

Meredith Hodges looks at Athletic Conditioning with “Equus Revisited”

This spring mule and donkey expert Meredith Hodges will release a new equine training series titled “Equus Revisited.” The four-DVD set and companion manual will cover every aspect of Meredith’s comprehensive Athletic Conditioning program. Meredith has used the techniques in this program to produce her champion mules and help countless others get the most from their equines.

“Equus Revisited” goes hand in hand with Meredith’s correspondence training series “Training Mules and Donkeys” and is designed to be used in conjunction with that program. The following is an excerpt from part one of the “Equus Revisited” manual.

Equines bond with their owners, and mules and donkeys are particularly gregarious and affectionate. In order to get the best from your equine, it’s important to understand the bonding process, called behavior modification.

Whether you are starting with a foal, or beginning a new relationship with an older, or abused animal, behavior modification will make your time together safe and enjoyable and guarantee that you’re doing the right things to insure that you get the best from your animal. The process isn’t much different from the steps you’d take to cultivate a friendship with another person.

Remember, you are building a relationship with your equine that should last a lifetime! It’s important to go slow and emphasize the positive. Learning how to effectively set behavioral limits and boundaries for your animal will help avoid negative confrontations and make him feel safe and secure in this unnatural environment.

As you work it’s also important to consider, your animal’s posture, frame, balance, coordination and muscle development. If he is comfortable in his body, comfortable with his handler and happy in his environment, he’ll perform better.

In the past, when equines ran free, they were unencumbered by human interaction and able to build and condition their muscles naturally. Today, with the increase in population and reduction in open lands, their activity is often restricted, so it becomes our responsibility to not only train them, but prepare them physically to perform and keep them happy in their environment. This becomes even more important when we ask them to exert more energy than normal in activities such as long trail rides, endurance events and showing. Proper preparation for this modern-day lifestyle will help to minimize your equine’s stress both physically and mentally.

Natural Horsemanship techniques, based on the equine’s natural behavior and status as a prey animal, promote an awareness we often overlook. They give us a wonderful way to learn how to connect with the equine mentally and communicate with him using our own

body language. Many people are intimidated by the equine's size. These techniques instill a sense of confidence and understanding and without them, fewer people would take an interest in these animals and learn how to interact with them. A relationship with an equine can be incredibly satisfying and equine companionship can enhance any life. This is why therapeutic riding programs for the disabled, at-risk youth, and those with other physical and mental disabilities are so successful.

Understanding the equine's natural evolution can help us give him what he needs to thrive in captivity. It would be nice if we could provide a habitat akin to what the wild equine used to enjoy: Room to run, with an abundance of soft dirt and occasional hard ground under his feet. However, today's equine must deal with a multitude of unfamiliar challenges including extreme activities, exposure to crowds of people, and more prolonged exposure to hard surfaces such as asphalt and cement.

Because equines are under more stress, we need to watch their bodies more carefully and provide the right kinds of exercise and feed. Their well being is our responsibility now. It's our duty to give them what they need to adapt in a healthy way to a world that can never be how it once was.

Humans, like equines, once roamed as nomads. Now that we enjoy a more sedentary existence in cities, towns and rural areas, we have to create meaningful exercise in order to keep our bodies fit and healthy. Equines—no longer running from predators or looking for food—need the same. It's our job to provide not only adequate nutrition, exercise and training for their physical health, but also routine and comfort during recreational hours to minimize stress and improve their psychological well being as well.

When equines lived in the wild, they didn't perform the meticulous athletic feats we demand of them. So running in a natural frame, whether it was with good or bad posture, had minimal bad effects. However, when we ask them to become real athletes for us, they must learn good posture and build muscle around a secure and properly balanced foundation.

Likewise, excessive exertion isn't typically an issue for equines in the wild. But as trained athletes, their bodies are stressed beyond normal, and proper conditioning is essential. As equal partners in athletic equine activities, we must also take the same precautions with our own bodies, paying attention to our own posture and athletic conditioning to improve, rather than hinder, our equine's performance.

For more information about "Equus Revisited," please visit www.luckythreeranch.com or call 800-816-7566, and watch for air dates on RFD-TV.