

Setting Goals in Training

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Before training a new mule, Tim puts together a plan of action • Teaching your mule shoulder control is an important step in training for lead changes • Working on collection, Tim implemented his plan, step by step, with a client's molly mule

Training our mules can be a fun and very rewarding experience. In contrast, it can also be a very frustrating experience. Too often, we get confused as to what cues mean what. Then our mules do not respond to our cues because they are just as confused as we are.

When training we must first have a training goal in mind. Our training really begins at the kitchen table, planning out sessions and giving ourselves a plan.

Firstly, write down your training goal or goals. What do you want to teach your mule? To come to you, to stand still when mounting, to be lighter and more responsive to the bridle, to have smooth flying lead changes, to move laterally better – side pass, half pass, hips in, etc.

Once we decide what our training goal will be, we must build a series of steps, a plan, to achieve our goal. Too often, we are forced into always thinking of our goal when we train. This approach, however, often makes it harder for our mule to reach that goal. The smaller the steps the faster our mule will achieve our training goals.

Think of your plan or training goal as a ladder, the more steps you have on your ladder the easier it will be to climb to the top...such is with training your mule.

For instance, when teaching a mule to do a flying lead change, you must first teach the mule to be responsive to the

bridle with many repetitions of bridle work. Then you must teach your mule to move his hips and shoulders freely; again with many repetitions. Next we must teach our mule to move laterally so we can disengage one hip and engage the other to ask for a lead change.

So, yes, lead changes are an advanced maneuver, however teaching it starts on day one of your training, no matter what level your mule is at. Responsiveness to the bridle is something I teach from day one with any mule I work with. This is of the utmost importance in many things you do with your mule. However, lead changes are hard to come by without it.

Another example is teaching your mule to stand when mounting. Well, first you have to teach your mule to stand to be caught, stand to be brushed, stand for the saddle pad, then lastly stand to be saddled. Expecting your mule to just know how to stand to be mounted does not happen overnight. Many other steps were taken to reach that goal. And again it started very early in our training.


Breaking each training goal down into as many steps as possible makes teaching your mule a fun and rewarding task; and your mule's willingness to learn will increase two-fold.

When a contractor comes to your home to give you an estimate for an addition, he never just says, "OK, ma'am, here is exactly what it will look like and

here is what it will cost." Contractors have to take the steps which are necessary to build you a solid addition that will not crack, fall or waver in any way. They have to take measurements, find the right materials to use, plan out each phase of the project to be sure nothing is missed that would cause your addition to have "holes." Before they even pour the foundation, they are planning out each detail on paper.

The same applies to training your mule. Write your steps on 5x7 note cards and use them during your training sessions. Understand what steps you are taking and why.

Too many times we are so worried about the goal that we miss out on our mule completing the steps in between. Therefore, we do not reward him. By seeing the steps in between and rewarding each step, we are giving our mule the opportunity to learn. The steps then become more fun for the mule and they look forward to the next step.

The most important thing to remember is... never put a time frame on reaching your goal. It is not fair to you or your mule. Your mule must be given the opportunity to learn at his or her pace. 

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