

MULE CROSSING: *Recognizing Mules As Viable Athletes*

By Meredith Hodges

The accomplishments of mule and donkey owners in this country over the past 20 years have been phenomenal. They have taken what used to be a predominantly work animal and challenged him to become much more. Mules are currently competing successfully in all areas of equine athletics and are also having an inevitable impact on the scientific community. Their effect on the entire equine world is felt everywhere. Let's just review some facts.

The mule is the result of a successful mating between a male donkey (called a jack) and a female horse (a mare). The mule inherits primarily the best characteristics from each parent with the jack making his major contribution in strength and intelligence, and the mare, in disposition. One can really only speculate about the potential of the offspring of this cross, but as their numbers increase, we see more mules emerging as top performance and sport animals. The facts concur that a mule is tougher and more durable than his dam, more resistant to parasites and disease. He is more surefooted due to the shape and size of his foot, and he has an innate sensibility that prevents him from overeating or causing himself harm. With all this being relative, it stands to reason that his athletic performance should at least be able to parallel that of the horse (his dam) and in some cases, with the addition of strength and intelligence, he should excel.

Americans, by nature, love a challenge with a good cause. They love to explore new frontiers and mules have given them every opportunity to do just that. Over the past 20 years, mules have been used in both English and Western, as well as in harness. In 1986, they were again challenged as an acceptable sport animal and their owners have met this challenge with much enthusiasm. In November of 1986, the U.S.D.F. recognized mules as a viable competitor in the world of Dressage. Since then, many mule owners have elected to pursue this challenge. One must appreciate the determination of such people. Though the U.S.D.F. was quite receptive, the A.H.S.A. was not. So, now we are faced with gaining yet more acceptance if we are to realize our full potential in Dressage and Combined Training. Actually, since A.H.S.A. sponsors all major horse shows, their sanction of mules is all-encompassing and all-important. Once there may have been a time when mule people were "those who couldn't make the grade on a horse," but this is quite to the contrary these days.



Being the intelligent animal that they are, they pose very different and very difficult training problems compared to horses. It takes a person with "a very special something" to help a mule realize his potential. The mule not only needs to learn the "moves," but the discipline of performance as well. Being the personable character that he is, the mule sometimes forgets how important a show may be to his rider. Only through consistent and patient discipline can a mule be expected to perform in a consistent and quality way. This is also true with horses, but after training both, I am convinced that the mule can meet you with much more resistance than can a horse and must be dealt with very carefully. Consequently, the end result in a mule has demanded a lot more work on the part of the trainer, or rider, than it would in the case of a horse. The successful mule trainer has justly earned a pat on the back and a chance to exhibit his talents.

Mules are getting their chance to perform in their own shows and as subsidiaries of major horse shows, which works out just fine for now in Western, English, and harness, but there is still a problem where Dressage and Combined Training are concerned. A.H.S.A. approves nearly all shows except schooling shows and they have said that the mules may not compete in A.H.S.A. approved shows.

I called the A.H.S.A.'s home office to find out why. "A.H.S.A. does not recognize mules," is the answer I received. They are simply not provided for in the rule book. Until now, there was really no need to make provisions for mules. I can surely understand that. The A.H.S.A. was very cordial and recommended that any mule people interested in making provisions for mules in Dressage should contact A.H.S.A. Dressage Committee Chairman, Mr. McDevitt, and express their thoughts on the matter. Since Dressage is a carefully aligned training for both equine and rider, and the shows are a means to gauge progress, it is imperative that they be allowed to compete in the shows, even if it is only against themselves. They must be allowed to be scored!

When we approached the U.S.D.F. for approval, we were met with skeptical eyes, but heard with intelligent ears. I was appalled at how few people had ever been exposed to mules at all. Many knew only the old rumors about these man-made equines, but as they listened, their curiosity was sparked and their interest grew. I suspect that there are many more people out there who just don't have all of the facts yet. If they did, I could see no reason for their objecting to mules participating in equine events of all kinds with A.H.S.A. approval.

Mules have, in 20 years, proven to be quite competent equines and have been bred to possess a similar beauty to horses. Not only that, scientifically they have been successfully utilizing molly mules (females) as embryo transplant recipients. It has been theorized that they make the best recipients since they are virtually "untouched." With these kinds of contributions to the equine industry, how can anyone with a conscience ban them from the major challenges of the industry?

I have heard many arguments both for and against mules, but never an argument that couldn't be compromised in their favor. Those who can appreciate the years and

dedication of successful horses and riders should also be able to recognize the same in mules and their riders. There is really no difference, except for the fact that the mule rider has had to work twice as hard to get to the same place. True horsemanship is an art form, be it astride a horse or a mule; the intrinsic value of the art form itself is the same. Perhaps, we have even added just a little more depth. What seemed to be ridiculous and laughable in the beginning has turned an otherwise unobtrusive animal into a graceful and magnificent creature with many redeeming qualities.

The mule may not perpetuate his own kind, but he can perpetuate the production of superior equines through embryo transplant. This alone makes him a realistic asset to the equine industry from an economic standpoint, not to mention the minimal costs of maintaining him. It seems only right that he be welcomed to test his true potential among the ranks of masters. He has already won the right to be a contender through his continued outstanding performances in various shows throughout the country. Usually, those who try this hard are encouraged and rewarded for their efforts. Why should a mule be any different?

At the Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colorado, mules are being raised for the expressed purpose of Dressage and Combined Training. We realize that it may take another 10 or 20 years to reach the pinnacle of our dreams, but anything worth having is worth the wait and the work in the interim. In the meantime, we appreciate the small rewards along the way. Our Mae Bea C.T. ridden by youth Leslie Busque took her first training level test at a schooling show, scoring a 61.76 percent, winning the class and High Point Beginner Horse (Mule?!). She is not the first mule to do well in Dressage, nor will she be the last. High hopes and a lot of determination will see to it that we attain our dreams!

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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