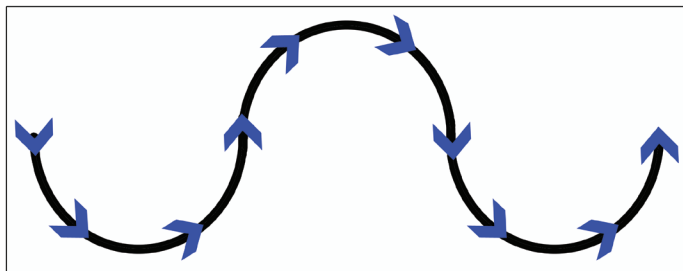


# Use Serpentine to Help you Train your Mule

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**S**erpentines are a great training lesson for young mules and young riders. Serpentine is also a great warm up lesson to start your training session with. Constant changes of direction by the mule require concentration from both the mule and rider. They will help a young or inexperienced rider to improving their steering skills. As you work on serpentine with your mule, you'll find that the mule is better balanced and carries his head in a natural head set.

In simple terms, a serpentine is a series of S turns. The most common is a figure-eight shape pattern. Serpentine requires at least two changes of bend across the arena. These changes of bending should be smooth with the mule staying upright and not dropping his shoulder into the bend. Serpentine also give the rider feed back into the mule's training level and response to cues.



**Serpentine figure example**

Start your serpentine at the walk. As you and the mule get better, move to a trot. You may not move to the trot for several days or weeks, give your mule time to understand the exercise before moving to a higher speed. Any mule will learn faster working at a trot compared to a walk. But, you must teach every lesson at a slower speed before you can increase speed.

You will want to ride in a large enough area to change direction often, but only ride in an area where you feel safe. You will also want to make sure you have long enough reins so you do not have contact on both sides of the mule's mouth.

I always ride with a full cheek snaffle bit with a long continuous rein. With a long rein I can slide my hands up and down the rein only giving the mule a cue on one side of his mouth.

Start off by riding in a large circle, we will say to the left. (To the left means that the right side of the mule is towards the fence, the left side of the mule is towards the center of the arena). As you ride you will be making large half circles 15 to 30 feet in diameter.

Start off at the walk. When the mule is walking freely, start



**Start teaching serpentine at a walk**

the half circles. Pick up the left rein making sure the right rein has slack and apply a little bit of pressure, a half pound, until the mule turns his nose to the left. You are looking for the mule to move his nose about 4-6 inches off center.

When the mule gives to the left, give a mini release. A mini release is a slight release of pressure, but not a total release of pressure. This tells the mule that you are asking him for something else. You are looking for the mule to follow his nose and move one step to the left.

When your mule begins to turn, watch the mule's left shoulder, but remember to stay upright and straight in the saddle, do not lean your body into the circle. When you see your mule's left front leg step to the left, release the left rein. The mule gave you the correct answer. Remember in order to teach the mule, you must start out looking for steps towards the goal. Do not concentrate on just the goal.

Allow the mule to walk off as he follows his nose. After the mule completes a half circle, slide your hand down the right rein and apply a half pound of pressure to the right rein. You are asking the mule to give his nose to the right. We will give him a mini release and ask him to follow his nose with



**Slide your hand down the rein and apply pressure for the circle**



**Keep applying pressure until the mule's feet follow his nose**

his feet to the right.

Make sure you are not applying pressure to the off rein or the rein you are not using. Doing this will confuse the mule as you are applying pressure to both sides of the mule's mouth.

If the mule will give his nose to the rein pressure, but not follow his nose, ask the mule to speed up. If the mule still will not follow his nose, ask the mule to move his nose farther to the side, give to the rein, and then ask for the mule to speed up his feet.

If an increase in speed did not help, ask the mule to move his hip and disengage his hip in order to straighten his body up. If you are asking the mule to follow his nose to the left and you disengage his hip to the right, the mule will be facing to the left.

Hold pressure on the left rein until you feel the hip move to the right. The second you feel the hip move, ask the mule to walk forward.

If the mule turns his head too far to the left or too far down, you will need to move his head to the right with the left rein.

This is the same thing you will do if the mule drops his shoulder inside when making a circle. While still apply pressure with the left rein, you want the mule giving to the left, slide your left hand forward onto the upper part of the mule's neck, shortening your left rein as you go.

Use the rein to push the mule's neck to the right. This will make the mule move his head to the right, forward. When the mules head moves forward, release the pressure on the rein.

When you ask the mule for a turn again, use less rein pressure and release the pressure when the mule turns his head. The mule will start to follow his head with his feet. You may need to adjust the mule several times before he gets the right idea.

Practice making a series of large half circles to the left and right. As you practice the half circles, your mule will get better and better at giving his nose to pressure and following his nose. You and your mule will get lighter and lighter with your cues and responding to a cue.

If at any time the mule gets stuck or stops, move the mule's hip. You will need to practice a lot at a walk until the mule is making smooth circles and turns. Once the mule is smooth at the walk, move up into a trot.

Try to say smooth and light in your cues and get into a steady rhythm and keep your circles the same size. You are looking for big sweeping turns and nice circles.

Once the mule gets the basic maneuvers down, you will want to work on smoothing the exercise out.

Start by slowing your hand down when giving the mule cues to move right or left and release the rein the second the mule responds. Always remember to release the rein as the mule is making a turn. If we keep pressure on the rein through the turn, the mule will lean on the bit.

We discussed a mule leaning into a turn. Some mules will go into a turn with so much energy that they will "leak" out. This is just like driving a car on ice, if you use too much speed in a corner, the car will not turn, it will slide out of the turn.

It would be tempting to use the outside rein to correct the mule, but we need to teach the mule to correct himself, so we will use one rein to correct the mule.

If your mule leaks to the outside use the "Hips Over" cue to correct the mule. The cue disengages the mule's hind quarters, but with the difference of releasing the rein the second the mule starts to disengage his hind quarters and then asking the mule to continue to move forward. You do not want the mule to completely disengage his hind quarter and make a 90 degree turn. You are looking for one step on the mule's hip, then for the mule to move forward.

Once the mule learns a serpentine and will not drop his shoulder to the inside or leak to the outside, then you can use both reins. We will start to ask the mule to "Give to the Bit" with his nose as he makes the turns.

When the mule changes direction, pick up on the rein again and ask the mule to soften and relax and "Give to the Bit," but not to change the path that his feet are traveling. This is a very advanced maneuver for the mule to do. The mule will



**After the mule learns using one rein, switch to two reins**



**Tim uses the rein to push Angel's shoulder outside. This keeps her from dropping her shoulder into the circle**

start only moving his head an inch or two, release the rein. That is our starting point.

If the mule does not give in two seconds, do not totally release the pressure, but switch directions. When the mule is moving in the new direction, ask the mule to give to the bit again. If he does not give to the bit once again, switch directions again.

If the mule will not give to the bit at all, move the hip and go back to changing directions.

Once the mule has the serpentine down at the trot, you can move up to the canter. The mule will not change leads at the canter, because we have not taught him to do so. That is OK at this point. Doing a serpentine on one lead is actually an advanced maneuver.

**How can you use serpentes to correct problems with your mule?** If you are riding a mule that is walking too fast or jogging, ask the mule to make serpentes. Pick up the left rein and turn the mule to the left. Release the rein and ask the mule to walk forward then pick up the right rein and ask the mule to make a circle to the right. Then, release the rein and ask the mule to walk forward. Now, pick up the left rein and ask the mule to make a circle to the left.

You are not punishing the mule for walking too fast. By walking fast, the mule is telling you, "I have a lot of energy and you are not using it." Put the mule to work making serpentes. This is our way of saying, "Watch what you ask for, you just may get it!" The mule will soon realize it's easier to slow down and walk normally than it is to make serpentes.

Serpentes are a very good exercise for any mule to learn and a great warm up exercise. By practicing serpentes, you will have a soft responsive mule that will respond to light pressure.

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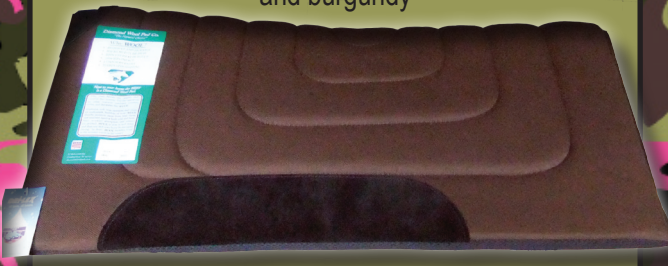
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