

MULE CROSSING: *Surge Of Mule Shows*

By Meredith Hodges

I remember 10 years ago when summer came and we had to search high and low for shows in which we could compete our mules! As they say, "You've come a long way, baby!" Mule shows are now so numerous that it is becoming very difficult to decide which ones to attend. Ten years ago, our mules were not necessarily welcome at horse



competitions, and today, that has changed as well--making our decisions about where to compete even more complicated. It is truly amazing to see the tremendous growth in popularity of the mule over the past 10 to 20 years, but then I guess it was inevitable given all their redeeming qualities! It really isn't that unusual that people would begin to prefer mules once they received accurate and truthful information about them. Granted, you have to be smarter than the mule in order to train one, but once you train one properly, you have a wonderful companion and a top competitor in the equine world. More and more, the criticism of mules has changed to general curiosity and a willingness to learn more about these unique animals. Many people have taken a great deal of time and effort to bring these animals into the public eye. To name them all would take volumes, but their work is certainly appreciated!

As I said, there are many all-mule and donkey shows that you can attend in most states across the U.S. Most of them are held in conjunction with state fairs, however, there are others that are promoted with horse and mule races as well. The American Donkey & Mule Society sponsors a National mule and Donkey Show that floats from state to state. This year's Nationals will be held in conjunction with the South Carolina State Fair. There are some lovely mules to see in our Eastern U.S. Those of you who will be in, or near, South Carolina, October 20-22, might want to plan to attend.

Breed shows are another place you will see mules today. In many places, you will see mules competing in their classes sandwiched between classes for anything from Draft Horses to Arabians and Saddlebreds. Many of these breed shows not only include a mule division, but allow mules to compete in their open classes as well against the various horse breeds. In 1991, our own Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T. competed in an Open English Pleasure class of primarily Saddlebreds and American Show Horses to sixth place of 20 entries. It is nice to know that the judges are taking mules seriously, as well!

The American Driving Society has been quite supportive itself! They encourage mules to participate in the many facets of driving that they offer, from pleasure, to fun events to actual marathon driving. In these shows, the mules are allowed to compete directly with the horses. Shows such as these tend to really test the knowledge and expertise of the trainer and the conditioning and response of the animals. Integrity in progressive learning is encouraged while stark competitiveness and politics take a back seat. This type of situation is much more appealing to the novice who wants to learn and improve his and his animal's skills.

The United States Dressage Federation is another group who has encouraged mules to come and compete in their schooling shows, giving mules the opportunity to train and show with the best that horsemanship has to offer. Showing is limited to non-A.H.S.A. (American Horse Show Association) shows, but nevertheless, quite adequate and beneficial for our mules. It is understandable that they should not compete with horses and riders that are competing for National and International Championships, and sometimes for Olympic recognition. It could offset the points system drastically should a mule compete, being ineligible for such events anyway. As the A.H.S.A. has stated; these championships are horse competitions.

The United States Combined Training Association has, more or less, left it up to each region to decide whether, or not, to allow mules to compete and some areas are more tolerant than others. Dressage and Combined Training offers the ultimate in fitness and conditioning of both animal and rider. Because it requires so much physical exertion and skill, everyone is accustomed to discussion on gross errors and wrecks with little or no embarrassment. This makes for a great learning environment with a lot of positive social interaction. We have had a lot of fun for the past three years competing with the Mountain States Combined Training Association and the Windy Wyoming Combined Training Association. They are a great group of folks from the organizers to the competitors. When Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T. came in second this year in the Open Novice Division at the Abbe Ranch Horse Trials in Larkspur, in June, organizer Susan Farmer presented our ribbon and warmly said, "We're not prejudiced here! Congratulations!" I think it is more important to these folks to see that people enjoy the sport, and more over, to continue to want to participate and learn. This makes for attainable long term goals, and even more... it make for long term friendships.

If you are not really the competitive type, but enjoy the simpler side of showing in gymkhana events and pleasure classes, there are a lot of small Open Shows that you can attend sponsored by various saddle clubs across the U.S. They will usually let the mules compete right along with the horses. Learning and having fun are again the key issues here.

The mule has been proving his worth now, more than ever in Competitive Trail Riding and Endurance Racing. When you talk about Competitive Trail Riding in Colorado, you have to give credit to Cee Wolf who has shined with her mules in this area of equine athletics, even at 80 years of age! She is another lady who has done great promotional work for mules! I would like to thank the millions of people who have given of

themselves, that mules might be seen for who they really are... a truly wonderful companion and a magnificent athlete and performer!

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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