

# Teaching Your Mule to “Pony” Another Equine

by Tim Doud

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**W**hat is ponying? Ponying is leading and controlling one equine with the mule you are riding.

At times, ponying can be much more than leading another equine with your mule. The equine you are ponying could be a horse, mule or donkey, trained or untrained, planned or unplanned due to an emergency.

Every mule should be taught to pony or lead another equine, especially if you do any form of trail riding. The more we can teach and do with our mule, the better trained our saddle mule will be. Ponying also gives the equine we are leading confidence to explore the world alongside a mule that is already confident.

Before you start ponying with your saddle mule, there are a few basic lessons he or she should be taught before leading another equine. Believe it or not, ponying is an advanced lesson for any lead-mule. Your saddle mule should not ever run away with you while you are riding, should understand the go forward cue under saddle, should understand spook in place, disengaging the hindquarters, neck-rein efficiently and be comfortable with rope work from head to tail and hooves.

Your mule should not be afraid of anything around its body. The ponied mule may walk all around your riding mule, may bump into his hind end, may spook and get the rope around his hind legs; you can expect the ponied equine to do just about anything. Your saddle mule needs to be prepared to handle just about anything.

You need total control of your saddle mule in case the ponying equine has problems. Your saddle mule must respond to your cues no matter what is happening in order to keep you, him and the mule you are ponying safe.

I pony a lot of untrained mules with my main saddle mule, Diamond Creek Angel. “Angel is not aggressive towards others mules, but is not a pushover either. There have been many times when the untrained mule pushes into Angel, jerks away and acts like an untrained mule. I often use Angel when I am starting mules for clients because she can stand head to tail to an un-started mule with me in the saddle so I can sack-out the un-started mule safely. This requires her to be extremely focused on me and what I am asking of her. There are also times when Angel thinks for me because she understands the situation enough to know if the situation is good or not.

I also use Angel on my wilderness trips. I will lead 10 pack mules with Angel. She has been taught to ground tie,



**NEVER, EVER tie the lead rope of the equine you are leading to your saddle horn!**

which means that if I step out of the saddle and walk away from her, Angel will stay in place until I ask her to move forward. This gives me a tying post anywhere in the wilderness for the 10 mule pack string.

If I need to walk back to the tenth mule in the string, I can tie the string to my saddle horn and walk back to the end of the string. Angel will not move or let any of the mules pass her.

Remember, it is your job to keep you and your equines safe. First, make sure you start your lesson in a safe area, like a round pen or small arena. You want to start in an area that you and your saddle mule feel safe in and the equine you are leading cannot get out of.

When you work in this type of area and you feel unsafe for any reason during your lesson, you can drop the lead rope from the equine you are ponying and the equine cannot run off.

Be sure to start with a pony equine that your saddle mule is comfortable with. Never start teaching your mule to pony with an equine he or she does not like. That could be a disaster before you even get on your saddle mule. Or, if you try to pony an equine that your saddle mule is afraid of, your saddle mule will try to run away from the ponied equine.

All of us have seen someone riding a mule that seems it can do anything. You must remember that this is a mule that someone has spent a lot of time training to do many things.

The more lessons we teach a mule, the more the mule will look to us for answers. When a trained mule is scared or insecure, it will look to the rider to give the mule a cue to respond to. The mule knows that the riders will keep the mule safe, so the rider does all the thinking, not the mule.

Once you have chosen your safe riding area, start only with your saddle mule in the pen. Take a lariat and review your rope work lessons. Next, drag the rope behind your saddle mule. Make sure the rope touches the mule's legs, tail and hips.

When you feel your saddle mule is ready to pony, bring an equine into the pen that already knows how to be ponied. Don't pony with your saddle mule for the first time with an

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equine that has never been ponied.

The best way I have found to mount a mule while leading another equine is to have the equine you are about to lead facing your saddle mule and standing at a 90 degree angle. Take the lead rope from the equine you are leading and the reins of your saddle mule in your left hand and mount your saddle mule.

If you have a trained equine to lead and are having problems handling both the lead rope and reins while mounting, you can place the lead rope of the equine you are leading over the neck of your saddle mule. Do not wrap the lead rope of the pony equine around anything while you mount. Always be sure that if the pony equine spooks, they can get away from you and your saddle mule easily without causing you or your saddle mule or themselves harm. When you mount your mule you can reach down and grab the lead rope from the equine you are leading off your saddle mule's neck.

Your saddle mule should be taught to stand still when you mount and not step forward until you ask.

Here are a couple of things you never do: Do not get the lead rope of equine you are leading wrapped around you. If

the equine you are leading walks behind you while you are mounting or getting ready to move, cue your saddle mule to turn towards the pony equine and follow the path of the pony equine so the lead rope does not get wrapped around you or your saddle mule.

Always keep the lead rope and leading equine on the same side. This is why you must have a well-trained saddle mule. The mule must respond to your cues automatically, in order to keep you safe. This is where all your work on previous lessons will pay off.

Never, ever tie the lead rope of the equine you are leading to your saddle horn. Should the leading equine pull away or set back, it will pull your saddle mule over on top of you. Hold the reins in one hand and the lead rope of the equine you are leading in the other hand.

Whenever I pony an un-trained equine, I will use split reins on the headstall of Angel. I have had mules being ponied rear-up and come down next to Angel's neck. If the ponied mule would get a front foot caught in a continuous rein, he could not get free and could cause serious harm to Angel, me or himself. With split reins, the mule cannot get caught up in Angel's reins. If the mule or mules I am leading are trained, I will use my continuous reins.

Should you ever lead more than one equine, like a string of pack mules, make sure all pack mules are always on the same side of your riding mule. If you are stopped in a river to let your pack mule drink and they are on both sides of you, this is already a wreck. Should something spook the mules, like a deer jumping out of the bushes, a pack slipping or a hundred other things that can happen on the trail. The mules will run forward. With mules on both sides the mules lead rope will rip you out of the saddle as the run by.

Back to the lesson; ask your saddle mule to walk forward. You will always need to make sure any equine you are leading, knows you are moving forward. I will always cluck or say the mule's name I am leading. If I see his ears up or looking at me, I know he will see Angel walk forward.

Anytime you lead an equine, you must always be thinking



**(above) If the mule you are leading is trained, you can place the lead rope on the neck of your saddle mule as you mount (below) When you start moving forward, start slow**





ahead of the equine you are leading. When you start moving forward start slow and be prepared to stop your saddle mule if the equine you are leading does not walk forward. If you do not stop, you will be pulled off the back of your mule.

A person's natural reaction is to hold tight on to the rope in an emergency, not to let go of the rope. This is why you must stop your saddle mule before you get pulled out of the saddle.

You will also need to slow down the forward motion of your saddle mule anytime you reach an area where the equine you are leading needs to take his time; areas like a river crossing, stepping over a log, walking around a switch



**Slow down your riding mule in order to give the mule you are leading a chance to step over objects**

back, etc.

Ride around the arena or round pen leading the other equine. Don't just ride around in a circle. When you leave the arena and hit the trail, you will not riding in a circle.

Walk your mule forward, turn left, then right, stop and walk forward again. By making a lot of turns, you will gain confidence in leading and will learn when you will need to slow down and when to speed your saddle mule up.

When comfortable leading in the pen, now add some trail objects. Walking over a pole is the same as stepping over a log. A tarp makes a nice creek crossing. When crossing any object while leading another equine, always give the equine you are leading time to cross the object.

If the equine you are leading is not given enough time to cross, he may jump the object and land on you or your saddle mule.

During this lesson, lead your pony-trained equine over as many objects and in as many different places as you can think of. Soon you will have the confidence to lead a 10-mule pack string 22 miles into the wilderness on a pack trip as I do in the summer with Bliss Creek Outfitters. Happy trails.

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