

Cinchy Mules

by Tim Doud

Diamond Creek Mules

Cody, Wyoming

A mule becomes “cinchy” when he feels pressure from the tightening of the saddle cinch. Any time a mule feels pain or too much pressure he will resist. A cinchy mule could start bucking, run off, dance around or pull back when being saddled. These are dangerous reactions for the mule and the handler.

First, we must make sure the pressure or pain is not coming from poor saddle fit. Are you starting to see white spots on the mule’s back? That could be a sign of an ill-fitting saddle. A white mark on a mule comes from pressure from a saddle or other piece of tack that does not fit correctly.

I will not go into saddle fit at this time as there are hundreds of articles written on saddle fit. Any veterinarian can check a mule’s back for pain or damage from a bad saddle fit.

Mules are being bred to be finer boned and more sensitive all the time. This can be part of the cause of a mule getting white spots. Today’s mules can sore easier than the old time thick skin draft mule of the past. I have even seen finely bred mules get white spots from a winter blanket or hood.

Not only do I breed quality mules, but I also operate a back country camp located 22 miles from the nearest road. The days we pack into or out of camp, my crew and I saddle 30 pack mules starting before the sun comes up. The mules are loaded with gear, mule feed or food, then led to and from the base camp 22 miles from the trailhead.

The riding mules will be ridden the same distance. During the 22 mile trip, the group will stop twice and take two one-hour breaks. This allows my clients to eat lunch and stretch their legs.

While my clients are stretching their legs, the mules that are being ridden will have the rider off their backs for at least two hours. The pack mules, however, cannot be unloaded until we reach the base camp. Then each mule is unloaded. When all mules have their loads off, they will then be unsaddled. This could be at 7:00 pm. By this time, the pack mules have had a saddle with a load on for 14 hours. This happens twice each week. Under these extreme conditions you could see a mule with a perfect saddle fit and still get a little white spot.

These mules will be ridden or packed for over 1,000 miles each year. We must constantly monitor each mule, each day in order to keep the mules working for an eight month time period. But these mules will not be reacting to the saddle because the saddle is fitting correctly.

Therefore, after you determine that the saddle fits your mule, you now know the problem is probably the cinch.



Place a rope around the mule where the cinch will be



If the mule moves, keep a hold of the rope and ask the mule to move back where he was

Before attempting this exercise, please be sure you can place the saddle on your mule safely and know he is accepting of the saddle. Take your mule into a safe area to work, like a round pen or small arena. You will be working with your mule in hand; do not tie the mule to anything until the problem is fixed.

Your mule should be taught to stand still when you ask him. With the mule standing in the middle of the pen, place a headstall with a snaffle bit on your mule.

Take a soft cotton rope and place the rope around the girth area of the mule where the cinch will be. You will be holding on to the two ends of the rope. Use the rope like a cinch. Quickly, but lightly tighten the rope around the girth of the mule for a split second and then release it.

You are not tying the rope around the mule, you are holding on to both ends, so if the mule should react violently, you can release one end of the rope and it will fall off the mule.

Any time the mule moves, use the bridle and place him



The mule should stand calmly with the rope tight around his girth

back to way he was. If the mule takes two steps forward, ask the mule to take two steps backwards.

If your mule tries to walk off calmly, try to stay with him with the rope around his girth until the mule stops. You do not want the mule to think that he can walk off if he is scared. However, if your mule begins to act violently, back away and drop one end of the cotton rope.

If the mule keeps moving, work with the mule on a lesson like disengaging his hip. You are not punishing the mule for moving. The mule is telling you that he has a lot of energy and would like to work. We are telling the mule, OK let's go to work.

After the mule is worked for a little bit he will want to stand still again. You are not teaching the mule to stand, you are teaching the mule to stand at an exact spot.

Once your mule is comfortable with the rope and will stand still when "cinched with the rope," get a saddle pad and sack out the mule. After the mule will stand still as you place the saddle pad on his back and move it all over his body, it is time for the saddle.

Place the saddle on the mule's back. If the mule has been trained properly to be saddled, the mule should not move.

If the mule does move, use the bridle and place the mule back where he was.

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Sack the mule out with the saddle pad

Work with the mule until the mule will not move when you place the saddle on his back and move it around. The mule should stand without moving with either the saddle pad or the saddle.

Now, if your mule will not move at all and has his head up in the air and looks like he is a statue, then you have a mule that is locking up. In this situation, you must make it a point to move your mule so he does not explode and hurt you or himself.

So, when do you move the mule? For a mule that is not wanting to move his feet, you should move him when you take the saddle pad off his back, or after you have the saddle pad placed properly on his back. Then do the same with the saddle. Always remember to keep yourself safe.

Next, we will teach the mule to stand still when we tighten the cinch. We will break down the cinching process. Our goal is to release the cinch before the mule moves. If the mule moves before we release the cinch, the mule is telling us we are going too fast. We will reposition the mule and start again. Make sure the saddle does not fall off the mule's side and spook the mule into you.

Reach down grab the cinch then let go of the cinch. Did the mule stand still? If so we will move on. If not, we will have to break it down even farther.



Use your hand to pull the cinch up and touch the mule



Sack the mule out with the cinch and touch the mule's girth



Ask the mule to walk off after the saddle is on

When the mule is comfortable with us grabbing the cinch, we will grab the cinch and let the cinch touch the belly of the mule for a split second, then release the cinch.

If the mule reacts after we release the cinch, that's OK, he did what we wanted. He stood still when the cinch was on him. Work with the mule until you can grab the cinch and touch the mule's belly with the cinch without the mule reacting.

Now grab the cinch, touch the mule's belly and pull the cinch upwards with your hand. If you have done the

previous work with the rope thoroughly, this should not be a problem.

Run the latigo through the cinch, touch the mule's belly then release. We are doing the same exercise we did with our hand only now we are using the latigo to bring the cinch up. If we did our earlier lesson well, this should not be a problem.

We are working towards tightening the cinch, with the latigo. Run the latigo through the cinch pull the cinch up and keep pulling the latigo up, this will tighten the cinch without tying the latigo off.


We will never move to the next step until the mule is completely relaxed with the current step. If the mule is having trouble with the current step, back up to the previous step.

Work with the latigo and cinch until the mule is comfortable with the cinch.

Now we will tighten the cinch up like we always have. Tighten the cinch with the latigo and buckle the latigo or tie the latigo. At this point, the mule should stand still as you cinch up the mule. Make sure the reins are looped around the saddle horn and let the mule walk off.

The mule should walk off calmly. If the mule runs off ask the mule to make an outside turn and stop. The mule is telling you that you did not work him through the lesson enough.

By teaching your mule this lesson, your friends will be amazed on how politely your mule will stand as you saddle and cinch him up.

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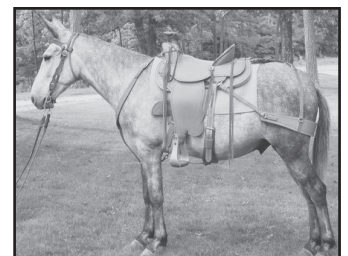


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