motivating by fear. Training you mule by using motivation by fear means if a correct response is not given, then pain or a consequence will immediately be enforced. For example, a mule that elects to elevate his head or to come off of the bit, will soon feel pain or pressure from the bit, when using side reins or draw reins as a training aid. The mule will then immediately opt to drop his head or go back on to the bit, simply because it will be the more comfortable choice for him. Using a crop to reinforce your leg when the mule chooses not to respond or yield to your leg, is another example. Severe training techniques used to motivate a mule by fear is not recommended. The only exception to this rule is when retraining older, spoiled mules. Keep in mind that the technique used here is only beneficial when the mule "hurts" himself.

**MOTIVATION BY CURIOSITY** is natural "training" for the mule. The mule will opt to investigate new things in his habitat or surroundings. A new gate or farm machinery that has been moved or parked is one example. Mules are naturally inquisitive by nature. A good trail mule will "investigate" an obstacle and will rate or determine if it is harmful to him prior to riding past it. Simply introducing something new to your hybrid friend will be all that is needed and the mule will investigate it on his own. Keeping your training programs fresh and creative will enhance you mule's learning ability, simply because he is naturally curious.

The mules' learning abilities are greater than what we tend to realize. They learn at a faster rate as compared to the horse, provided they have maturity and the desirable qualities. You can take a good mule, elevate his training and certainly make him into a better mule. But remember you have to start out with something that has potential. The more potential that you have to start out with, the higher quality mule will be your finished product. Always give the mule credit to what his potential is. That is where mule psychology comes into any type of training program. Keep an open mind, a hybrid state of mind, where both mule and rider win.