

Training Your Mule To Accept Dogs

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TIM asks Diamond Creek Monty to change direction when he reacts to Blackie

Monty watches TIM for a cue instead of looking at Blackie



Do you own a dog? I guess that is a pretty random question, but probably an important one for most mule owners. If you own a dog and a mule I am sure you have discovered, more often than not, mules and dogs generally do not mix.

It can be an unfortunate experience for dogs when they are hoping to be friendly with your mule and they get chased or kicked by a mule who is trying to protect himself. More often than not, the mule wins.

But we can have a world where mules and dogs co-exist harmoniously. I have heard from many mule owners who say they would love to ride down the trail on their mule with their dog walking alongside.

So, where does this mule behavior come from?

Donkeys, a mule's sire, is generally known to be very good at guarding their space. Whatever it may be, donkeys are known to be strong, individual equines and can "handle their own." Here in the western United States many sheep ranchers will turn a "guard" donkey out with their sheep to protect them from wild predators. The donkey will chase any coyote or wild dog away from the herd of sheep, protecting them from danger. This is the natural instinct of a donkey, and thus is bred into the mule.

This instinct is not the same in every mule. Some will have a strong instinct towards dogs, while others may not.

If a mule is raised around dogs they will often become more accepting of dogs and understand their canine friends are not going to hurt them or their fellow mules. My girlfriend, Jessica, owns three dogs, a Jack Russel Terrier ("Jack"), a Shiba Inu ("Kit-Kat"), and a Border-Collie mix ("Blackie"). These dogs are constantly around our young mules from the day they are born, sniffing and checking every inch of our ranch out every day. The mule-foals will try to push the dogs away, but the dogs are used to being around mules and understand the space relationship. Soon, the mules ignore the dogs and they co-exist.

But what if you have just purchased a mule that has never been around dogs, or worse, hates them. Or, what if you just got the family a new puppy and the mule is ready to pounce. How can you train a mule to accept a dog?

When I start a young or older mule, I always start in the round-pen. I teach the mule 20 steps to round-penning, see the June 2011 issue of *Mules and More*. These 20 steps will get the mule focused on me and build a relationship between myself and the mule. I become the leader and the mule begins to respond to my cues, no matter what is going on around us.

Jessica's dog Blackie, who we recently adopted from the local humane society, loves to run around the round pen while I am working a mule. We've discovered that he has very strong herding instincts, so he loves to run around the round pen with the mules. We immediately taught Blackie to never go inside the pen when there is a mule inside, to protect him and the mule. This teaches Blackie there are space restrictions and it also teaches the mule that he cannot

pounce on every little canine.

I now use the round pen to a mule's benefit. Most mules will pin their ears and try to strike at Blackie. However, when I see this trait in a mule develop, I immediately ask the mule to change directions and refocus on my cues.

Essentially, I am teaching the mule to concentrate on me, no matter what is around: a dog, a plastic bag blowing, mules running the pasture, etc. A dog is just a more active distraction.

Please understand, I am not punishing the mule for going after the dog, I am asking the mule to stay focused on me and ignore the dog. Concentrate on the positive not the negative.

So, if I notice the mule is continuously pinning its ears at Blackie, I will continue to work the mule allowing Blackie to run around outside the round pen. I continue to ask the mule to move his feet and cue him to change directions over several sessions until the mule stays focused on me and not Blackie.

What if you do not have a round pen, or a Blackie, who understands to stay out of the round pen? The answer is simple.

During training, I will use this line of thinking every time the mule looks at a dog. If I am walking the mule to the barn and the mule looks over at your dog walking behind him, give your mule a cue. Ask your mule to do something you know he will respond to: step backwards two or three steps, then to the right a step or two, then left, do bridle work, etc.


The mule will learn to always concentrate on you, not distractions around him. A dog is just another distraction for you to use as a training tool.

Remember, you must never punish your mule for exhibiting the behavior it does towards your dog. This behavior is built in and we are essentially reversing his natural thinking. So, we must use positively reinforced cues, i.e. the release, to reward our mule for focusing on us and not the dog. You must always be consistent. Again, the cue can be anything; back up, stop, give to the bit, move the shoulder or disengage the hip.

It also does not matter if we are in the saddle or on the ground. You cue your mule the same with the same line of thinking; focus on me and not the dog.

It likely will take many repetitions before your mule begins to ignore the dog. Dogs are usually a more active distraction than most other distractions we will encounter. But, as with all training lessons, it will take a commitment from the owner to apply the lesson for as long as it takes to teach the mule. We, as owners, also must be consistent and apply the lesson every time the mule reacts to a dog. After that time period the mule will always look to you for guidance, no matter what the situation.

Be the leader to your mule. Always give your mule cues to respond to correctly when he or she is distracted. Do not be a follower, correcting your mule after he shows unwanted behavior.

If you are a leader, the mule will look to you for direction when he or she feels unsure about the dog or crossing water or loading in a trailer, etc. You will build a partnership between you and your mule by teaching them and being the leader they are looking for. Your leadership attitude will transfer to everything you do with your mule. It does not matter if you are on the ground or if the mule is under saddle. Soon, you will be taking your rides with your mule and your dog, co-existing harmoniously. 

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