



Imprint Training

By Tim Doud
Diamond Creek Mules
Cody, Wyo.

Imprinting bonds newborn foals to humans, desensitizes them to stimuli, and can teach your mule to be very well trained



Should you imprint train your newborn mule or not? Imprint training is the training of a newborn foal minutes after birth. The basic concept is to expose the newborn foal to people and things immediately so the foal is not afraid of them later in life. This bonds the mule to humans and desensitizes mules to many stimuli such as handling its feet, brushing him or her, getting shots, teeth floated, haltering, etc. There are many books and DVDs available on imprint training. Many believe that equine foals learn a majority of their behaviors and personality within the first hours of life and that their brains are fully mature from birth.

There is a big misconception that an imprinted foal is a pushy equine. However, that is not correct. A pushy mule foal is often the result of either incorrect training or is the mule's personality or behavior. You should not allow a young mule to do anything that you would not allow your older broke-mule to do. For example, do you allow your older mule to walk into you?... No. Do you allow your older mule to run off and kick at you?... No. The same applies to your newborn foal.

Another misconception of imprint training is that the mare will not bond to the foal and the foal will not get the ever-important colostrum needed for survival. This is also not correct. The foal will have more than enough time to bond and nurse after the initial imprint session. The foal must be nursing within a few hours of birth.

Imprinting is just like any other training program you may encounter for your mule. Just like a training program for your older mule, there are three rules you should use to evaluate the program to determine if it fits:

Rule 1: The trainer (most often the owner in this situation) cannot get hurt. If at any time during a training exercise your conscience says you will get hurt, you should stop the training exercise.

Rule 2: The mule cannot get hurt. No training method in the world is worth a mule getting hurt. If this is the case with a particular exercise, stop the exercise!

Rule 3: The mule must be calmer after the training session than before the training session. If your mule is calmer after your imprinting session, then he or she is learning the exercise and is processing the information.

This article is a generalization of imprint training and its positive aspects. It is by no means a step-by-step guide. Before you imprint I recommend you purchase a book or DVD on the subject and study imprinting before your mare has her foal. Be sure to learn as much as you can about imprinting so you fully understand its purpose and correct methods. You should also have a kit of imprinting tools ready before your mare foals out. You will not have the time to gather these items as your mare is foaling. If you wait you will miss the opportunity to imprint your foal.

You will need a halter and a lead rope for both the mare and the newborn foal. Be sure the halters are the appropriate size for each. You will also need items to stimulate the

young mule such as towels, newspaper, small plastic bag, spray bottle with water, hair dryer, and clippers.

Most importantly, be sure you have the help of one other person to hold the mare while you are working with the foal. Sometimes mares can be weary of people handling their newborn foals. It is important to have help as to avoid the mare getting upset about you handling the foal. The number one job of the handler is to keep the imprinter safe. Some mares will try to paw their foal away from “strangers.”

Again, I encourage you to buy a book or DVD to learn all the intricate details of imprint training. The first imprint session is the most important of your newborn foal’s training and will take a full hour to properly desensitize the foal that has not yet been on his feet.

During this session, you are doing a majority of the training in a very controlled way. Do not rush this session as it could result in the foal not being imprinted. With the foal still lying on the ground, you will be rubbing your foal all over with your towel and putting your hands in his or her mouth, ears, nose, all over the legs, feet, belly, neck, and withers until the foal is totally relaxed. The towel simulates the mare drying off the foal just after birth. Do not move past this step until your mule is relaxed, otherwise you are going too fast and your mule will not be imprinted correctly. You will need 30-100 repetitions of each step.

Next, with your hands, begin bending all of the foal’s joints until there is not resistance from your foal. Again, 30 to 100 repetitions per joint, but do not stop the repetitions until the joint is relaxed. This is important for picking up feet, trimming hooves, etc.

Next you will rub your newborn with the stimuli you have gathered, from least stimulating to greatest. It is important to keep your foal on the ground. Some foals will try to get up; refer to your DVD or book to learn how to keep your newborn on the ground safely. Finally, you will rub your halter all over your newborn and put it on him or her.

After your first session is complete give the mare and foal time to bond and the foal time to nurse. The following sessions, usually once or twice a day thereafter, should not exceed 15 minutes in length. Even if your lesson is not completed, stop after 15 minutes and come back later when the foal is rested, and complete the training session.

The second session you will be concentrating on desensitizing the foals back, head, neck and feet. The third session will be teaching the foal to move away from pressure, teaching to lead and to stand when tied.

Imprint training can be a great way to start a mule off right from his or her first day of life. Like any other training program, you must be committed to learning about the training lessons and taking the time to complete each lesson.

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