

MULE CROSSING: *Boulder County Fair Grounds Exhibition*

By Meredith Hodges

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. My name is Meredith Hodges, this is my husband, Gary, and my daughter, Dena. We own and operate the Lucky Three Mule Ranch in Loveland, where we raise and train high quality mules and donkeys. We have brought two mules with us today that will demonstrate some of the things that mules of today are doing. In the past,



mules were used primarily for packing, pulling and farming... the modern mules are doing much more. Using top quality mares in mule breeding has noticeably increased the capability of an otherwise maligned animal. The combination of the strength and intelligence of the jack and the athletic ability and beauty of the horse has produced a superior performer in the mule. Before we get on to the exhibition....

First, this morning, we would like to present my wife, Meredith, riding her 16.2 HH Quarterhorse mule, Lucky Three Sundowner, exhibiting the discipline of Dressage through First Level Test! Sundowner has recently taken the step up to First Level after spending 18 months at Training Level, learning to travel in a cadenced, rhythmic, and balanced fashion. At first glance, this pattern may look rather simple and many of you might think, "Oh, that's simple!" But I challenge you to actually get out and try to do this. You will find, as is the case with many things... that it is not as easy as it looks. Many hours of training have gone into this animal in order to make this mule look as smooth, balanced, and rhythmic as he is. Though he is under the rider's direct control, he must appear that he is doing of his own accord.

Coming up the centerline, the animal should reflect straightness and smoothness of gait with a respectful halt and salute to the judge at the center of the arena. The object of Dressage is the harmonious development of the physique and ability of the equine. As a result, it makes the equine calm, supple, loose, and flexible, but also confident, attentive, and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with his rider.

As Sundowner moves across the diagonal, he is asked to lengthen his stride and proceed with more determination and energy, then return to the sitting trot submissively and calmly. Mules have a very strong flight reflex and it is only through an understanding between mule and rider that this type of movement can be achieved smoothly. A mule is

capable of running through any bit known to man, so it is pointless to try to force this kind of submission. It must come slowly through meticulous training and practice.

A halt for five seconds followed by a walk across the diagonal on a loose rein shows the judge that this animal is indeed relaxed and responsive to his rider's commands, and that there exists a true repose between them. Mules are quite intelligent and can memorize patterns very quickly. For this reason, the patterns themselves are not trained in. Lucky Three Sundowner won the title in 1984 for World Champion Bridle-Reined mule as a four year old, but it has only been recently through his Dressage training that he has become submissive and genuinely willing to comply.

Next into the arena we have Meredith driving Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T., a 15 HH molly mule. Driving used to be a matter of necessity rather than pleasure. There was not much need to have the animal do much more than go forward at all three gaits, with the trot being most prevalent, and to back and turn. Mules today are being taught to drive with finesse through training in Dressage. Driving classes that are offered in the shows include Pleasure Driving, Obstacle Driving, Drive & Ride, and Cross Country. All of these classes require a good communication and understanding between mule and driver.

As in Dressage under saddle, the mule learns to go forward with a free and relaxed stride, responsive to control through the reins and whip. Moving in a balanced frame allows the mule to be responsive to any change in gait or direction. The Dressage driving mule is able to bend in the shafts to follow the arc of a circle around turns. This type of driving takes many hours of meticulous training, but will result in a happy calm, quiet, obedient individual.

When the mule is in balance, he is comfortable with his own body and better able to cope with outside distractions or stress. He is better able to stay quiet enough to work his way through tight obstacles and is ultimately able to move each foot at the request of his driver.

Mae Bea C.T. currently holds the Reserve World Champion Driving Mule title and has for two years. She is only six years old, and as a three year old held the World Champion title for Green Driving. In addition to driving, Mae Bea C.T. has captured over 25 titles in Halter, Western Pleasure, English Pleasure, and Reining. She is currently working at Training Level Dressage and Jumping. She is really quite extraordinary in her accomplishments at such a young age.

At the beginning of this demonstration, I talked a little about those of us who wish to improve on our equestrian skills, but who is more important than our young people!? My daughter, Dena, is riding Mae Bea C.T. today to let you know that there are young people out there who also prefer mules.

Dena will first show you a demonstration of Training Level Test 1 in Dressage. The test itself looks simple enough, but I must again tell you there is more to it than meets the eye. At Training Level, the animal is expected to learn to move forward in a free and

cadenced fashion. The movements are kept simple to allow the rider to work on such things as forward motion, cadence, rhythm, and directional changes. The animal learns to circle properly, in an upright position, and begins to learn submissiveness to the bit. By not throwing too many things at the animal all at once, we are allowed to work on these things in a natural progression that will facilitate an obedient, free-moving, and calm animal. As the training becomes the animal, the animal itself becomes a more dependable and pleasurable mount.

Jumping is definitely one of the mules' fortes. The muscling on a mule is equivalent to that of a ballet dancer, and he is so nimble, he can jump over his head from a standstill! Training mules to jump in a smooth fashion must be trained in just as in horses. Many years ago, a mule named Hambone out-jumped every horse in this country. It was at that time that mules were banned from the AHSA competitions. I would imagine that there were some folks' egos who just couldn't take it... being out-jumped by an animal that was supposed to be used for farming and such... but today, it is really not the case anymore. Mules are being trained properly and are exhibiting some incredible skills. Because of the difficulty in training the mules, equestrians who ride mules are faced with a real challenge and should be congratulated for their efforts. We are all keepers of the art. I hope that by letting you see a little of what they can do here today, that some of the old sayings about mules can be put to rest and in its place, arise tolerance and support of a truly marvelous and versatile animal! Thank you very much and good luck with your show.

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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