

MULE CROSSING: *The Equine Industry*

By Meredith Hodges

The highest recognition available for equestrians in this country is to be chosen for the U.S. Olympic Equestrian Team.

Obviously, this honor is reserved for a select few, but this doesn't mean that the rest of us can't reach this stage of horsemanship in our lives and reap other kinds of rewards for our performance. These rewards can be found in many places: winning

placements in equine shows, inspiring other riders to continue to learn, and maintaining an industry in which our children can grow. Sometimes in our own exuberant competitive spirit, we lose sight of the things that are really important in our industry, like learning together with a spirit of camaraderie, and presenting what we've learned in such a way that everyone can share in our success, including those who may never have seen an equine.



To most of us, the idea of promoting a whole breed can be quite overwhelming, so instead, we try to promote our own animals in hopes of complimenting the entire breed with our personal successes. In theory, this works well, however, over the years it has proven to be the source of a lot of conflict in the industry itself. Unethical training methods began to arise in an effort to assimilate the performance of show champions, amateurs had to compete against professionals and a shortage of judges for shows allowed non-licensed individuals to begin setting the standards on the basis of their own personal opinions rather than making educated selections in show placings. All of this opened our shows to the political arena, devaluing quality training and hard work, while emphasizing gimmicks and popularity of individuals for the sake of monetary gain. The original intent of promoting the breed began to take a backseat to economics and personal gain. The result of this was a decrease in the number of people willing to compete in the shows, a lot of artificially trained animals produced and a decreased number of spectators attending the shows. Seeing the same individuals win over and over again, from one show to another, deserving or not, became boring and uninteresting to the general public. Thus, a lot of spectator support and amateur competitors were lost.

Since 1967, Longears have once again begun to gain popularity in this country. Those who felt they had been treated unfairly in the horse circles turned to Longears for fun and fair treatment. In developing our industry, we have attempted to learn from the mistakes of the horse industry and have tried to devise our shows and promotional events with the

integrity of our equine history kept in mind. Personal achievements are honored, but positive promotion of the entire Longears industry is foremost in our hearts.

To continue to grow and prosper, our industry must keep several things in mind. We need to appreciate what our shows can do for Longears, as well as what they cannot. Large shows do bring in a lot of spectators, but those who attend shows usually already have a certain interest in equines. They will spread the word throughout the equine set in our society, but if we wish to promote new interest, we need to be more creative in our promotional thinking and target those who are unfamiliar with equines.

Taking into account some basic human characteristics, this doesn't need to be difficult. It is the nature of human beings to like to be entertained by the unique or unusual. After a while, spectators become bored watching the same animals compete in the same classes show after show. To spice up the shows, individual exhibitions and demonstrations, done with a "Hollywood" flair could do the trick. Decorations and props to help the audience transgress reality and enter the fantasy of the moment can make a tremendous difference in their reaction to a performance. Variety from act to act will hold their interest and that momentary release from the everyday pressures of society will guarantee their return, if it is done effectively! Spectators do not derive the same kind of pleasure that we exhibitors do from our own progress; this is a very personal thing between each of us and our animals, and, among all of us as competitors, but it does not effectively recruit spectator support. We need to realize the limitations of shows as a vehicle for promotion and cater to the needs and desires of those who would know nothing except for our efforts.

The Longears equine division, inspired by the United States Dressage Federation, has begun a movement toward better learning in their development of fun learning clinics over the past three years. This has spurred the horse industry to increase their clinics ten-fold. The Colorado Donkey & Mule Society, in an effort to facilitate fun and goodwill, as well as learning, has one-day clinics, with one-hour classes of three to four students each. The classes are video-taped, everyone brings potluck, then after the clinic, we watch the videos, discuss what we've learned, and enjoy some great food! In this relaxed atmosphere, we have found that people get more personal attention, learn more quickly and develop a true attitude of good sportsmanship. Different clubs all support and attend the Longears shows, but maintain their individuality through specialized events and exhibitions that we can all appreciate.

The entire equine industry seems to understand the value in considering our potential spectators when developing promotional events. We are seeing more and more exhibition shows where different breeds and disciplines exhibit their specialties. This absence of judges allows the spectator to observe and be the judge himself, allowing him to become an active part of our industry, giving him not only entertainment, but involvement, increasing his personal feeling of commitment to the industry. As we investigate this avenue of promotion, we find many more new and interesting ways of promoting our equines. In Kansas City, riders have been asked to join the symphony orchestra in an evening of classical entertainment with a fantasy of visual equine aids. This surely targets

people who would otherwise, not necessarily see equines perform and may gain future support from their interest.

In an effort to gain such support, the Colorado Classic Equine Show, held at the National Western Stock Show Complex in Denver the last weekend in April, is going to try this same approach. Riders will pay to exhibit with the Denver Symphony orchestra in an effort to expand support and interest in the equine sports; the performance would take place on the first evening of the show. The Colorado Donkey & Mule Society will be sure to see to it that mules are duly represented in a Dressage and Combined Training Exhibition to music. Developing and implementing creative ideas such as these can only increase the appeal of our industry to the public and bring our members together in a mutual effort of goodwill and sportsmanship. We need our shows to measure our progress and to honor our exceptional individuals, but we also need to balance it with creative, positive promotional ideas that will entertain and capture the hearts and support of the general public. By utilizing our individual talents, we can ensure an equine future for our children that is fun, exciting, and educational!

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**.

© December 1989 Lucky Three Ranch, Inc. All Rights Reserved.