

20 Steps to Round-Penning Your Mule

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What is a round pen? Simply, a round pen is a corral with no corners. A round pen allows us a starting point to train an untrained mule or an older mule with a problem. The round pen is a tool that I use to build a relationship with my mule and establish control. It is not a device to wear the mule down or tire the mule out. We want the mule to move only enough to learn the lesson we are teaching.

I want all my mules to have energy, not to be worn out. It is much easier to work a mule with energy than to work a mule that does not want to move. I use the round pen to gain control of the mule, so I do not want the mule running out of control.

The mule will also learn to build trust in you. You will ask the mule to do something (go forward, turn left, etc.). When the mule responds correctly and you reward the mule with a release of pressure, the mule will start to look to you for direction and leadership.

If you do not have a round pen can you still teach your mule round pen lessons? The answer is yes. You can take any pen and make a round pen. By securely placing panels, bales of hay, etc. in the corners of a square pen to round the corners - you have a round pen. You can also teach any lesson in a pen with square corners, although training will be faster and easier with no corners for the mule to stop in or to think about jumping out.

The round pen does not train the mule, the person standing inside the pen does.

I like a 6-foot tall, 60-foot round pen. Many mules will jump a 5-foot pen if pushed. This is not to say that you must have a 6-foot pen, though. I have worked many mules in a 5-foot round pen. However, you must make sure not to apply too much pressure on the mule in a 5-foot pen where the mule thinks about jumping.

One question I get a lot is, "Do you like a solid wall round pen or an open round pen." I use a round pen made from portable steel panels, the same kind you would use for a portable corral. I like a mule to be able to see outside the round pen and see the distractions of the world around him. My goal is to take the mule out of the round pen so I do not want

a pen with solid walls. I will teach the mule to respond to my cues no matter what is going on outside the round pen.

It is also our job to keep the mule safe. Make sure there is nothing that will hurt the mule in the round pen. We will also make sure that we never apply so much pressure that the mule feels he must jump or run into the sides of the pen. If the mule does, he is telling us that we must use lighter cues in order to get the proper response.

What type of equipment do you need for round pen training? If your mule's feet are safe to handle, place protective boots on your mule. This gives the mule protection should he bump into the pen or step on his hoof when making a turn. Remember, it is your job to keep the mule safe. If you cannot place boots on your mule, that's OK, you can teach that lesson later.

You will need a lariat or lunge whip. I am comfortable using a lariat, but if you are not, use what you are comfortable with, lunge line, lunge whip, etc. The rope or whip is used as an extension of your hand. It is not use to cause the mule any pain. Any time we cause the mule pain, the mule will tighten his muscles and brace against the pain. This will cause a major drop in his performance.

To begin in the round pen, I follow 20 round pen steps all mules should know, whether the mule has never been touched or the mule is a seasoned rider. These steps are the foundation for further lessons, like standing when being mounted, spook in place, disengaging the hind quarters, advanced leading lessons and many, many more.

When teaching these 20 steps, we will be concentrating on the mule's hip and nose. The mule will learn that you will apply pressure when you want the mule to do something. You will release the pressure when the mule responds correctly.

Kiss or cluck to the mule before you ask for movement from the mule. The mule will learn that when you kiss or cluck to him, you are asking the mule to move something. You may be asking for the mule to move his feet, his head, his hind quarters or any other body part you wish. How does the mule know which body part to move?

You will kiss or cluck to the mule, ask for movement, then apply pressure to the spot you want the mule to move.

Imagine that the mule has a line across his withers. If you are behind this imaginary line, you will move the mule forward. If you are in front of this line the mule will want to slow down, stop or turn.

You can teach these lessons in one session or many. You can stop any time the mule gives you a correct answer. If you are at a certain step and need to stop, but the mule will not give you the correct answer, go back a step or two and ask the mule for a correct answer, then stop.

This is by no means a complete guide. The following descriptions are a short explanation of each step. If you get confused at any point or you feel the mule is out of control, step out of the round pen and regroup.

Step 1



Step 1: Make the mule go forward to the left. Standing in the middle of the round pen and behind the mule's withers, kiss or cluck to the mule while looking at the point of the hip. If the mule does not move, toss the lariat or wave the lunge line behind the mule. The mule will move away from the lariat to the left.

If you are having problems making the mule move see "Go Forward Cue" in the July 2009 issue of *Mule and More* or reprints of my articles at www.diamondcreekmules.com.

You want to establish a consistent forward motion to the left, no pauses, and no attempts to change directions by your mule.

Sometimes the mule will try to turn back to the right, when he does ask him to go back to the left by cutting off his forward motion by stepping in front of the withers and driving his hip back to the left. If you feel the mule will not stop and will run you over, simply get out of the way and try again. The mule will turn back to the left.

If the mule stops moving forward to the left, ask the mule to go forward again. But, do not keep asking the mule to move forward if he is already moving forward.

You want the mule to move around at the trot, but not running around the pen in an uncontrolled matter.

Step 2: Make the mule change directions from the left. As the mule is moving to the left and you are standing in the center of the round pen, look at the mule's nose and walk towards the mule's nose. The mule will change directions. He will then be moving to the right.

Step 3: Make the mule go forward to the right. Ask the mule to go forward to the right the same as you did to the left. Look at the mule's hip, kiss or cluck to the mule. If the mule does not move forward toss the lariat behind the mule.

Step 4: Change Directions from the right. This step is the same as step 2 only to the right.

Step 5: Change directions from the left, making only an outside turn. Now you will ask the mule to not only change directions, but specifically to turn away from you, outside. To make a mule turn outside, concentrate on the mule's nose. With the mule moving to the left, walk towards the mule's nose and encourage the mule to move away from you to change directions.

If the mule is at 12 on a clock, you will be walking at a 45 percent angle towards the mule, or 10 on a clock.

If the mule turns towards you, inside, step back and ask the mule to move forward again. You are not punishing the mule for turning inside. You are telling the mule that you did

Step 5



not want an inside turn. After the mule is moving forward again, ask him for an outside turn again.

Step 6: Change directions from the right, making an outside turn. This is the same as step 5, only from the right.

Step 7: Practice outside turns. During steps 5 and 6, you are establishing your outside turns. Now repetition is going to teach your mule. Practice your outside turns until you can get the mule to turn outside consistently without hesitation. Make sure you allow the mule to move forward after the mule makes an outside turn. Do not ask the mule to make outside turns using only a small part of the round pen. Let him walk at least half way around the pen before you ask for another outside turn.

Step 8: Have the mule turn outside when you ask. Now you will ask the mule to turn outside at certain spots in your round pen. Pick a spot like the panel across from the gate. Ask the mule to turn outside at your spot. If the mule turns two panels past your spot, he is telling you that you must ask him sooner. If the mule turns before your spot, he is telling you that you are asking too soon.

Make sure you change your spots where you ask for a turn. If you ask a mule to turn at the same spot, the mule will memorize your pattern. Every time he goes to the spot, he

will turn. He is not responding to the cue, he has memorized the pattern.

Step 9: Turn inside from the left. You will now ask the mule to turn inside, towards you. For an inside turn we will step in front of the imaginary line at the mule's withers. Instead of stepping towards the mule, 10 o'clock, we will step at a 45 percent angle away from the mule or at 7 o'clock.

Step 10: Turn inside from the right. Same as step 9, only from the right.

Step 11: Practice inside turns. Practice inside turns until you can get the mule to turn inside, right and left, consistently and when you ask.

Step 12: Have the mule turn inside at exact spots. Same as step 8, only have the mule make inside turns.

Step 13: Ask the mule for outside and inside turns. After your mule understands how to do inside turns and outside turns without hesitation, now we will mix up outside and inside turns. This will get the mule to focus on your cues and not anticipate or memorize your lessons. He will not know what type of turn you are asking for until you ask him and his focus on you will become intensified.

Step 14: Ask the mule for an outside turn, then a stop. Now, we will go back to our outside turns and use them to



Step 9

stop the mule. Ask the mule to move forward. Then ask for an outside turn. You will allow your mule to complete the turn and continue moving forward. However, instead of allowing your mule to move around the round pen, we are going to ask for another outside turn after just a few panels. We will repeat this, continuing to ask for outside turns every few panels. Essentially, we are using the outside turns to cut the round pen down to one-half of its size.

Once you have cut the round pen down, ask for outside turns using one-fourth of the round pen, then one-eighth, then one-sixteenth and so on. Our goal is to teach the mule to stop on cue. With practice, you will soon be able to ask for outside turns one after another. The more turns you ask for the slower your mule will turn, which is what we want. Ask for an outside turn then relax and stop, if the mule continues to move ask for another outside turn. Keep turning the mule outside until the mule stops.

Step 15: Ask the mule to stop, standing parallel to the fence. The mule should now be focused on your cues with your outside turns. Now use your turns to stop the mule parallel to the fence. If the mule is facing you ask for an outside turn. As soon as the mule moves, relax. If the mule moves too far outside, move him back.

You can now move the mule anywhere you would like without touching the mule.

Step 16: Ask the mule to stay, standing parallel to the fence. Now you will walk back to the center of the round corral. If the mule moves from the fence, reposition the mule parallel to the fence. When the mule will stand parallel to the fence no matter where you are standing in the round pen, you know the mule is listening to your cues.

Step 17: Ask the mule to look at you. You will teach the mule to look at you, but not move his feet. Stand in front of the mule at a distance where he will not move off. Kiss or cluck to the mule. Remember a kiss or cluck means movement, but now you are asking for movement from his head or eyes.

If the mule looks away from you, kiss or cluck and ask for

his head. If the mule does not look at you, step towards the center of the round pen, ask the mule to move forward, then stop the mule and reposition the mule parallel to the fence. Walk back in front of the mule and ask for his head again. Soon the mule will realize you are just asking for him to look at you.

When the mule is looking at you, relax and stand still. This is the mule's release.

Step 18: Ask the mule to look at you and bend his neck. We will now ask the mule to look at us and follow us with his eyes as we take one step to the side. The mule may look away, if he does, we ask him to look at us. If the mule does not look at us, slap the lariat against your leg to get his attention. If he still will not look at you, step back in front of the mule and ask again.

Build on this until you can walk two or three steps to the side of the mule. The mule should not move his feet, but bend his neck to keep looking at us. Walk towards the mule's hip not back to the center of the round pen.

Step 19: Ask the mule to turn and face you from the left. Have the mule move forward then stop parallel to the fence. Kiss or cluck and ask the mule to look at you. At this point the mule should look at you. As he continues looking at you bend his neck farther and farther, he will move his feet to square up his body. If you can pet the mule, do so. The mule may follow you as you walk back away. That is good. We will want the mule to follow us later in his training.

Step 20: Ask the mule to turn and face you from the right. Same as step 20 only start with the mule's left side parallel to the fence and bend his neck to the right.

By practicing these steps you can continue to other steps, such as teaching the mule to follow you and lead without a halter. I use these steps with every mule I train, no matter their riding level. It builds willingness in my mules and a partnership.



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Step 20