

Behavior Modification Gets Results

Meredith Hodges' Secret for Training Mules and Donkeys Works Wonders with Horses,
Too!

By Helen Taylor Hertz and Meredith Hodges

Like her father before her, Meredith Hodges has chosen a path different from most. Her dad, Charles M. Schulz, entertained us for years with his famous "Peanuts" comic strip. He encouraged his daughter to find her passion and pursue it wholeheartedly. So when Hodges discovered that her love of horses was surpassed only by her affinity for mules and donkeys she dedicated herself to unlocking the mysteries of how to effectively train these animals.

She steered clear of fads, trends and short-cuts and instead, based her training program on behavior modification techniques developed more than 50 years ago by world-famous behaviorist B.F. Skinner. For years Hodges has used these techniques to train her own champion mules and donkeys, and she has shared her method with millions through her books, an award-winning video series and several television programs.

The techniques presented here work well with not only long-eared equines, but also with horses and any other trainable animal – even humans! The program is designed to be resistance free. The goal is, and always has been, to help people get the best performance and most enjoyment from their animals and to ensure that the animal receives the best treatment possible.

Setting the Stage

When Hodges started working with mules and donkeys, she quickly realized there would be no shortcuts to successful training. Throughout history, mules and donkeys have been pegged as being stubborn and therefore stupid, but Hodges found just the opposite to be true. They are intelligent, sensitive animals, she says, and they have a particularly strong survival instinct. They'll go to great lengths to avoid danger or what they perceive as danger, and the process of training a mule or donkey is the process of earning their trust.

The behavior modification techniques Hodges learned as a psychiatric technician working at Sonoma and Napa state hospitals in California proved ideal for her training purposes for two reasons:

1. The system in which the trainer sets performance goals and rewards positive behavior leading to achievement of those goals encourages "good" behavior instead of using fear-inducing punishment to suppress "bad" behavior.
2. The step-by-step approach that builds gradually on learned skills gives the animal a sense of security and achievement that encourages trust and helps minimize resistance.

Animals, like humans, need a predictable routine in order to learn. Just as children progress through grade school, building on their knowledge with each successive grade, animals learn best when a foundation is laid for each new skill. By creating a logical course from the outset, we avoid the confusion that can lead to resistance.

These levels of achievement are at the heart of behavior modification as a training tool. Acceptable levels of behavior must be defined at each level of training beginning with the simplest of expectations and working forward. At each level the animal must accomplish certain tasks, and each accomplishment must be acknowledged and reinforced.

Also note that it is critical, especially if you are working with a mule or donkey, that you, the owner, participate in the training process. Mules and donkeys develop a strong bond with their trainer. If they've learned from someone else, their performance for you may suffer in the long run.

It is also advisable to consult with an experienced trainer in your area and, if you are working with Hodges' video training series, she is just a phone call away.

Reinforcing Behaviors

Everything we do, every behavior we choose, is based on an instinctual desire to experience pleasure and avoid pain. Our choices reflect our experience. They are "reinforced" by the pain or pleasure they have given us in the past. Behavior modification uses the same principles of positive and negative reinforcement with an emphasis on positive reinforcement.

In training, positive reinforcement is delivered in the form of rewards. We know that an equine, when rewarded for performing a certain task, will be willing to perform it again in anticipation of another reward. Note however that positive reinforcement is not bribery; the reward is not given as an inducement to perform the task but as a reward for a task completed.

The reward should be something the animal loves and will work for, yet something that is nutritionally sound. Rolled or crimped oats work better than richer snacks. If you use something they like but is higher in protein, such as alfalfa cubes, you may get an animal that will perform for awhile but then tire of the reward, or worse, eat so much he becomes hyperactive and unfocused.

Positive reinforcement also takes the form of verbal cues. As the animal performs the desired behavior we simultaneously and with appropriate enthusiasm say the word, "good." This works well when it isn't possible to give a food reward right away. Clicker training applies the same concept and has become a popular and effective means of audible reinforcement. It's immediate, it's consistent, and it can be used with all mules, donkeys and horses to reinforce behavior.

Negative reinforcement is used not to punish the animal but to encourage a better choice. It should be brief, to the point and used sparingly. It should never be of long duration or given arbitrarily. Negative reinforcement, such as a blow or a yell, causes discomfort to the animal but shouldn't be used to the point that it makes the animal unresponsive altogether. Remember: Reinforcement by its very definition always strengthens behavior. Punishment is used to suppress behavior and may trigger other undesirable behaviors.

B.F. Skinner, himself, said positive reinforcement may take more patience because "its effect is slightly deferred, but it can be as effective as negative reinforcement and has many fewer unwanted byproducts."

When you begin training, you will have to give a verbal and food reward every time your animal performs a desired response. As he learns more, you can reinforce

learned behaviors less frequently and focus on rewarding new achievements. Gradually the animal becomes satisfied with a verbal reinforcer for established behaviors and will comply for longer periods between food rewards.

This shift from a predictable, or fixed, schedule of reinforcement to a variable schedule helps with skill progression. For example, in the transition from lunging to riding, where the animal was initially rewarded after each set of rotations in the roundpen, he eventually can be ridden through his entire 30 to 40 minute session before receiving a reward.

Beware of the “delayed gratification” phenomenon, however. If the animal suspects it will be too long before he receives a reward, he may be reluctant even to begin. Often a quick reward for a simple task at the beginning of a lesson is incentive enough to get him started.

Also keep in mind that reinforcing too soon is ineffective. The animal should be rewarded immediately after the behavior, not before. An animal rewarded too soon can become aggressive and/or resistant to training.

Remember, each of our own behaviors elicits a response from the animal. We must be meticulous in the way in which we ask our animal to perform and always be aware of our own actions.

Shaping Behaviors

Shaping behaviors takes reinforcement to the next step. Here we are working with the tendency of an animal to perform in the right way and guiding that performance toward our ultimate goal. This is called “successive approximation.”

For example, if you are teaching a turn on the haunches on the leadline, you must ask for a step forward first, before the turn, then walk toward the animal’s shoulder and ask for the turn. In order to teach him to plant his pivot foot before the turn, the process must be broken down into smaller steps. First you ask for the step forward and reward him immediately when he complies. Then move on and ask for one step forward and one to the side and reward him again when he’s successful. Then ask for one step forward and two to the side and reward and so forth. Eventually the animal will complete as many steps as you desire and at the same time, learn to step over only as many steps as you ask. Skinner describes shaping behavior this way: “A response must first occur for other reasons before it is reinforced (with a reward) and becomes an operant (action of choice). It may seem as if a very complex response would never occur to be reinforced, but complex responses can be shaped by reinforcing their component parts separately and putting them together in the final form of the operant.”

In another example, Hodges used this technique to teach her donkey to canter. Though many people tried to tell her that donkeys don’t canter, she had seen them do so when they ran free and knew it was possible. She set a goal of cantering a circle. No one could run ahead of the donkey fast enough to reward him with grain, and negative reinforcements such as a kick or the crop didn’t work, so she had to find another reinforcement. Using the pleasure principle, Hodges put her cycling broodmares into a pen at one end of a hayfield and took her jack to the other end. When asked to canter toward those mares, he did so eagerly. She reinforced the action verbally with, “Good, good,” while they cantered and gave him a food reward once they reached the pen. The

next time she did the same thing but this time turned him in a large half-circle route to the pen and rewarded him again the same way.

The next time, Hodges asked for a little more of a circle and got it. Several times later, she was able to get an entire circle before they ran the line to the pen with the mares in it. Once the donkey was cantering, she didn't need the mares anymore. She took him into the arena and tried to canter the perimeter. At first he cantered a few strides and then dropped to trot. Each time he cantered, she praised him verbally, and when he broke to trot, she would finish the circle, stop him and praise him with the food reward. It was slow going the first few tries, until Hodges started counting strides and realized the jack was adding one more stride at canter with each attempt. Before long, he was cantering the circle with ease on command. With training like this Hodges' donkey jack, Little Jack Horner, has performed successfully in trail, reining and even in jumping to a level of four feet, quite remarkable for a 13-hand equine, and a donkey no less!

Sweet Success

As you begin to understand the principles of shaping and modifying behaviors, it is important to realize that it is a lot like dancing, cooking or any other learned skill: The only way forward is through practice. The more practice you have, the better a trainer you will become. You have the opportunity to practice positive reinforcement every moment of your life, reinforcing behaviors in everyone – the cat, the dog, your husband or wife, your children. It becomes a game of noticing and praising positive accomplishments large or small. With practice you will increase your awareness and thus, your skill.

The success or failure of our effort to shape behavior in any animal does not depend upon our expertise but on our patience and persistence during the process. This is not the easiest way but it is effective.

Information box

About Meredith Hodges

For more than 25 years, Meredith Hodges has worked diligently and creatively to promote mules and donkeys around the world. Her mules have won two world championships in third level dressage and scores of other awards and acknowledgements. She has served as a representative, animal inspector and judge for the American Donkey and Mule Society and as a columnist for numerous mule and donkey publications around the world.

In 1993 she published *Training Mules and Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Longears*, a hardbound book that was among the first comprehensive resources on the subject and served as the foundation for Hodges' award-winning training videos. This series of 10 tapes produced by Hodges in partnership with MediaTech Productions of Fort Collins, Colo., has in turn been the basis for two television series – one that aired last year on the Outdoor Life Network and another that played during paid programming segments on the Discovery Channel. Hodges' shows also air regularly on the RFD-TV channel of the Dish Network. (For show times, visit www.horse-tv.com.)

To find out more about Meredith Hodges and her training program, call 1-800-816-7566 or visit www.LuckyThreeRanch.com.

Side bar

Ten Principles for Shaping Behaviors:

- 1) Establish and raise your performance criteria in increments small enough to give your animal a reasonable chance of success and create opportunity for positive reinforcement. If the criteria are too challenging, the animal may fail and give up.
- 2) Train for one aspect of a behavior at a time. Do not try to teach several skills at once. When training for a dressage test for example, do not practice the whole test every day. Take a few sections of the test and work on those. Practice going up and down the centerline in straight lines. Practice 20-meter circles. Practice going through corners with the right amount of bend. Shape the ultimate result by gradually linking the components, and they'll fit together nicely. Ride the test as a whole, and the quality of the smaller components will suffer.
- 3) Before you move to a new skill, put the current skill or behavior on a variable level of reinforcement. Use a fixed schedule of reinforcement on any new behaviors, rewarding verbally and with food each time the behavior is performed, but once the animal "gets it," reward less often and randomly. Then as you add a new behavior reinforce that behavior on a fixed schedule while randomly rewarding learned behaviors.
- 4) When introducing new behaviors, relax expectations on the old ones. What was once learned is not forgotten, but under the pressure of assimilating new behaviors, the old ones sometimes fall apart temporarily.
- 5) Stay ahead of your trainee. Be prepared with what you will ask next should your animal have a sudden breakthrough and perform the next step easily. You must keep him challenged to maintain his interest.
- 6) Avoid changing trainers midstream. The animal/trainer relationship is an integral part of training. Changing trainers disrupts the training process until a new bonded relationship is formed.
- 7) If one shaping process is not working, try another. Individuals, whether animal or human, learn in different ways. Continue with the premise of reinforcement but find what works best for your animal at any given stage.
- 8) Do not interrupt the training process without cause; to do so constitutes punishment. When you are training, try to avoid interruptions. When you train using the methods of behavior modification, you are obliged to reinforce the good behaviors. If you aren't paying attention, you may inadvertently punish a desired behavior if you interrupt it.
- 9) If a learned behavior begins to deteriorate, simply review and use fixed reinforcement until it is re-established. Sometimes side effects from negative

reinforcement can cause this to occur, but if you remain calm and patient the animal should relearn quickly.

- 10) Quit while you're ahead. At the beginning of the each session you will likely see improvement from where you were at the end of the session before. Drilling on a desired behavior will make the animal tired and less willing to perform. Better to quit with a good assimilation of the requested behavior and work to refine it in subsequent sessions.