



Can My Mule Be Fixed?

*By Tim Doud
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I receive many calls each month from people with training questions or owners wanting their mules trained. Most of the calls I receive are from owners who are having problems with their mules and are looking for help. I enjoy helping people help their mule. After all, that is a trainer's job.

Most owners that call often ask me the same question "Can my mule be fixed?" The answer is always the same; "Yes."

When, or if, a mule develops a bad habit like bucking, running away, walking off when you mount etc., 99 percent of the time it will take longer to retrain a mule than if a horse developed the same habit. This often begs the question, why would a mule start an unwanted behavior?

Most "bad" behaviors with mules typically start as a defense mechanism to pain, abuse or fear. It may also be a mule becoming confused with trying to find the right answer to the owner's cues.

Often times, owners become frustrated and put their mule back in his pen. When this happens, you are training your mule to use the unwanted behavior any time he wants to "get out of work" or get away from you. The mule is training the owner. After all, they are not stubborn, they are just smarter than we give them credit for.

My answer: there is not a mule in the world that cannot be trained. Some mules just take longer to train than others. It is up to the owner to decide if they want to make the commitment to train the mule or send the mule to a professional trainer for the amount of time needed to train the mule.

One of the biggest responses I get to telling owners how long it will take to correct the mule's problem is "Why?"

Why would a mule start an unwanted behavior?

You have to think of it in relation to how long it took you to go through school: 12 years to graduate high school and four to 10 years for college – depending on what you've specialized in. Don't discount a good education for your mule. You may think years is ridiculous, but it is reality! Buying your mule is the cheapest part.

When training mules you cannot buy a piece of equipment and magically fix your mule. Nor will your mule fix itself in the pasture. Many people are afraid that they will make the mule worse if they make mistakes. So, the mule sets in the pasture for days, weeks or even months.

The mule must be trained to get better. Training takes place with a person working with the mule. If you are confused go back in your training to a point that the mule will give you a "Yes" answer to a cue. That is your starting point. From there, just take your time and help the mule find the right answer.

In the March 2011 issue of *Mules and More* I wrote about a mule called "Maggie." Maggie was purchased by a couple for their young son to trail ride. They paid a lot of money for the mule, but found out when they took the mule home, that the mule was too dangerous for their son to ride.


I ended up owning the mule and used the mule during my pack-in black bear hunts in May and June. Maggie started out with her old tricks, mainly running off or refusing to move at all. We worked her through her problems for two months. Now she is the mule that her former owners thought they had purchased. But it took two months of working every day to fix her problems.

Maggie's past owners had given up on her and passed her on from owner to owner because they believed she could not be trained. I did nothing special with Maggie. I just took the time she needed to fix her problems.

Back in the mid 80s I was working for an outfitter here in Cody. He owned two mules named Jack and Jill, a pair of grulla mules that were a brother and sister team. The mules were very, very badly abused. They had been hit in the head with 2x4's, thrown on the ground to pack and were two of the most afraid mules I had ever seen. The mules were trained to be scared. The only way they could protect themselves is to kick, bite or run away.

I told the outfitter to give me the mules to use and keep everyone else away. It took me three years of constantly working with the mules before they overcame their fears. They learned that not all people are out to hurt them.

I later purchased the business from the outfitter under the condition that Jack and Jill came with the business. Soon, I had my guide school students that had never seen a horse or mule in their life using Jack and Jill.

All mules can be trained, you just need to take the time the mule needs to be fixed. As they say, patience is a virtue, especially with mules. 

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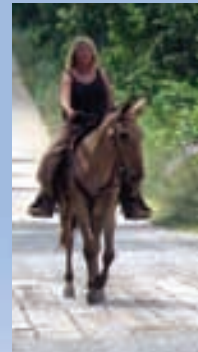
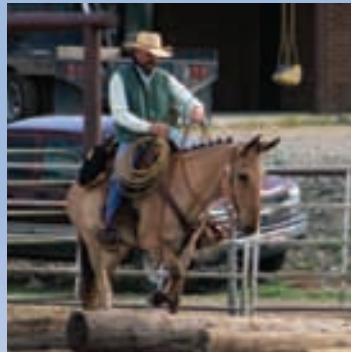
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