

# Gaining Confidence

by Tim Doud

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**H**elping my clients and their mule gain confidence is my job and goal. I sometimes teach clinics to help my clients, however, most of the training I do for the public is private lessons. I travel to my clients home's, no matter where they live, or my clients travel to me. Private lessons allow me to teach any owner to train any mule because the lessons are specific to one mule and owner and their needs. Unlike a clinic where I teach a group of riders a set of exercises geared towards trail or performance, private lessons are focused on exactly what that mule and that owner need. Whether it be saddling, round penning, the hard to catch mule, leads and lead changes, ponying, any topic really, private lessons are an excellent way to help my clients and their mules gain confidence.

The first step to ensuring my clients have gained confidence is being sure they are going to be able to do what I have taught them when they get home. Because I teach the owner exercises that are specific to his or her own mule, when the private lessons are over the owner knows exactly how to continue the training, even at home.

I recently completed a two-day private lesson with a gentleman who wanted to simply gain confidence with saddling, ground work and trail riding. He scheduled the private lesson because he had purchased a mule, had a bad experience and lost his confidence. He did not feel safe or in control with his new mule.

The first day he rode his new mule by myself, the mule spooked and ran away with him. When the mule spooked the man had no control as the mule would not respond to any of his cues. The mule would not disengage his hind quarters, stop, turn or slow down at all.

Lucky, neither the rider nor mule was injured. Sadly, I get more calls from clients needing help with run-away mules and mules bought from sales that are not what the seller or auction said they were.

So, I guess this begs the questions...Why does a person lose confidence, or moreover why does a person not have any confidence to start with?

Usually a person has no confidence when they feel unsafe and out of control. This could be from a bad experience with a mule, as the story with my client, or even someone that is new to equines or new to mules. It could even be someone that has been told bad stories about untrained mules or has seen a wild untrained mule and therefore may not feel confident around mules.

No matter what the reason, the solution is the same, you have to slowly and methodically build your confidence. So how can a person build up their confidence?

We all know how scary it can be for young child to learn how to ride a bike. Do you just go put a young child on a bike



**Start your confidence training at the kitchen table**

and give them a big push down a busy street? Of course not.

We set the child up to succeed. We walk alongside the child holding on to the bike so it will not fall over. We also make sure the child is wearing a helmet, is riding in a safe area and the bike is equipped with training wheels.

It is the same with the mule owner and his or her mule. We only want to do things with our mule that we feel are safe and controlled.

Most mules with problems, like running away or kicking, have these problems because they do not have the confidence to do otherwise. Unfortunately, a run-away mule or kicking mule was likely forced into a situation where his only option was to run or kick, or was never taught that standing still or not kicking was an option. He quickly learned that running or kicking was his best and safest way out of the situation, so he continued to do it.

If you are unsure or do not feel comfortable working with your mule, get professional help from a trainer you trust.

First, we must remember the three rules of training.

#1 You cannot get hurt.

#2 The mule cannot get hurt.

#3 The mule must be calmer at the end of the lesson than he was before the lesson. In this case rule number three also applies to you. You must be calmer after the lesson than before the lesson.

Next, find something that you can do with the mule that you feel safe doing. This could be trotting in the arena, but not loping. It could also be riding on a trail or riding in a round pen or even just haltering the mule and brushing the mule.

Make sure when you are with your mule and you are trying to build your confidence you start by choosing an exercise that is pleasant for you and your mule. You want this to be enjoyable, not a scary experience.

Start your confidence building at the kitchen table. Grab a cup of coffee and a piece of paper. Write down the reasons you do not feel confident with your mule. This could be things



**Find something that you feel safe doing with the mule**



**Always stay safe and in control**

about you or your mule; maybe you do not feel comfortable picking up the mule's hind feet or loping with the mule. Be honest about you and your mule.

Maybe the mule will not respond to your rein cues or crowds your space when you lead him, spooks at objects on the trail, etc.

Next, we will list the goals we wish to accomplish with the mule. This could be anything from winning an Olympic medal to standing still when you saddle him.

Finally, write down a lesson plan to accomplish your goals. What lesson or lessons do you need to teach the mule and what steps are needed to teach each lesson. This is the most important part of any training. By having a written lesson plan, we can teach our mule step by step each lesson we would like the mule to know.

If you are not sure how to solve a problem or build your confidence in a certain area, then get help from a professional trainer. You are better off alive and healthy, then hurt or without your mule because you were afraid to ask.

Always remember, the more steps in any lesson, the easier it is for the mule to learn the lesson. The mule will also learn the lesson faster if there are more steps in the lesson.

A sure lesson plan builds confidence in the teacher as well as the mule because as the mule learns each step, you will feel safe and confident teaching the next step.

Think of a lesson plan as a ladder. If you need to get to the top of your barn, would it be easier with a ladder with two steps or a ladder with 50 steps? Of course 50 steps would be easier.

If at any time in your training you feel unsafe or unsure or the mule is not responding to your cues, just back-up one step in your lesson plan and start again.

Once you have this starting point, you will work forward from there. If your lack of confidence with your mule comes from a training problem of the mule, you must fix the training problem. In other words, do not be afraid to change how

you get to your goal. If what you are doing is not working, try another approach. Sometimes, if we change one little thing, we get big results.

For example, if your mule ran away with you, ask yourself, "Does my mule know 'Spook in Place' or how to disengage his hind quarters?" If the answer is no and you ride your mule without first fixing the problem, then you are probably going to have a run-away mule again.

If the mule does not want to stand still with you in the saddle, you must teach the mule to stand still. Walking off and doing what he wants will not solve the problem. Fix the problem and teach the mule to stand still.

Always stay safe and in control. Start your lessons with the mule from the ground if you feel unsafe in the saddle. If you cannot get the mule to perform the lesson correctly from the ground, he probably won't from the saddle with you on his back.

If you are working your mule from the ground in a safe area, like a round pen, and you feel unsafe, you can let go of the mule and start over or regroup.

As you practice the first exercise you have chosen, you will gain confidence in yourself and the mule. When you feel 100 percent safe and confident in your first lesson, start your next training lesson by first reviewing the past lesson, then move on. You want to push yourself and the mule a little each time, but never enough to where you are unsafe and out of control.

When your mule is responding correctly to your cues from the lesson plan you developed, you will have confidence in your abilities and confidence in your mule. This will not happen overnight, you will get out of your mule what you put into your mule. With a lot of practice and patience from you, the mule you have always wanted will be waiting just around the corner.

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