

Teaching the Foal to Lead

by Tim Doud

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Spring and summer is the time of the year when most mare owners time their mare to foal. Once the foals hit the ground and are deemed healthy, they should be taught to lead as soon as possible. The foal may need to be loaded into a trailer to see a vet or you may want to lead the mare and foal out of their pen every day to a turn out area.

The first thing to know about a youngster is that it is easier to teach a foal to lead when it is beside its mother. The foal will not leave the mare and will follow the mare. So, we can use the mare to help the foal move in the direction we wish. We will ask the foal to move towards the mare not away from the mare.

Our number one goal when teaching a foal to lead is to always remember it is our job to keep the foal safe. We will take the mare and foal to a safe area, like a round pen. Have a helper hold the mare or tie the mare to a safe pole. Never tie the mare to portable round pen panels.

If the mare should get excited, she could pull the panels on top of her. You must also keep the mare safe. If the mare is very protective of the foal, keep the foal next to the mare. This will help keep the mare calm.

Do not tie the mare at all if the mare is not trained to be tied.

Keep all your lessons with the foal short, after 15 minutes give the foal a break. Foals have a short attention span. The break will give the foal time to nurse and absorb the lesson.

You will use light pressure with any lesson you use to teach the foal. Do not get into a fight with the foal. Should the foal ever get scared or frightened, back up in your lesson plan and reevaluate your lesson plan.

Always monitor your foals comfort level. Make sure your foal is always comfortable with you and his surroundings. If the foal is holding his head at his natural level and seems calm and relaxed, he is telling you that he is comfortable.

Should the mule pin his ears, switch his tail or kick out with his hind legs, he is telling you that he is nervous. If the mule shows any of these signs, he is telling you that you are going too fast. Return to a point in your lesson where the foal is comfortable and start again.

The more we can break the lesson down the better and faster the mule will learn. Breaking down a lesson means adding more steps. Think of a lesson plan as a ladder. If we have a ladder and are going to use the ladder to reach the roof of our house, which would be easier for us to reach the roof: a ladder with three steps or a ladder with 20 steps? The

answer is a ladder with 20 steps of course.

It is the same with a mule, the more steps we have in a lesson the easier it is for the mule to complete the lesson correctly.

In order to teach the foal to lead we must first be able to halter the mule. Before we can halter the mule we must be able to touch the mule.

So first, we must sack the foal out with our hand. Walk up to the mule, pet the mule, and walk away. Start at the neck or shoulder. When the mule is comfortable with us touching his neck or shoulder, leave your hand on his neck or shoulder for a longer period of time.

Next, we will walk up to the foal, pet his neck or shoulder and then run our hand to his back. Most foals love to be petted and handled. With practice, the foal will see us walking towards him and the foal will walk up to us for attention and petting.

A foal is treated like an adult mule in that the foal should never put his mouth on us. When you start petting your foal, the foal will want to scratch you back with its mouth. This is what mules do to each other in the pasture. This is natural behavior. We are not another mule. If we allow the mule to scratch us with his mouth, he will next nip us then bite us. We do not want to teach the mule to bite.

Should the mule touch us with his nose, take your hand and bump his nose. Do not hit him, bump him. This will scare the mule and soon he will learn that we can touch him, but he is not allowed to touch us. Work through this lesson until the mule is comfortable with you touching any part of his body. Now we will introduce the halter.

Walk up to the mule with a halter in your hand. Sack the mule out with your other hand. The mule is used to you walking up to him and touching him. The only thing that has changed is now you have a halter in your hand.

With a halter in your hand, the mule will see and hear something new (the buckle hitting the halter, etc). When the mule is comfortable with the halter, we will start to sack the foal out with the halter. Again start slowly and move to another body part when the foal is relaxed and calm.

Remember to give your foal a break after 15 minutes of training. You can teach this lesson in one day or several days or weeks. We can stop our training any time we give the foal a cue and the foal gives us a correct answer.

When you can rub the halter all over the mule's body, including the face, place the halter on the foal. Make sure the halter is the correct size for the foal. You do not want a halter that hangs off his face. This can be dangerous to your foal as he may initially try to pull the halter off with his legs. If the halter is too big, he could get a leg stuck in the halter, then you have a wreck. Also, never leave the halter on your foal when you are not with your foal. If your foal gets the halter stuck on something and you are not there, your foal could get seriously hurt.

We will now add the lead rope. With the foal close to the



TIM sacks out Diamond Creek Popeye with his hand • Next sack out the foal with the halter • When the foal is comfortable with the halter, place the halter on the foal



Apply pressure to the lead rope so the foal steps toward the mare • When the foal is comfortable stepping towards the mare, ask the foal to step away from the mare • Give the foal a complete release of the lead rope when he steps toward the pressure or gives to pressure

mare, attach the lead rope. Apply light pressure to the rope. Any mule is more likely to resist pressure if the neck and spine are in a straight line. Standing in front of the foal, add pressure at a 45 degree angle towards the mare.

We are looking for only one step or a lean of the foal's body in the direction of pressure. As soon as the foal steps or leans in the direction of the pressure, release the pressure. The mule will learn from the release of pressure, not by adding pressure.

As soon as we get one step consistently, we will ask for two steps, then three steps, until the foal will move freely and calmly when we ask.

Next, we can lead the mare and foal together. It is much easier for most people to have a helper lead the mare and you lead the foal. The foal will want to stay with the mare, so the mare will help us teach the foal.

Lead the mare and foal around the pen. If you are using a helper, make sure the mare handler is always watching the foal. If the foal stops walking and locks up, the mare handler should stop until the foal moves again. If the mare keeps walking with the foal stopped, the foal could get scared that

the mare is leaving him.

You do want the mare out in front of the foal a few steps in order to encourage the foal to move.

I usually teach the foal to lead by myself. I will have the mare in one hand and the foal in another. You want to give the foal some rope, about two to three feet. But not enough rope to run around the mare.

The mare will be on a short lead. Hold the lead rope about one foot from the halter.

Take your time and do not be in a hurry when teaching any lesson to a foal.

Now, when you lead the mare to the turn out area each day, lead the foal also. Always take the halter off the foal first. If you release the mare first the foal will get scared and pull away to follow the mare.

With a lot of practice you will have a foal that you can lead anywhere.

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