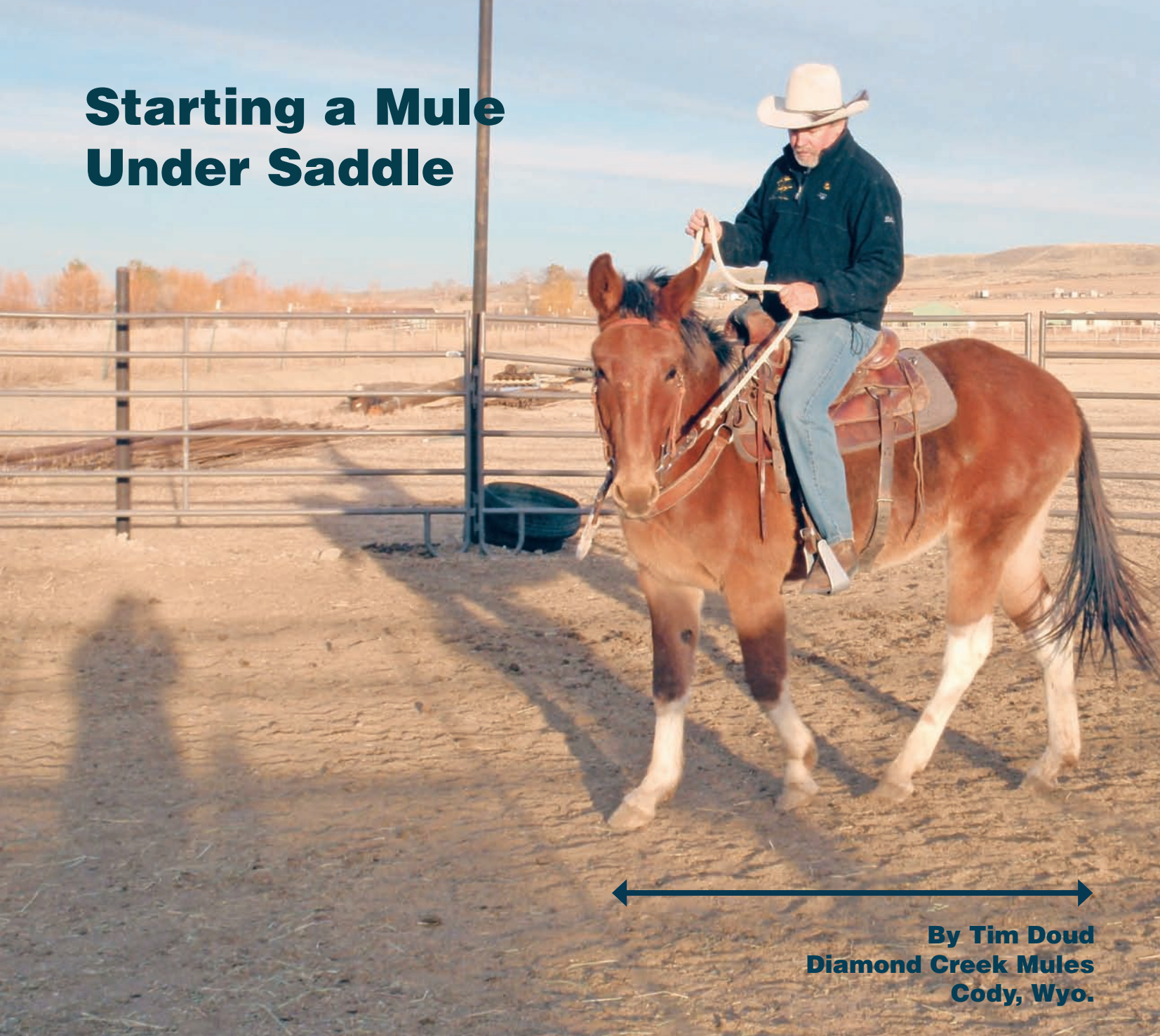


Starting a Mule Under Saddle



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This is the time of year when people start their young colts, either by sending them to a trainer or starting their mule themselves. Many people refer to starting a colt as “breaking a colt.” “Breaking” is a violent term that means using force. Starting a mule is building a partnership between the trainer and the mule. If the mule is asked to respond to a cue, instead of forced to respond, you will get better performance from the mule which results in a mule that wants to learn. If the mule is forced into a cue he will be stiff and resistant. He will also build resistance to all people. The mule will respond to a rider’s cue, but will also pin his ears or swish his tail or even try to buck you off.

Starting a colt under saddle is a very time consuming task. You have heard the old saying, “You get what you pay for.” This is never more true as it relates to training. There is al-

TIM keeps this mule turning and responding to his cues as he rides him for the first time

ways a trainer down the road that will train your mule for half of the price in half the time. However, most of these 30-day trainers will get on the mule and “buck him out” (riding the mule until he stops bucking and accepts the rider, if the rider can stay on that long) or use force to train your mule.

Similarly, some owners want their mule to be started in a month or two. Then, when the owner starts riding the mule at home, they find the holes. The mule runs off, bucks them off, is hard to catch, etc.

Everyone wants a bomb-proof mule in a month. It takes years and years of training to train a mule to this level. I am not saying you must have your mule in training with a trainer for many years. The mule owner can do most or all of the

training. But, you do have to stay consistent and continue working towards your goal. Training is not rocket science.

I receive many complements each year about my main two riding mules, “Diamond Creek Angel” and “Diamond Creek Grover.” The complements are usually the same. “They are so well trained, I would love to have a mule like that.” But, what many forget is that I have been training Angel and Grover for years, not months.

The big craze now is colt starting clinics and competitions. You can start a colt in three days or three hours, but after that three days or three hours, that colt can only be ridden by a few very experienced riders. You can not attend a three or four day clinic and then start trail riding your mule the next day. An experienced trainer will instruct their participants that even though they are riding the mules, they must review the lessons they have learned in the clinic several hundred times so he fully understands what he has learned.

I will not take a mule to start unless the owner will commit the mule to a minimum of three months of training. You must build a foundation with the mule before you ride him. The foundation will be built through ground work. This will build the partnership between the mule and rider that teaches the mule to look to the rider for cues instead of reacting on his own. Instead of running off or bucking when afraid, the mule will wait for the rider to give him a cue.

Bridle work is very important and should be done before the mule is mounted for the first time. All mules I start are taught to respond lightly to rein pressure; giving to the bit, disengaging his hind quarters, moving his shoulders, turning and stopping from the ground. This will keep the rider safe when riding because the mule already knows my rein cues during the very first ride.

Next, the mule needs to be “sacked-out.” Sacking-out a mule teaches the mule to stand still while objects are tossed around him or rubbed on him. You are not desensitizing the mule. It is impossible to present everything he will see in his life to him. You are teaching the mule to not move his feet when he is afraid.

Some people like to tie the mule’s hind leg up and force the mule to stand while being sacked out, saddled and mounted. I would like my mule to “want to” stand still beside me. Forcing anything is bad news. It will show up later as a problem and could hurt you or your mule.

You want to teach your mule to be okay with all kinds of objects including the saddle pad and saddle. After the mule will stand still with nothing on his head, I will start sacking out the mule with a rope. This will get the mule used to objects around his legs and teach him to not run away. If he is afraid of things behind him I will ground drive the mule.

The mule will also need to be taught to stand still when mounted and not move off until the rider cues the mule to move. This is accomplished with all the sacking-out and rope work.

When you are ready to ride the mule for the first time, you



(above) Sacking-out a mule teaches him to face his fear and not move his feet when he is afraid (below) The mule should stand still when saddled



should ask yourself “Is there anything else I should teach or continue to practice with the mule?” The answer is always “yes.” There is always more you can do to prepare the mule to be ridden, but you will know when it is time to start riding.

Be sure your mule stands to be saddled, leads well, picks up all four feet without resistance, bridles well, is calm when you are working with bags and tarps around him, is easy to catch, stands tied and responds to the bridle well. These are all things your mule should do well before you consider mounting for the first time.

It is very important to give the mule a positive experience when you ride your young mule. Do not think you must ride the mule for “x” number of minutes. You can build the number of minutes you ride later.

When you do start to ride, keep your riding time short; five to 10 minutes at a time. I may ride a young mule for an



The mule should respond to light rein cues on the ground before you get on his back

hour on the first ride, but I will dismount six times. Instead of one hour long ride, I ride six 10-minute rides. This gives the young mule needed breaks.

When I get on a mule's back, the first thing a mule is thinking is "Oh, no. I have to carry this guy around for the rest of my life!" The rider knows what is happening, but the mule does not. By keeping the first rides short, we have told the mule that this is not permanent.

It is also very important to keep a young mule busy when you ride. Ask the mule to disengage it's hind quarters to the right, then left, then move his shoulder to the left, then right. By constantly turning the mule and having the mule respond to a cue, the mule will be less likely to be distracted or spook. It is hard for the mule to think about a scary object if he is thinking about a cue. It is also hard for a mule to run off if he is focused on something else and his body is bent as he is disengaging his hip.

Let the mule know you are on his back by praising and rubbing on the mule as you ride. Make sure your body stays in the proper riding position as you do.

Sometimes, I take mules in training that need to be restarted. These are mules that have so many holes in their training that it is easier to restart them. Any mule can be started under saddle, but you will find it is easier to start a young mule than restart an older mule. Once a mule develops a problem like running off or bucking, it can be fixed, but it often takes more time and consistency and can be hard to fix.

Purchasing or raising a young mule and starting the mule under saddle is a long term commitment and not for everyone. But if that is the avenue you wish to take, it can be a very rewarding experience.

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