



Rope Work

by Tim Doud

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Every mule should be taught to accept a rope because it will teach your mule to accept things around his legs, hind quarters, back, shoulders, etc. Rope work will also teach your mule to accept pressure on his hip and shoulder.

If you plan on using your mule on the ranch, leading a pack mule or ponying another mule, rope work is a mandatory lesson.

Rope work is sacking a mule out with a rope. Sacking out is exposing your mule to an object, which is adding pressure, and then removing the object, releasing the pressure.

Sacking out is not tying a mule up and slapping him with an object until the mule no longer moves. If you tie the mule up, you are forcing the mule to stand still. I want the mule to stand still on his own, not make him stand still. The use of force never works when training. I guarantee it will come back to bite you later.

We will start with a mule loose in a safe area, like a round pen. Standing in front of the mule, while holding the end of the rope, throw the rope down about a foot away on the ground in front of you. This is your starting point.

When you throw the rope, watch the mule's head and eyes. When the mule is getting scared or worried, he will raise his head and his eyes become bigger. The mule is telling us he is not comfortable with what is happening and is about ready to flee.

This is the response we are looking for. We want a reaction from our mule. It is OK for your mule to be afraid, however, he cannot move his feet. If the mule does move his feet, we will continue to throw the rope down a foot in front of us. We are not keeping the mule moving by continuing to throw the rope. We are teaching the mule that running away from the rope, or anything that he is afraid of, will not make the scary object go away. When the mule stops his feet, we stop tossing the rope.

(top to bottom) Start by throwing the rope about one foot in front of the mule • The mule should be 100 percent comfortable with the rope before you add the saddle • Flip the rope over the mule's hip and apply light pressure • With the rope in front of the mule, the mule should turn and face you when you apply pressure • When the mule feels pressure on his hips, he should make an outside turn and turn away from pressure

Mules have a very strong flight instinct. We are teaching the mule the opposite of the instinct he was born with. Stop your feet (instead of running away) when you are afraid and look to me for direction.

If the mule does not seem afraid when we throw the rope one foot in front of us, throw the rope two feet, then three feet, etc, until the mule reacts to the rope. Remember we want the mule to lift his head up and act like he will run off, but does not move his feet.

If he does move his feet, throw the rope the same distance you did when he moved off. When the mule stops his feet, stop throwing the rope and walk up and praise the mule.

We will continue throwing the rope on the ground until we can throw the rope all around the mule. This includes around and between the legs, in back and front of the mule.

When the mule looks bored with the exercise, he is telling us that he is ready for the next step.

We will now work on throwing the rope on top of the mule. Start by throwing the rope halfway up the mule's hind legs, then on top of the mule's hind quarters. If the mule moves off, try to keep the rope on top of the mule until he stops. The second the mule stops, pull the rope off.

If the rope falls off the mule as he moves, throw the rope about half the distance towards the mule until the mule stops his feet.

If your mule does not seem to want to stop his feet, throw the rope in front of the mule. This will make the mule want to stop. If your mule is running wildly around the pen, stop and step out of the pen until the mule calms down. The mule is screaming to you to back up in your training as you are applying too much pressure.

When the mule is comfortable with the rope on his hind quarters, throw the rope up on his back. Then we will throw the rope on his neck.

After your mule is comfortable with the rope on his back, we will ask the mule to move with the rope. This is a different type of scary object. The object is now following the mule. If we have done the previous lesson well, this exercise will not be a problem for the mule. The mule should slowly walk off until we step in front of the mule and ask him to turn inside and face us.

The mule should also be comfortable with the rope touching his legs as he moves.

Now with the mule calmly walking with a rope and standing when we throw the rope anywhere on his body, we are ready for the saddle.

Saddle the mule and practice all previous exercises. The mule must be 100 percent comfortable with the rope before we can attach the rope to the saddle.

Once your mule is 100 percent comfortable with the rope all over him while saddled, then and ONLY THEN can you attached the rope to the saddle horn and ask the mule to walk forward.

If your mule is not 100 percent comfortable with the rope

all over him while saddled, do not attach the rope to the saddle. Continue working on sacking out your mule with the rope while saddled and unsaddled for several more lessons.

If your mule is ready, attach the rope to the horn of the saddle and ask your mule to walk forward. Allow the rope to drag beside the mule, then behind the mule. As the mule walks forward, lightly pull on the rope moving the saddle horn slightly. This is another different feeling for the mule.

Do not pull hard enough on the rope that you pull the saddle way off to the side as this will cause pain to the mule. If you add any pain to a mule, he will think and react to the pain, not to the cue.

Next, take the rope and flip it to the outside of the mule, towards the fence. As the mule moves forward apply light pressure to the rope. This will apply pressure to the outside hindquarter of the mule. You are looking for the mule to move his hindquarter to the inside of the circle, away from the pressure of the rope. You are looking for one step.

When the mule will take one step to the inside constantly, hold pressure until the mule takes two steps, then three steps and then the mule will disengage his hind quarters when you apply pressure. The mule is making an outside turn when you apply pressure.

Remember to work both sides of the mule. The mule should softly and calmly disengage both hind quarters. Then we will work with the mule's shoulder.

With the rope still tied to the saddle horn, flip the rope over the mule's head. The rope will now be running from the saddle horn, down the mule's outside shoulder, around the front of the mule, to your hand in the center of the round pen.

If you have trouble positioning the rope, you can position the mule. If you ask the mule for an outside turn, it will position the rope on the mule's hind quarters. An inside turn will position the rope on the shoulders.

If your mule is calm, you can walk up to the mule, position the rope then ask the mule to move forward.

With the rope positioned on the mule's shoulder, cue the mule to walk forward. As the mule walks forward, apply light pressure to the rope. The mule should take one step to the inside of the circle, move his shoulder in.

If the mule does not respond, add more pressure and hold until the mule responds. Same as with the hind quarters, we will ask for one step, then two steps, then three steps. With many repetitions, the mule will turn and face you when you apply light pressure with the rope, an inside turn.

Rope work will teach a mule many lessons. After rope work is completed you will have no problems leading or ponying another animal. Your mule will also be more responsive to your cues and much calmer when things are thrown around him.

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