

Balking Mules

by Tim Doud
Diamond Creek Mules
Cody, Wyoming



Because TIM is giving Diamond Creek Angel constant cues, she does not see the deer in the field behind her.

When a mule balks, most people think the mule is being stubborn or doesn't want to do what is being asked. Other people think the mule is trying to get away with something by balking. Usually what will happen is the person will "show the mule who's boss."

By using this approach or any method that will intimidate or frighten the mule, we are going backwards in our training. Anytime we frighten a mule, he will tighten his muscles and his performance will drop. The mule will balk or lock up even more if a mule is continuously frightened or intimidated by the handler or owner.

We need to change our way of thinking because by using intimidating or fright tactics to train your mule, you are causing your mule to be confused, scared and unsure of your cue. Intimidation also shows a lack confidence in you, and your mule sees that. He will eventually begin making his own decisions because he feels safer that way. You may say you are afraid that you are looking bad in front of your friends or you have lost control over the mule and you feel unsafe, but in reality, your approach is not in the best interest of your mule.

A lot of riders will express their emotions by being aggressive with their cues; kicking harder, yanking on the reins, using the reins to whip the mule or spurring the mule very hard.

If you take the reason the mule refused to move forward and add to it an aggressive reaction from a rider you have a wreck in the making. If the mule is locked up and will not move the first step could be a big one. The mule will eventu-

ally find an outlet for his emotion and may start bucking, run off or rear.

Many times, a mule balks because he is confused. The mule is telling us that he does not understand the cue we are giving or the response we are looking for from the mule.

An example would be when a rider kicks a mule and asks the mule to move forward, but the mule does not respond. The rider assumes that the mule knows the cue because he has responded to the cue before, until the day he does not respond to the cue. The mule must be ignoring you or balking. This is probably not the case - he is telling you he does not know the cue well enough.

If you have never taught your mule a cue to speed up, there will come a time when the mule does not know what to move and you will have no way to ask him.

The easiest cue to use to teach your mule to speed up is a small squeeze with your legs. Most riders will start off with a cue that is too



The speed up cue - first squeeze with your legs, then lightly bump with your legs

hard. When you apply a cue to the mule, you want the mule to know that you will keep applying the cue until the mule responds. We can always add pressure, but can only decrease pressure when the mule starts to respond correctly. If we decrease pressure, we are telling the mule that he is on the right track and we are just looking for more from the mule.

We want the cue to be a little aggravating for the mule. We want the mule to think the cue is unpleasant enough to respond, but not painful.

If you squeeze with your legs and the mule does not move forward after a little bit, we will start to bump the mule lightly with our legs, if nothing happens we will bump harder, then harder, etc. until the mule takes one step forward.

As soon as the mule takes one-step forward, stop the cue with your legs. The mule did what we asked him to do. Do not keep bumping with your legs to keep the mule moving forward. You will burn up your cue. If we kick the mule, apply the cue, as he moves forward, the mule will soon realize that he is kicked when he is standing still and he is kicked when he moves. So the mule might as well just stand still.

If the mule stops his forward movement, apply the cue again from the beginning, slight squeeze with your legs, and wait for the mule to move forward. With practice the mule will learn to keep walking until you give the mule a cue to stop.

It is important to always use the same steps in the cue. First, squeeze with your legs, then light bumping with your legs, then increase pressure of the bumps until the mule moves forward. The mule will learn the steps you are using, soon the mule will respond to only light bumps with your legs, then the mule will respond with a light squeeze from your legs.

We can not expect the mule to respond to a light cue if we do not give the mule the opportunity to respond to a light cue, EVERY TIME we apply the cue. It is very important to remember that a mule learns from the release of pressure, not adding pressure. We must release the pressure the second the mule responds. If we are constant with our release the mule will get more responsive to our cues.

Start your practice session with the mule standing still in a safe area and the rider still and relaxed in the saddle. Apply the speed up cue, light squeeze with both legs. Do not give any other body or rein cues to your mule. As soon as the mule picks up a foot and starts walking forward, release the pressure with your legs, stop squeezing or kicking and allow the mule to walk forward. If the mule should happen to go into a trot, that is fine as long as you feel safe. After a couple of steps, ask the mule to stop. Let the mule stand still for a second or two and start again.

The key is to ask the mule to stop before the mule stops himself. You want to work on the mule speeding up, not work on keeping the mule moving. In order to do this we will need to start and stop the mule constantly.

Our job is to teach the mule the cue. You squeeze, the

mule walks forward, you stop squeezing. Do not worry about the direction the mule is going. We are not going to steer the mule at this point as this may confuse the mule. Just let the mule move forward. It will take a lot of practice to teach this to the mule.

We always want to set-up the mule for success. We will ask the mule to move forward when we feel he will move forward. We will also ask the mule to stop before we feel the mule will stop on his own.

There may be times when you do not want to kick your mule when he balks. If the mule is frozen in place because he is scared, the first step may be a big one. In this case we want to move the mule in a safe manner instead. In this instance, we will disengage his hindquarters or teach the hips over cue.

Start by taking slack out of the one rein, then put light pressure, about half a pound, on one rein and hold pressure until the mule takes a big step to the side with his hindquarters. When you first apply pressure the mule will probably turn his head towards the rein pressure, give to the bit. Continue to hold the pressure until the mule moves his hip to the side. If you apply pressure to the left rein, you are looking for the hindquarters to move to the right, away from pressure.

The hips over cue, or disengaging the hindquarters, will also stop a mule from running away with you. If you think the mule is getting scared and will run off, ask the mule to move his hip over. By working on this cue, we will make the mule less likely to run off in the first place.

If the mule is looking at a scary object, ask the mule to move his hip over and think about your cue and not the object. We all have seen the rider that pulls the mule's head to the side. This is not hips over. There is no release in pulling the mule's head to the side. You will get the same reaction from pulling the mule's head to the side and not releasing, as you do when you kick the mule when the mule is walking.

As you pull the mule's head to the side the mule will move his hip over, only he will move his hip very fast as the mule is reacting to a lot of pressure applied by you. If you do not release the pressure the mule will try something else to get the pressure to be released. Soon the mule will run through his shoulder and run away with you.

You will need to practice the hips over cue many, many times so the mule's response is automatic. He will no longer think about why the pressure is applied, he will just move his hip. Now you have an emergency brake in case the mule should run off.

Next, we will find something that will bother the mule, but not scare the mule. What we are doing is teaching the mule to respond to our cues even though he may be scared. Soon the mule will learn to trust us, as we will not put the mule in a situation where the mule will get hurt. The mule will then look to us for direction instead of thinking for himself.

Take the mule to a safe area. Place something in the arena

that will take the mule's attention away from you, like a tarp on the ground. Start off riding the mule away from the tarp asking the mule to constantly respond to your cues. Work on asking the mule to speed up and the hips over cue. Move closer and closer to the tarp while working on the lessons. The mule should be concentrating on your cues and not paying attention to the tarp.

When you can ride all around the arena and the mule is not distracted by the tarp, move towards the tarp.

Point the mule towards the tarp and just let the mule walk towards the tarp. If the mule walks right across the tarp, let it happen. When the mule is across the tarp, pet the mule for a job well done and let the mule keep walking.

What will probably happen is the mule will walk towards the tarp, then stop. When the mule stops, pet the mule and let the mule stand. The mule is telling us that this is where he feels safe and this is the spot we will start from.



Keep the mule's nose pointed at the spot on the tarp at all times

takes one step forward. This tells the mule he did the right thing.

If the mule moves in any direction other than forward, keep applying the cue. If the mule should start to back away from the tarp, keep asking the mule to move forward until he takes one step forward, even if he takes 10 steps back and one step forward. Pet the mule and let him stand for a minute.

Any direction the mule moves we will always keep the mule's nose pointed at the spot in the middle of the tarp. When the mule is standing calmly again ask the mule to step towards the tarp. If we do not pressure the mule and keep the mule clam, soon the mule will walk towards the tarp.

Eventually the mule will walk right up to the center of the tarp. Let him stand. The mule will probably put his nose on the tarp, paw at the tarp, snort or back-up. That is fine. Do not kick him, when the mule stops pet him and try again.

Pawing at the tarp is a sign the mule is thinking about crossing the tarp.

Once the mule steps on the tarp, it might scare him a little. That's fine, let the mule get across the tarp himself. Just stay



The mule will tell you where he feels safe and this is the spot we will start from

You want to make sure the mule is kept calm.

As the mule stands away from the tarp pick a spot in the middle of the tarp. This is the spot that you will ask the mule to walk towards and cross. We do not want the mule to cross the tarp; we want the mule to cross the tarp at the little spot we have picked. By picking a small spot on the tarp it will make crossing the tarp easier for the mule.

Keep the mule's nose pointed at the spot on the tarp at all times. When you think the mule is relaxed and will respond to the speed up cue, ask the mule to take a step forward towards the tarp. It does matter how many steps towards the tarp he takes but you must release the cue when the mule



The mule may put his nose on the tarp

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Remember to praise the mule

relaxed and try again.

Once you have gotten the mule across the tarp at your spot. Pick another spot to cross the tarp.

After the mule has mastered the tarp, pick another object for the mule to cross. Pick an object harder for the mule than the tarp, but an object you feel the mule will cross. It will build up the mule's confidence and yours.

Once you and your mule master these two lessons your mule will have confidence in you and less likely to balk. Should the mule balk, you will know exactly what to do.

You can reach Tim Doud at www.diamondcreekmules.com, by phone at 307-899-1089 or by e mail at bliss@wave-com.net. You can also "Like" Tim Doud on Facebook.

Tim's past articles can be found on his web site.



Work on the hips over cue away from the scary object

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