

Training is a Long Term Commitment

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is not the bit that trains the mule; it is the person behind the bit. A good example is the mule that won't stop. I am sure you have seen ads for bits, "guaranteed to stop your mule"; most of these bits are very severe. What happens is the bit will cause the mule pain. The mule will stop when you first use the bit on him, but as the mule gets use to the pain he will run through the bit.

The best solution.....Training. Any mule will stop on a dime with a halter if he is trained to do so. That type of response will not happen overnight; it takes many hours of teaching on your part and learning on your mule's part. But, it is possible. Anything is possible with your mules, but teaching and learning needs to happen for them to learn what you want them to learn.

The first and most important detail in training.....training takes place every time you are in contact with your mule, whether you are feeding, brushing, leading, petting, etc. There are lessons that can be taught in several brief segments or lessons that can be taught over sev-

Morning Tim,

My husband, Jim and I live in NE Arizona. We bought two older mules three years ago...our first mules. Two years ago we bought two paint mares; they were both in foal to a jack. Those two mule colts will be 2-years-old in May. They lead, tie, trailer and pick up their feet. We have had pack saddles on them, overnight camp trips, saddles with long-lines with just a halter and snaffle bits. They get handled daily, but not worked on a real regular basis; we both still work full time away from the home. Wanted to give you some background on them and me.

Both Jim and I have had horses for the past 25 years. What I am looking for is other training lessons I can work them with. These two john colts are our first babies ever – then we turned around and rebred the mares to a much smaller jack to give us some future mules we could use for packing. Those two will be one year old in May. The 2-year-olds are 15 hands already. What I don't want to do is burn them out on the same 'ole lessons. Can you give me some pointers? We ride, pack and drive. We have a forecart now with two harnesses

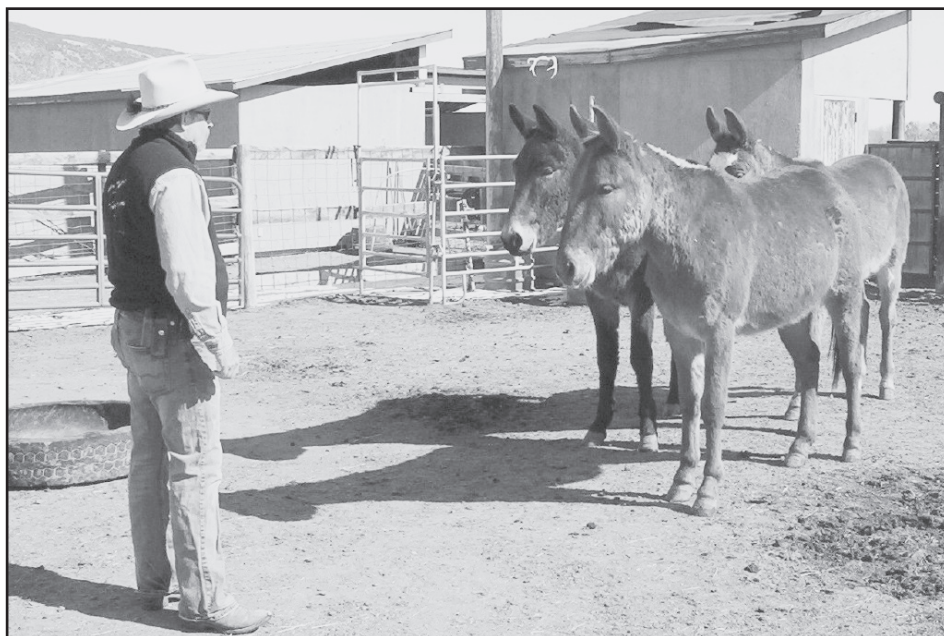
and my husband is building a covered wagon. Any info you can give us would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you very much for your time and input, Tanya and Jim Pea, Concho, Arizona.

Dear Tanya and Jim,

It sounds like you have a plan for your mules and your mules have a great start. The number one thing to remember about training is training is a long term commitment. We live in a 'quick fix' society, but you cannot buy this bit, or that video and your mule will magically be trained.

You can get any mule to do anything you wish with a snaffle bit. It



TIM ASKS THESE young mules to turn and face him

eral 60-90 minute sessions.

A few examples of lessons that can be taught in brief segments are teaching him or her to pick up his feet on cue, come to you on cue, leading with or without a lead rope, or waiting patiently for your cue to eat his hay.

A few examples of lessons that should be done several times in 60 or 90 minute segments are: teaching turns in the round pen, sacking out, saddling, ground driving. I will explain these lessons in detail in upcoming articles.

Regardless of the length of the lesson, over time, you are teaching him to always look for a cue from you when you are around him. It will also build a partnership between you and your mule. Any time you ask your mules to respond to a cue and they respond correctly, make sure you reward them. This is the process that will have your mule looking forward to your lessons and learning.

A Few More Examples

Since your mules are wearing snaffle bits, you can work on bridle work from the ground. Everything you do with the bridle on the ground will transfer to the saddle. Bridle work can be done in 60 minute or 15 minute lessons. You can work on give to the bit, disengage the hindquarters, move and lift their front shoulders, side-pass, etc. Just be sure that when you end your lesson with your mule he is better at the exercise than when you started.

Another great lesson to teach any mule is to 'Spook in Place'. It is unfair to ask any mule not to be afraid. Just like different people are afraid of different things, so are mules. What you want to teach

your mule is "I know you are afraid. But, here is what you do when you are afraid. I will give you a cue and tell you what to do." Eventually you will have taught your mule to stand still, not run away, buck or rear. Anyone can ride a mule that is afraid if the mule does not move his feet and knows what to do when he is afraid.

I teach all young mules these lessons BEFORE I climb into the saddle for the first time. I spend a minimum of 90 days starting a mule under saddle and at least four to six weeks doing ground work before I even think about mounting. That way the mule knows how to respond to my rein cues should he get scared when I am riding him.

A solid foundation is the key to a great partnership between you and your mule. No matter what the age of the mule is, a foundation can be put on your mule, it just takes time.

Tanya and Jim, you are correct that you do not want to drill any lesson into your mules. The mule will lose interest and his performance will suffer. I am sure you have seen a mule with his ears always pinned back. This is a mule that is not enjoying what he is doing. Always remember to allow the mule to be a mule; he is not a machine or a piece of equipment. He thinks and breaths and lives just like we do. If the mule enjoys what he is doing he will look like he was born to lope or slide or stop or anything else you ask him to do.

It is a personal decision you will have to make on when to start your mules. Your two year olds can be ridden if their joints are closed. Only an x-ray from your vet will

tell if the joints are closed. Personally, I start all my personal mules the fall of their third year. A mule will live 10 years longer than a horse. I will give the mule a year in the front because I know I will get 10 years in the back, and they will not have joint problems later in life.

Another reason I wait until they are three years old is I have other mules to start. When a person only has one or two mules it is harder to wait. You want to start your mules so you can use them. I also run an outfitting business. My camp is located 22 miles from the road. This requires a 10 hour ride to get into the camp. So, by starting my mules the fall of their third year, by the time they are ready to be ridden, I can ride them into my back country camp. This allows me to put about 50 miles of riding on them each week.

Again, in the following months I will be writing articles explaining how to teach some of the exercises I discussed previously in this article. I would like to thank Tanya and Jim, and all the other readers, who have sent questions. If you would like a question answered in an upcoming article, or would like me to discuss a specific lesson for you, please let me know. I would be happy to discuss it with, or for you.

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