



TIM teaches Angel to give to the bit before starting reverse arch circles



Angel steps toward 1 o'clock, the first step in a reverse arch circle

Reverse Arch Circles

by Tim Doud, Diamond Creek Mules, Cody, Wyo.

We all hope and work towards having a soft and supple mule. A mule that will respond to our rein cue with lightness and energy is the goal or end result. But how can we get a mule so light that it looks like we are not moving the reins at all?

The best way to achieve softness is by teaching your mule reverse arch circles. A reverse arch circle is when the mule will give his nose and flex his neck to rein pressure from one side, we will say the left, and move his feet in the opposite direction, to the right.

Reverse arch circles are also an excellent way to move a mule's shoulder. When trotting or loping a circle a mule may drop his inside shoulder in the circle. With a reverse arch circle, we can pick up the mule's shoulder and move the shoulder outward. This exercise is also one of the best ways to teach your mule to neck rein softly.

With the mule saddled and a snaffle bit on its head, take the mule to a safe riding area. First, we will start teaching the mule to give to pressure from the rein. Start with the mule at a walk or trot. As the mule moves forward apply a small amount of pressure, say one half pound, to one rein, let's say to the left rein, and hold the pressure.

Watch the mule's nose as pressure is applied. As soon as the mule's nose moves to the direction of pressure, left, release the rein. This is called "giving to the bit." Remember, the mule learns from the release of pressure, not by applying pressure.

At this point, we will not worry about where the mule puts his feet, as long as we are safe.

If the mule does not respond to one half pound of pressure applied to the rein, increase the pressure to one pound and hold, then two pounds, then three pounds, etc. When the mule moves his nose to the direction of pressure, release the rein.

There may be times that you need several pounds of pressure to get an initial response from your mule. You must remember that adding pounds to your pressure is OK as long as you are not jerking or yanking on your mule's mouth. A slow and steady hold is what your mule will respond to correctly.

Secondly, be sure to start out with as little pressure as possible to get your mule to respond. If we start off with a lot of pressure, we are not giving the mule the chance to respond to light pressure. We must start off light then add pressure only when the mule will not respond.

We will continue to work with the mule until the mule will "give to the bit" with very light pressure. Work on both sides of the mule as you will want your mule soft on the left and right. The more you practice this lesson, the lighter and lighter your mule will become.

Next, we will begin teaching the reverse arch circle by teaching our mule to move his shoulder with the rein.

When we taught "give to the bit," we asked by pulling our rein towards us slightly. However, to do a reverse arch circle, we must think of it as "pushing" our mule's shoulder in the direction we want to go without touching our mule's neck with the rein.

As the mule walks forward, apply pressure to the rein, say the left side and ask the mule to "give to the bit." When the mule moves his nose to pressure, we will give a mini release. Release some of the pressure, but not all the pressure. This will tell the mule, yes, you responded correctly to my cue, but now I am asking you to do more.

Now, after our mini-release, if we want the mule to move his feet to the

right in a reverse arch circle, we will add pressure to our rein again, but in an upward and toward the shoulder motion, as if we are “pushing” our mule’s shoulder to the right while his nose and neck are bent to the left.

Make sure you are looking for the mule to move his shoulder to the right. The mule may move his head farther left to find a release. This is not what we are looking for. If he responds with more flexion of his neck, slide your rein up his neck towards his ears and hold in the same manner you did when you initially asked, upward and toward his shoulder. Do not hold your rein against his neck and do not cross over his neck. This will keep the mule from giving to the left farther.

Hold pressure until the mule moves his shoulder to the right. The movement may be very slight. A good place to look is at the right foot of your mule. It will step out and away from the rest of your mule when he is trying to get the right answer.

Another way to think of this exercise is to think of yourself as riding in a clock: 12 o’clock is straight ahead and 6 o’clock is directly behind you. When the mule first steps to the right, he will probably place his right front foot on 1 o’clock. Not straight to the right, but also not straight forward. We will build on this first step.

Work with the mule stepping on 1 o’clock until the mule will constantly step on 1 o’clock. Then ask the mule to give to the bit and move his shoulder to the right even more, this time have the mule step on 2 o’clock.

Now, you must always keep forward motion when you are working on this exercise. You do not want your mule spinning or pivoting on his hind legs. Eventually, you can ask for that, but initially, your mule will learn it better if you keep your circle, or clock, moving at all times.

Next, in order to properly move around the clock, your mule must progress to 2 o’clock, then 3 o’clock, and so on. As your mule steps out with the right front foot, the left front foot has an important role as well. It must cross in front of the right front foot to maintain forward motion. If the left front foot crosses behind the right front foot, you are “going backwards.” This is a tell-tale sign that you are using too much rein pressure to get the result you are looking for.

The correct sequence is to: Walk forward with your mule, ask your mule to give to the bit and for neck flexion to the left, give mini-release, then pick up and towards the shoulder of your mule and watch the right front foot step to the right, then the left front foot crosses in front of right front foot, hind feet move forward. Then begin the process again.

Remember to always work both sides of the mule. What the mule learns on the left side will not automatically be learned on the right. You must start the lesson over when you move to the opposite side.

You can also teach your mule to side-pass from this exercise. When you have your mule stepping on 2 o’clock, ask for one more step towards three o’clock. Now the mule will be moving his front feet straight to the side and not moving his hind feet forward. From there, you can develop this movement and your mule can begin to learn the initial steps of the side-pass.

As we work through the lesson, you will notice the mule responding to lighter and lighter pressure. The mule is also looking to us for cues to respond to.

Any time we work through a lesson with our mule we will find that the mule improves in other areas that we are not concentrating on.

With many, many repositions the mule will give to the bit and move into a reverse arch circle with very little rein pressure from you.

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TIM asks Angel to step toward 3 o’clock



The left foot has an important role as well; it must cross in front of the right front foot