



Active and Reactive Riders

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Diamond Creek Mules

Cody, Wyo.

Angel would like to eat grass. TIM is active and asks Angel to pick her head up before she eats

Are you an active or reactive rider? How can you tell? If you are always telling your mule “No,” as in “No, do not walk ahead of me,” or “No, do not eat grass,” then you are a reactive rider. If you are always asking your mule to respond to a cue, take two steps back, move your shoulder over before the mule does something you don’t want, then you are an active rider.

Anytime you have two people or a mule and a person together, one takes the lead and the other responds to the leader. Sometimes the lead will go back and forth between the two people or between the mule and person. Each one will lead when they feel comfortable and follow when unsure. Eventually, one will take the leadership role.

Many times an active partner will take control not by what they say, but by what they do. If we do not set a training program with training steps for our mule, the mule will dictate what we do. Unless we tell the mule where to go, the mule will go when he wants.

The more decisions we allow the mule to make, the less control we will have. We do not have to dictate every step he takes, but we must be in control.

What does it mean to “be in control?” Being in control is knowing and directing to the mule what we want. It is not asking the mule to stand. It is asking the mule to stand at an exact spot in the arena.

Depending on how well we have our mule trained, we will allow him certain freedoms. If your mule is trained to ground tie, stand still in the middle of the arena while not being tied to anything, we will drop the reins and walk away from the mule. This will allow us to practice ground tying with the mule and to evaluate the mules training.

Of course we will always set up the mule to succeed by practicing ground tying when the mule would like to stand, not when we first saddle the mule and the mule is wanting to

move. We will also make sure the mule is in an area where if he does move, he cannot run out on the road and get hurt.

If you always look at what the mule did (i.e., he spooked at the mailbox, he walked off as you mounted, or he pushed into you at the gate) then you are a reactive rider. If you instead ask your mule to do something you want (for example, give to the bit as we walk beside the mailbox, stand still when you mount, or take a step back away from the gate) then you are an active rider.

Reactive riders correct their mule when the mule does something they do not want. An active rider is constantly asking the mule to do what they would like the mule to do.

Active riders are positive in their training, always thinking “yes.” Re-

active riders are negative in their training and are always thinking “no.”

Let’s look at a normal situation. A person has decided to go on a ride. They put a halter on their mule and tie the mule up to the hitch rail. As they brush the mule, the mule starts to move around a little bit. They tell them “whoa.” The mule moves some more, and they say “WHOA” in a louder and firmer voice. As they grab the saddle pad and the mule moves again. This time they yell “Stand still!” When they try to put the saddle on his back, he moves again, and they yell again. Now this person is starting to lose their temper. Any time you lose your temper, you are reacting. This person is reacting to what the mule is doing. They are a reactive.

Another person has also decided to go on a ride. They put a halter on their mule and tie the mule to a hitch rail. As they brush the mule, the mule takes a step to the right. They ask the mule to take a step to the left and then they continue to brush the mule.

As they place the saddle pad on the mule’s back, the mule takes two steps to the right. They ask the mule to take two steps to the left.

This is an active rider. This person is not negative, is not correcting the mule for something the mule did that the person did not want. This person is always positive and asks the mule to do something that the person wants.

How do you become an active rider?

Start by looking at your mule and noticing the good things about him. When you brush and saddle your mule, tell him where to stand, do not scold him when he moves.

Think about what you would like your mule to do before you do it. If you would like to mount your mule while the mule stands still, think about your mule standing still and what you must ask the mule to do in order for the mule to stand.

When you get into the saddle ask the mule to stand still instead of immediately walking off. This may be different for the mule because for a reactive rider, the mule has been use to making all the decisions. You are now asking the mule to allow you to make all the decisions.

Make each request easy for the mule to accomplish. Don't start out with unreasonable requests. If you do, you are setting up your mule to fail. Remember, you are the teacher and you are teaching a small child not a college student.

When you begin, do your ground work or ride in situations where you're likely to have little distractions, not big ones. At first, your mule may become frustrated as he's not used to you taking the leadership role.

To ensure success, ask your mule to do one thing at a time. Reactive riders will ask their mule to do two or more things at once. Do not ask more of your mule than he can do and give him the required time needed to accomplish the task.

Do not nit-pick at your mule; give precise clear cues that are easy for the mule to understand.



If a mule doesn't want the bridle on, an active rider will ask the mule to do something else (above). Then the mule accepts the bridle (below).



Reactive riders are also in a hurry, wanting to get the mule trained as soon as possible, get the mule saddled as soon as possible, or start riding the mule as soon as possible. Reactive riders are more concerned with impressing other people. Remember, training a mule is not a race; there is no finish line.

An active rider is always monitoring the mule and slowing down or speeding up the lesson plan as the mule dictates. An active rider sets up the mule to look good and succeed. Active riders will also push the mule to do better in a safe and controlled environment.

Reactive riders are very vanilla in their request to the mule: "Walk forward."

Active riders are exact in what they want the mule to do: "Walk forward when I ask, next to the rail. Then move up to a trot and turn left. Now turn right. Move your shoulder to the right and slow to a walk. Disengage your hindquarters and stop."

Think of this as if it were you. It is much easy for a person to walk into an unknown situation if there is someone in charge telling us what to do. All we need to do is follow directions. If we are in a situation with no one in charge or we feel unsafe with the person in charge, then we often feel that we must do what we have to do to be safe. It is the same with a mule.

If the mule does not need to think about anything but the cues given by the rider. It's the easiest things for a mule to do. If the rider is asking in a way the mule understands clearly, then the mule will do his best to learn what is being asked and work with you. However, if you are always reactive, your mule picks up on that and becomes resistant and unwilling because it is trying to protect himself from you.

A mule owned by an active rider will soon learn to only respond to the riders cues. It then becomes the rider's job to worry about the truck driving down the road, the plastic bags blowing across the arena, the mailbox coming up on the right, etc...not the mules.

An active rider will see a distraction ahead of the mule and get the mule busy doing something else, like moving his shoulder over or giving to the bit, instead of waiting for the mule to react to a distraction, then correcting the mule.

You will not become an active rider overnight. Just like the mule must be retrained to allow you to take the leadership role, you must also be retrained. If you make a mistake (and we all do) just ask the mule to do something positive.

By becoming an active rider you will build a trust and relationship with your mule. You and your mule will become partners. Your mule will respond to your cues 100 percent of the time because the mule will learn that you will keep him safe. 🐾

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