



When riding your mule alone, you should constantly be giving your mule cues

Riding Your Mule Alone

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Trail riding season is upon us and most of us that own mules love to trail ride. There is nothing like heading out on the trail and enjoying the day with friends.

What trail riding really means is that we can enjoy riding our mules almost anywhere. We are not limited to riding in an arena. I have had a lot of mules come to me for training. Some of those mules were fine in the arena, but when I took those same mules outside on the trail, they acted like a mule that knew very little.

When you ride a mule in an arena, you are setting up a safe environment for which to work the mule. This is great for mules that need to learn more, are spooky or just do not have the knowledge base yet. You always want to ride a mule in an environment where you feel safe. An arena is always a great place to start.

Once your mule is responding correctly to your cues 100 percent of the time in the arena, you will get more performance from your mule if you raise his emotions. You can raise the emotions of your mules two different ways, add speed or add distractions.

When you ride a mule out on the trail, the distractions can be endless...rocks along the trail, wild birds and animals.

The ground is no longer a nice soft sandy surface. There are steep inclines, creeks and hills. You can find out how well your mule is trained by how he responds to your cues on the trail.

I can't stress enough that you must be sure your mule is responding to your cues 100 percent of the time before you begin trail riding. It is much safer for both you and your mule.

But what if your friends are busy and cannot make the ride? Is your mule trained well enough to ride on the trails alone? Some mules are and some mules are not.

What is riding a mule alone? Technically, you are never riding a mule alone. It is a mule and a rider riding together with no one else around.

A lot of mules are followers, meaning they like to follow another animal. When a mule follows another animal, the mule does not have to do think a lot and he feels secure having a "buddy;" the animal in front of your mule keeps walking along and all is good.

If the lead animal stops and looks, then your mule will come to attention to see what is going on. If the lead animal spokes and runs away, your mule will do what his buddy is doing

and run off. These exact scenarios are why you need to have complete control and attention from your mule.

So how can we teach our mule to ride off alone or lead a group of riders?

This may sound obvious but, the easiest way to teach a mule to ride in front is to ride him in front. All mules I start under saddle, I ride them outside the round pen alone, I ride them in the arena alone, and finally, I ride them out on the trail alone.

Most mules I will pony from my saddle mule Diamond Creek Angel before I get into the saddle. The mule will look to Angel for support. But, when I mount the mule, I want the mule comfortable with what is happening and looking to me for support.

I will have a lesson that I have taught the mule, like disengaging the hindquarters, that I can use to control the mule. I want the mule to start looking to me for support instead of other equines. If the mule feels unsure, he should look for the rider to give him a cue to respond to; a cue that will tell the mule what to do. It can be any cue, disengage the hindquarters, move the shoulder, stop your feet, etc.

How can you tell or teach your mule already under saddle to ride alone or out front of a group? The answer is the same.

Again, you must have control of your mule before this can be an option. This means the mule will respond 100% of the time to your cues. By riding a mule by himself, we are raising his emotions. This will allow us to see how well trained the mule really is.

If the mule will respond to our cues in the round pen, in the arena and when riding behind another animal, but not in front of a group, the mule is telling us he does not know the cue 100 percent. So, review the cue again and again until you get 100 percent response, then try again.

If we want to teach a mule to ride out in front of the group the same as we teach a mule to leave his buddies, we will need the help of a friend and their mule. See the July 2010 issue of *Mules and More* or visit my web site www.diamondcreekmules.com for my article titled "Buddy Sour Mules."

A group can be 100 mules or two mules, so you and your partner can make up a group of riders. Start with your partner riding in front of you. Then both riders ride their mules in a circle in opposite directions. This will separate the two mules for a short time. During this circle, your mule is not following the other animal for a short time. This is our starting point and we will build from here.

Over time, your mule will learn that he won't die if he is not following another animal. When the mule is comfortable being separated for a short time, the riders can make bigger circles. This will increase the time the mules are separated.

By increasing the size of the circles, the mules are riding off alone and learning how to exist on the trail with just their rider in small spurts, not all at once.

Next, we will continue our circles, only this time when we ride back together, we will have our partner ride behind us for a split second.

Our mule is now leading the other mule. This is the same as riding off by ourselves. We will build on the time our friend is behind us and we are leading.

Next, have your friend ride along in a straight line and we will ride away in a circle for a split second, then ride back



Most mules are most comfortable following another animal down the trail
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Can you ride your mule alone or in front of a group of riders?



to our friend. We have now ridden our mule away from the group.

The key with any mule is to always give your mule cues when you separate or ride off alone. Be sure that you give your mule a chance to learn this new task of riding alone in spurts. There is no way I would want someone to put me in a scary situation and expect me to just get over it all at once. I would hope that the person would introduce me slowly so that I can understand what is expected of me.

To help your mule along, you should constantly be giving your mule cues when he is away from the group. Turn right three steps, walk straight one step, turn right three steps, move your shoulder to the right three steps, disengage the hind quarter two steps to the right, then walk off in a straight line. This gives your mule something to focus on other than "Oh my... I am away from the group!"

By the time the mule has responded to all these cues, he finds himself walking right beside the other mule.

How can we teach our mule to ride alone if we have no riding partner? We will use the same procedure. Constantly ask your mule to respond to your cue as we ride away from the barn, then ride back towards the barn. But only ride as far as your mule is comfortable to start with. Then gradually increase the time away in small increments, being sure you do not go so far that your mule over-reacts.

Remember, any lesson can be taught in several sessions. As long as we give a cue to the mule and the mule responds correctly to the cue, we can stop the lesson.

A trail ride is always more enjoyable if we are riding a mule that will go anywhere we want to go, or will take us on a nice trail ride alone. Be sure to practice these exercises and your mule will be riding alone in no time. Happy trail riding! 🐾

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