



Lessons for the Trail Riding Mule

By Tim Doud
Diamond Creek Mules
Cody, Wyo.

Trail riding is the number one use of mules in the United States. Many people enjoy spending the afternoon or weekend riding down the trail with their mules. Not only is it great for people, it is also great for your mule to see the world.

It allows your mule to get out of his pen or the arena. Like us, most mules like to do new things and see new country. It can be very boring for a mule to stay in the same pen or same pasture and ride in the same arena. A mule enjoys taking a break from practicing flying lead changes. Even if you own a performance or show mule, trail riding is a great break from the daily grind of showing.

Many believe that a mule taken on trail rides does not have to be well trained; it just has to go down the trail. That is false!

A mule used for trail riding must be a better trained mule than one that never leaves the arena. The trail has many objects that will never be seen in an arena. I have seen a few mules that had never been ridden outside an arena that were scared to death of trees or rocks.

A trail also has many moving objects and hazards like water crossings, logs across the trail, uneven ground, etc. Since trail riding requires more from a mule, a trail riding mule must be a very well trained mule. You must have complete control of your mule with the bridle and with your seat and legs.

The number one phone call I get is that a mule ran away with its owner on the trail. You rarely hear of a mule running off with someone in an arena. So what lessons does a trail riding mule need to know? The number one lesson any mule needs to know is to obey cues from a rider. It does not matter what the cue is. This is more so for a mule used for trail riding. If your mule does not respond to your cue 100 percent



of the time, he does not know the cue. No, he is not being stubborn, he just does not know the cue!

It does not matter if your mule stops at a creek crossing. If you can ask him to go forward and he responds to your cue, then he knows the cue. If your mule spooks at a rock on the trail and wants to run away but does not move his feet, he understands to spook in place.

The “Go Forward” cue is an excellent lesson to teach your trail riding mule. (See the July 2009 issue of *Mules and More* for my article on teaching a mule the “Go Forward” cue). Once your mule has learned the “Go Forward” cue he will walk forward any time you ask him whether he is in an arena, at a creek crossing, or with a big log across the trail.

“Spook in Place,” from the June 2009 issue of *Mules and More*, is another great lesson for any trail riding mule to know. This teaches the mule to not move his feet and to listen to the rider anytime the mule is afraid. Mules have a stronger flight instinct than horses. If a mule sees or hears something it does not like, many times it will run away. Any rider can ride a run-away mule that has been taught not to move his feet.

When the mule feels scared or afraid, he will look to the rider for guidance instead of thinking of a plan for himself. Some areas, like here in Wyoming during my summer pack trip/clinics, we will have deer or elk bust out of the brush in front of us. The mules are taught not to run away.

Your trail riding mule should also be taught not to kick. This is very dangerous when riding with other equines. If you have a mule that kicks you will find yourself always riding in the back for the protection of other riders. Soon your riding partners will become too busy to ride with you as they do not want to risk having their mule or themselves kicked by your mule.

With any mule, especially a mule used for trail riding, you need to have a cue that the mule will respond to 100 percent of the time as a safety message. This cue will be used anytime you need the mule to concentrate on you.

An excellent cue to teach your mule is to disengage his hind quarters. This lesson softens a mule’s spine and neck, stopping a mule’s forward drive, making it very hard for a mule to run off. Disengaging the hind quarters is also a lesson that really makes the mule work. As the mule disengages his hind quarters he will forget all about that scary rock or deer jumping out.

During my summer pack trips/clinics, guests see a lot of wildlife - some close, some far away - including grizzly bears. A mule must listen to its rider even if there is a grizzly bear in front of him.

See past issues of *Mules and More* or go to my web site www.diamondcreekmules.com for articles on these lessons.

All of these lessons should be taught in a safe area, like a round pen or arena, until the mule will respond to the cues 100 percent of the time. Then after your mule understands the cues there, begin teaching the cues on shorter trail rides

with one or two riders that will be patient and work with you should you need to teach your mule.

With hundreds of repetitions, the mule will respond to your cue without thinking. It will become an automatic reaction, just like when a person throws a ball at another person; the second person raises his hand to catch the ball. This is an automatic response.

The mule must practice these lessons many, many times before it becomes automatic. A lot of mules come to Diamond Creek Mules for training that are to be used for trail riding. The owners purchased the mule from a sale or individual owner. At the sale, the mule was ridden in a small round pen or arena and looked and acted great. When the new owners took the mule on their first trail ride, the mule ran off with them. What happened?

In a round pen or arena the mule “can’t go anywhere” and does not have the space to run away. Also, he does not have all the distractions a trail has. In a round pen or arena, a mule feels secure. He is in his normal place. He is used to be ridden in an arena and has learned to only worry about things inside the fence. Once you take him out on the trail, he sees that the fence is now five miles away instead of 100 feet.

Trail riding is one of the most fun experiences you can have with your mule. There is nothing like spending the day with family or friends riding down the trail on a safe responsive mule. If you take the time to teach your mule, you can have a fun and safe experience every time you ride down the trail.



Tim can be reached at www.diamondcreekmules.com, by phone at 307-899-1089 or by email at bliss@wavecom.net.

