

MULE CROSSING: *Bea's First Combined Training Event*

By Meredith Hodges

While making the entry to our first actual Combined Training event, I was excited, apprehensive, and maybe even a little afraid!

Questions raced through my mind: Are we really ready for this? How will they receive my mule in an all-horse event? Mae Bea C.T. and I had worked three long years for this moment. We'd been taking dressage lessons from USDF instructor/trainer Melinda

Weatherford once a week for even longer, and stadium and cross-

country jumping lessons for the past four years. We practiced cross-country jumping at Beebe Draw in LaSalle and at Lory State Park in Fort Collins, Colorado, not far from our ranch. Now the day for actual Combined Training competition was drawing near.



The Preliminary and Training Levels were A.H.S.A. recognized. Would they even let us in the show at the U.S.C.T.A. recognized Novice level? After all, I was to be riding a mule! What would they think of her? Would she annoy anyone with her presence? Would she do anything to embarrass me? Would I do anything to embarrass myself? I desperately wanted to be able to test my skills under the real conditions that those with horses could do on a fairly regular basis. There were no combined events strictly for mules. There just weren't enough folks doing Combined Training with mules in any one area to warrant such a show. I had to rely on the generosity and kindness of those in the Mountain States Combined Training Association. Would they let us in? I didn't know for sure, but I had nothing to lose by asking. All they could say was, "No!"

Weeks passed as I waited to hear from them. I was on pins and needles! There had been so much talk and discrimination against mules competing in A.H.S.A. recognized events that I just didn't know what to think. Clearly, they were not allowed by the A.H.S.A. and I understood that they did not want interference in competition for A.H.S.A. Championships. The decision of whether they could compete in non-A.H.S.A. divisions, however, was generally left to local show committees and technical delegates. I could stand it no longer! A week and a half before the competition I had to know, so I called Susan Robinson-Farmer, owner of Abbe Ranch and operator of the Abbe Ranch Horse Trials in Larkspur, Colorado, that was to be held on June 28-29, 1991. What a nice person she was!

Susan told me they had discussed the mule issue and asked me if there had been a mule that competed in the U.S.C.T.A. before in the East somewhere? "Yes!" I replied enthusiastically. "That was Maryster Farm's Kit, owned by Edith Conyers of Kentucky!"

We spoke for about twenty minutes and Susan kindly put my fears to rest. I assured her that we would do anything necessary to keep from interfering with the other competitors. All we wanted to do was to test our skills and to learn all we could from those with similar interests. The next day our ride times came in the mail and we were in! The day before the show, I bathed and brushed Mae Bea C. T. until she shined! I braided her mane and tail, wrapped her legs and polished her hooves. I covered her with a light sheet, hoping that she wouldn't get too dirty overnight. My excitement afforded me little sleep. The next morning Mae Bea C. T. reminded me that, first and foremost, she was a mule and loved dust baths! She was a disheveled mess, so again, we bathed, brushed, braided, and polished!

During the drive from Loveland to Larkspur, I went over my dressage test in my mind at least a hundred times. My daughter, who was going to ride her Hanoverian gelding in the event, thought her mother was being ridiculous to be so excited. My husband assured me that both the still-shot and video cameras had been packed and were with us to document this special event. It was still early morning and our dressage test time was not until 1:18 P.M. We arrived in plenty of time, but time flew by quickly and it was no time before we were warming up in the first practice arena. After about five minutes, the ring steward ushered us to the second practice arena. They were ahead of schedule! We were abruptly ushered out of the second practice arena and into the third and final arena for a last minute tune up.

Finally, we were ready! Mae Bea C. T. entered her dressage test down the centerline with her hindquarters engaged, shoulders up and with the most active trot she has ever had! She seemed to sense that this was the time to do her very best! She halted squarely, I saluted the judge and she proceeded with the same enthusiasm. I was so excited that halfway through the test, I forgot where I was going! I couldn't believe it! My mind just went blank! The little bell rang to remind me I was in error. It only took a few seconds to regain my composure and find my place again in the test. We were back on track and finished the test well with plenty of impulsion, good rhythm and cadence, and totally relaxed for the first time ever in our dressage experience.

As we exited the arena, I began to cry. I couldn't believe that I had forgotten my test! There were a group of seasoned riders who leapt to my rescue as I exited the arenas with stories about their own stupid mistakes. I couldn't have asked for a more supportive group of people! My coach, Melinda Weatherford, was also there to lend support as she did with all her students who competed. A smile once again graced my face.

Then I prepared to walk the cross-country course for the following day's ride with all the other student competitors. First, Melinda took all of us around the course, discussing strategy at each obstacle. Next, we all assembled for the official course walk. Dick and Susan Farmer gave us all a warm welcome and introduced us to Ground Juror, Jackie Fischer-Smith; Technical Delegate, Karen Bjorgen; Stabling Steward, Lee Thomas; Photographer, Tricia Jones; and our resident security guard. There were many other volunteers who helped the event run smoothly. I remember thinking, "What a friendly

and enthusiastic group of people!" I was thrilled to be included! We took our official course walk, and then we headed to our motel for dinner and a good night's sleep.

The next day, things were buzzing in anticipation of the cross-country experience. We walked the course once more while the Preliminary Division riders were going out. As I took my place in the starting box at 12:18PM people threw encouraging remarks our way, "Looking good! Good luck! Have a great ride! Now there's class!"

"You are the classy ones for giving us such a warm welcome!" I thought silently.

Mae Bea C. T. came out of the starting box as she had seen the horses do before her. She wasn't exactly sure what she was supposed to do. She jumped clean over the first two fences, but unsure of the rocks and railroad ties, she skidded to a halt at the third fence. We re-approached and cleared the third fence on the second attempt after which she galloped freely and jumped the remaining fifteen fences with no problem. She finally figured it out and she loved it! So did I!

What a thrill! I think I was more tired than she was when we finally finished the course and rode in for our vet check. She passed, but the vet suggested that we needed more galloping in practice to improve her respiration. I wholeheartedly agreed! I knew then I had to improve my own respiration as well!

As we walked back to the trailer, there were more votes of confidence, "I'll take that mule as my mount anytime! Good going! Great ride!" I swelled with pride and gratitude for such a wonderful experience. A couple of hours later, Mae Bea C. T. and I cleared the eight fences in the Stadium Jumping phase of the event and finished in 8th place in the Pre-Novice Division. This was considered very respectable for the first time ever in a formal horse trials competition. We cordially thanked everyone for giving us the opportunity to compete, for the support to keep us going and for the time of our lives!

By 1992, we were better prepared to again test our skills at the Abbe Ranch Horse Trials in the Novice Division. Our confidence and enthusiasm soared when we placed second! The knowledge we had gleaned from the people at the first competition had paid off! Then in 1993, we entered the Novice Division again and actually placed first against 56 horses! We couldn't have been more pleased! I will always remember the warmth and consideration we received from everyone at the event and how the little mule that would, became the little mule that could!

For more information about Meredith Hodges and her comprehensive correspondence training program, *Training Mules and Donkeys*, please visit **www.LuckyThreeRanch.com** or call **1-800-816-7566**. Also, find Meredith Hodges and Lucky Three Ranch on Facebook and Twitter. And don't forget to check out her children's website at **JasperTheMule.com**.

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