

## **MULE CROSSING: *Meeting The Equestrian Challenge***

By Meredith Hodges

Since April marks the Fourth Anniversary of my column, "Mule Crossing," I would like to take this opportunity to share some thoughts with all of you. I grew up a horse-crazy tomboy with a particular preference for Arabians and Thoroughbreds. I suppose in my 23 years' experience with horses, I never really thought much about mules at all. In fact, for a long time, I didn't even know the difference between a mule and a donkey!



When my mother started the Windy Valley Mule Ranch in Healdsburg, California, in 1973, I learned the difference and as a favor to my mother, I began to work on the ranch as an assistant trainer, and of course, stall cleaner! At the time, I remember feeling rather condescending and patronizing of mules... just to be nice, so to speak, but as I spent more time with them, I began to realize the depth of their character and their potential for greatness! The longer I trained the mules, the more I began to realize the things they were training in me! I learned humility, creativity, humor, patience, understanding, forgiveness, and much more. We have all wished, at one time or another, that we could have been a little "more" of any one of these things. I feel fortunate to have friends such as my mules to cultivate these good things in me. Plain and simple... I like myself better now and I'm continuing to learn so many new things each and every day! Maybe, I could have found these things within myself another way, but there is something about mules and donkeys that seems to speed up the process.

Over the past 10 years, it has been a thrill to witness people like myself exploring, discovering, and enjoying the true capabilities of the mule. When my friend, Sally McLean, and I went to the U.S.D.F. convention in November of 1986, we had no idea what to expect, and justly so. Every first time the mules appeared in a show, there was a wide variety of responses from total acceptance to genuine disgust, so we were unsure as to the general attitude of the U.S.D.F. An informed group of dedicated equestrians, the U.S.D.F. clearly showed that they were indeed a "Circle of Friends" interested in perpetuating the equestrian arts in this country. As it should be, their main focus is on developing the skills of the riders and on training the animals in a methodical and dependable way. We discussed the matter of mules in Dressage quite extensively; some considerations were obviously more important than others, but we covered them all! How beautiful can a mule look? Is he a capable competitor? Most of them had never seen any of our newly developed saddle mules, much less, seen them perform. When they viewed the photographs and video tapes, they were pleasantly surprised and quite impressed. What about the noise they make or the way they smell? They spook the horses and they won't settle down in the show! Our horses... and mules... all have to show under a variety of conditions, often in

situations where there are other kinds of livestock present. Repetition causes familiarity and appeases this type of apprehension. This is actually part of the overall training process. Those of us with mules face the same problems as those with horses. Many mules are terrified of Draft Horses, Park Horses, and even some ponies, but training along with these other breeds helps them to overcome their fears. Probably more important than the fear itself is the way we, as equestrians, handle that fear. If we are polite, considerate, and good sportsmen, everyone's needs can be considered and satisfied.

A little over a year ago, we started a mule club here in Colorado, the Colorado Donkey & Mule Society, which was inspired by the motto of the U.S.D.F.A Circle of Friends. To improve the skills of our riders and the performance of our mules, we began sponsoring monthly clinics in horsemanship. English and Western riders alike attended the clinics and worked together. Eventually we were approached by people



who didn't even own mules and asked if they could join our clinics. Realizing the importance of sharing and learning together an art form that we all had in common, we saw no reason to refuse. Today, our clinics are composed of enthusiastic equestrians sharing and learning together and having a wonderful time in the process! Not only do our equestrians learn from each other, but our animals learn from each other as well--horses and mules alike!

Most equestrians do realize that there are those of us with mules who are quite serious about meeting the equestrian challenge. There are, indeed, those who prefer to use their animals in other ways, but they do not usually frequent the shows. Those who do, realize the demands placed upon them by their individual breed organizations and are working diligently to become the best they can be. The network of shows is basically designed to facilitate this process. Schooling and Open Shows make the learning process available to all equestrians at all different levels; individual Breed Shows separate brilliant individuals who earn their places in the Regional, National, and International Shows competing for Championship titles. Schooling and Open Shows are generally designed to accommodate equestrians within a certain geographical area without regard to breed to perpetuate the learning process and to facilitate their own successful existence. At this level of showing, it seems rather self-destructive to the equestrian art to be overtly discriminating against an animal that is, in fact, half horse! There are those who will be discriminating no matter what, and in this country that is your right within a reasonable framework. But, let's try to be fair about this. Shows can be set up any number of ways. They can be all Open classes, they can be Open with Specialized classes, they can have a full agenda for each breed, or have a designated agenda for all the breeds to compete for event

championships. It is still, however, the duty of the show management to see to it that their exhibitors and spectators are treated to a fair, productive, and entertaining show.

The A.H.S.A. has stated that mules may not compete in their approved shows. At this point in time, it is my feeling that this is fair. After all, they are sponsoring our country's champions and mules have simply not been around long enough to produce an equestrian team worthy of their respect and attention. We must yet prove ourselves worthy. But the A.H.S.A. has not really banned us from their shows altogether; we are allowed to compete with our own division of classes and non-A.H.S.A. registration forms. In these shows, we have been assured of enough classes to get these shows approved and to qualify for points with our own Mule & Donkey Show Association of America.

What concerns me now is how some smaller All-Breed Shows are misunderstanding the intent of the mule people and are using the A.H.S.A. ruling as an excuse to be personally discriminating. It doesn't always matter if the show is A.H.S.A. approved or not! It seems they have missed the point of showing. It has been my understanding that All-Breeds in its most limited form meant any and all breeds of horses. Since a mule is truly half horse, he should be included, as are ponies. "Open" is just that... open to all. If a show is set up where each breed competes in its own classes, then there is no problem, but when open classes are offered either by themselves or in conjunction with breed classes, then it seems only fair that every breed should be allowed in those open classes! Unfortunately, there are those who are trying to say that all breeds except the mules may compete in the open classes in certain shows.

We do have the right to be discriminating in this country provided it does not infringe upon the civil rights of others. Shows that are not willing to treat open classes as such and advertise them "Open" anyway, then discriminate against mules, are in serious danger from legal repercussions! Our government does not support such blatant discrimination in any area--it's too destructive!

Whether astride a horse or a mule, the challenges and pursuits of the equestrian arts are the same. It takes a tremendous amount of dedication and perseverance to meet those challenges and to climb the ladder to success. So, perhaps we should all, as dedicated equestrians, try to be fair and accommodating with each other for the sake of the art form itself. Let's be fair to ourselves and to those who share our interests; dissension in our industry can only be self-destructive. Mules don't have to be in every class, at every show... but come on folks, let's be fair!

Training series will continue next month!

For more information about Meredith Hodges and her comprehensive correspondence training program, *Training Mules and Donkeys*, please visit **[www.LuckyThreeRanch.com](http://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](http://JasperTheMule.com)**.

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