

MULE CROSSING: *Letter From Jasper The Mule*

By Meredith Hodges

Hi, Meredith!

My name is Jasper. I am a three-year-old, 15HH, bay Quarter Horse mule. I suppose, by people standards, I'm really nothing special, but I'm still me! I heard my owners talking about you the other day. They said that if anyone could help set me straight, it would be you. I didn't know there was a problem! I always try to do what they want me to, but sometimes that can be hard to figure out! When I was just a foal, people used to come out to see me and my mother.

We were pastured on a couple of acres that surrounded an old shed where we used to get in out of the weather. My mother was content to graze and doze day after day--she wasn't much on excitement. I used to love it when the people came and carried on about how cute I was. Then they would scratch and massage my fuzzy little body. They even got a little playful when I followed them around, romping, playing, and bumping them with my nose. "Oh, look how cute and friendly he is," they'd say.



One day, when I was about six months old, the people came to play. I was feeling especially good that day and was glad to see some playmates coming to my pasture. Mom doesn't really like to play much. I let them scratch and pet me for about 10 minutes, but then they started to leave! I didn't want them to go, so I ran quickly behind one of the older men, nipped him on the butt playfully, and looped my forelegs over his shoulders. Wham! My whole head ached with the sting from that blow and I heard: "Get out of here, you brat!" I didn't understand. They'd always liked to play before. "I guess we'll have to start halter breaking this mule and teach him some manners!"

A few days went by before they came back. I was more cautious this time. I wanted to be scratched and loved, but I didn't want to make them angry with me. Out of nowhere, they began trying to wrap this "thing" around my face! Didn't even give me a chance to see or smell it! I felt trapped and scared to death; what were they going to do to me now?! Had I been worse than I had thought the other day? Did they want to kill me? I'd seen them whip and beat my mother one time when she wouldn't go into that dark little room on wheels. She said it was best to do what they wanted, but that room was so small, she wasn't sure she would fit, so she hesitated. "People don't like it when you hesitate about doing what they ask, so try to perform quickly," she said. My mother always helped me

try to understand these humans and to appreciate the good things they have given us. Suddenly, as soon as that "halter thing" was attached to my face, they tried to lead me away from my mother. That's when I saw the little room on wheels parked along the pasture fence! I called to my mother to come... we were going for a ride! She took a couple of steps toward me when one of the two men shooed her off the other way. I was going alone with these two guys--but where?! Why?! I got scared! I pulled, kicked, bucked to get away, but nothing worked. They were both bigger than me and before long, I found myself locked in that little room on wheels... alone! I was frightened, but I was brave. The ride was short. When they finally opened the doors to let me out, I was an explosion of forced bravery. I came out of that trailer so fast I accidently knocked one of the men down. Whoops! Before I could show him how sorry I was, he jerked on my head and laced me about the head and neck with a long skinny stick that stung like a bee! Better stand still, I thought. Well, they didn't like that either! They were pulling on my head and hitting me on the rear with that stinging stick! If I followed, it released the pressure from around my face and the man with the stick would stop, so I followed.

That was the first of my days in what they call training. They put me in a small house they called a stall. It had a small yard outside...large enough to walk around in, but not nearly enough room to romp and play. Whenever, the man came to take me out, I had hopes of finally getting a chance to stretch my legs and play a little, but every time I tried to play, he would only get angry with me and force me to stand still. Sometimes he would even tie me up and leave me alone for hours, which was worse than being in my stall! I tried to be good and do what he wanted, but there were always so many new things going on around me that I never really felt relaxed. Maybe, I wasn't supposed to relax. Even the man who was training me seemed a little nervous and hesitant about how I would react. What was he nervous about? Why did he try to hide it? Is there something about all this that he wasn't telling me? Will I get hurt?

The day they put the saddle on my back when I was two was only one of many confusing times. I didn't really mind the saddle until they fastened the belt around my middle so tight that I could hardly breathe. I bucked and ran, trying to get it off. "He's going to be a real tough one," the man said to my owner. I'm not really sure what he meant. I learned pretty quickly that the bucking only caused more pain as the stirrups thumped against my sensitive body. It was better to move smoothly with that saddle on my back, for sure. It took me awhile to learn to stop and turn when they pulled on that bit in my mouth, but the worst part was trying to keep my balance through all of this! Didn't they know that I was still very young and growing and not really all that strong despite my size? They would ride me until I was stiff and sore, and then put me back in that small area with no room to stretch and exercise. They gave me rest for days at a time, with no other exercise. It seemed like I was either overworked or over-rested! My muscles never really had a chance to become stronger. They rode me either too long, or not at all. Somehow, though, I managed to learn. I guess we all do, whether it's the hard way, or not.

The reason that I am writing to you is to ask you to let mule owners know that we mules don't mean to make mistakes. We love people! They know so many ways to have fun and they can be so pleasant and understanding when they want to be. I just wish that they

didn't think that we are deliberately trying to be bad. The only time I was ever "bad" is when I didn't understand what they wanted. Even when I was stiff and sore and fed up... at least I tried!

I met Mae Bea C.T. and Ciji at Bishop Mule Days this year. They said that they have a wonderful life--equally balanced with training, pasture time, just plain fun, and a lot of consideration for their feelings. Ciji said you were really mad at her for refusing all the jumps in the Hunter Under Saddle class, but that you were fair. You made her do them in the Jumping Class, rode the English Pleasure class, then let her rest for the remainder of the show since you knew she was in heat and feeling crampy. Ciji admitted that she can sometimes be a little stubborn and unfair herself, so she tried to make up for it by doing her best in the English Pleasure Class, which brought her fourth place.

I wish my owners would be fairer with me. I'm only three years old, and they have already been riding me for a year! If they would only slow down and explain more carefully, maybe I wouldn't make so many mistakes! Maybe if I had more play time, I wouldn't get so impatient with their inability to explain... and if they would take time to learn to balance and control their own bodies, maybe they wouldn't keep throwing me off balance when I am trying to comply. I really like my people and like most mules, I really want to please them. Bea and Ciji said you know how to speak "MULE." Wish everybody did. Makes it easier to communicate when you speak the same language. Do you think you could teach more people to speak "MULE" so we can all enjoy our lives with our owners as much as your mules enjoy you? I hope so.

Sincerely yours,
JASPER

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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