



Lessons for the Mule Foal

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You have your foal...Now what do you do?

You have decided to raise your own mule. You have either purchased a mule foal or found the right jack to bred to your mare. Once you get your new mule foal home or your mare foals out, what do you do?

One question I get asked a lot is “What age can I start training my mule?” The answer is, “Right away.”

You should never start riding a mule until his leg joints have closed. The only way to be sure a mule’s leg joint has closed is to have the joints ex-rayed by a veterinarian. Most mule’s joints will close when the mule is three years old.

A mule must be physically able to carry weight in order to insure his safety and health. But there are many things we can do with a foal that does not require the mule to carry weight. These are lessons that they will need later in life when we start to ride, drive, pack or just handle them.

The number one thing to always remember when working or being around a mule foal is to treat the foal the same as you would treat a mature mule. What I mean by this is that none of us would allow a mature mule to kick at us, bite our sleeve, push us against the gate, etc. Remember the mule is always learning, even at a very young age.

One thing you do not want to do is to get into a fight with your foal. If the foal is acting scared or aggressive, step back and rethink your lesson plan. A foal will react violently to pain.

The goals to accomplish with your lessons include 1) developing control of the foal; 2) gaining trust and respect from the foal; 3) getting the foal to move his feet when you ask and in the direction you want and 4) teaching basic manners.

When working with a foal limit training sessions to 15 minute sessions. This will allow the foal to rest and nurse between sessions. You can do more than one session a day or only one session a day. Just remember to not drill your foal with lessons, you want the foal to enjoy the time you spend with them training.

A lot of people think it’s cute when a foal comes up and nibbles on our sleeve. If we allow the foal to continue this behavior, the foal will soon start to bite our sleeve, then nip your arm, soon we have a mule that is biting us and we do not know why. We have taught the mule to bite.

So how should we control this situation? Spend a lot of



Start sacking out the foal with your hand



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time hugging the foal's head and lightly rub his nose, ears etc. Not a hard rub, but a soft rub. We do not want to hurt the foal. Foals who get a lot of attention paid to their head's rarely bite.

Soon the mule will keep his mouth away from us. We are also sacking out the mules head, so the foal will be ready to halter, bridle, clip his ears, etc., later in life.

Biting is an act of aggression and the worst thing a mule can do. If the foal does bite us, the correction is the same as an adult mule. You have three seconds to make the foal think he has made the worst mistake of his life. Your correction must happen immediately after the bite within three seconds. If you wait any longer, the mule will not associate the correction with the bite.

Make enough noise to startle him. If you have been calmly working with you mule, he will know that he did something wrong.

If he bites you again, your correction should make him think he is going to die. You are not allowed to hit the mule forward of the withers. You cannot hit the mule with anything that will injure the mule. As an example, you could take the lead rope and swat the foal's rump. Remember you must stay behind the withers. Shout and holler when you correct the foal. You only have three seconds to correct the mule. After three seconds go back to cuddling your foal.

The mule should allow a person to touch any part of his body. The earlier in the foals life you teach this lesson, the easier it is for the foal and the owner. Some people will begin as soon as the foal is born. This is called imprint training. See the February 2011 issue of *Mules and More* or visit my website www.diamondcreekmules.com for my article on imprint training.

Teaching the mule to allow you to touch any part of his body is sacking the foal out. You will start with your hand. Foals love attention. Start petting the foal with your hand on his body. The key is to stop petting BEFORE the foal tries to pull away.

Start where you can pet the foal and work towards the area that you cannot. Let's say you would like to work on picking up the foal's feet. Start by rubbing the foals back and work towards the front shoulder. Remember to pull you hand away before the foal moves. This is the release for the mule.

When the foal stands calmly with you rubbing his shoulder, work your way down the foal's front leg. Do not run your hand straight down the leg. Run your hand from the foals back, to the shoulder and inch down the leg, then back to the shoulder. When the mule is comfortable with this, go two inches down the leg, then three inches, then four inches, etc., while always going back up to the shoulder or back.

Soon you will be down to the foal's hoof. Always remember to stay in front of the front shoulder. A foal can kick you, just like a mature mule. Always keep yourself safe and keep the mule safe.

As you touch the foal's hoof, the foal will pick up his hoof on his own. Work on holding the hoof. When the foal will let you hold his hoof, take your hand and tap his hoof. This will teach the mule to have a shoe nailed on later in life. Even if you do not shoe your mule, the mule will be easy to trim and your farrier will love you.

Use the same process for the foals hind feet. Start at the foal's back and work your way down to the hind leg.

When the foal is comfortable with you touching every part of his body, take a soft lead rope and sack the foal out, then a halter. Keep building on this lesson by introducing something scarier to the foal than your last item, but not scarier enough to make the foal move away. Remember to work in 15 minute segments.

Teaching a mule to lead is easiest done as a foal with the mare at his side. If you have a helper to lead the mare, you can concentrate on the foal. The foal will always stay next to the mare and follow the mare.

You can use the mare to get the foal to walk and stop. If you or your helper walks the mare forward, soon the foal will follow. When the mare stops, the foal will stop with her.

Remember to sack your foal out with the halter so you can calmly place the halter on the foal. Never leave a halter on a mule, especially a foal. The foal can catch the halter on a fence or feeder in his pen. The foal can also catch his hind foot in the halter and injure himself or, worst yet, be killed.

Build trust and a "want to" attitude in your mule. Mules should always give you a right answer. As a trainer you want to always be teaching a mule to improve. But you must also know what the mule can do and what he cannot.

A foal, just like a child, will not want to go to school if school is not fun and the student is not improving. This would be the same as walking up to the mule throwing a saddle on his back and jumping on. This will not be a pleasant experience for the mule or the owner. We must start the simple exercises and lessons that the mule can accomplish and build confidence in himself and in people. Soon the mule will learn that we will not put him in a situation that he will feel pain or get hurt.

The mule will start to learn that if he is ever scared or unsure of what to do, he can look to us for the answer. Respond to our cues 100 percent of the time and we will take care of you. This is harder for a mule to learn than a horse. A mule is always looking out for his safety.

These are just a couple of the many lessons that you can teach you foal. Remember that you can teach the foal almost any lesson that does not require the foal to carry weight. Keep training short and fun for your foal and as he grows up you will have a mule that is a very good student.

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