

Trainer to the Stars
Meredith Hodges Takes Athletic Conditioning to New Heights
By Helen T. Hertz

Mules continue to reach new milestones and surprise us with their versatility, strength and talent. They've earned new clout in the horse world, from the dressage arena to the Extreme Cowboy Race course. Their victory at the TELUS Battle of the Breeds Team Event in Calgary last year gave us the overwhelming sense that the tide had shifted, and when the USDF recently featured mules as their "Breed of the Month," we knew longears had finally shed their second-class-citizen status.

So to what do we attribute this sensational rise to stardom? Meredith Hodges, who has trained, exhibited and promoted mules and donkeys for more than three decades and helped lay the foundation for their growing popularity, says better breeding, better riders, better training and a sense of adventure have made all the difference.

"As breeding practices have improved and riders have stepped up and developed the skills to be competitive, we see that with proper training, the sky's the limit, says Meredith. "Now we want to discover the mule's true potential."

At her Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colo., Meredith takes training to a new level. Comprehensive athletic conditioning is integral to her practice, and all her mules whether they're performance champions or rescued sufferers of abuse, benefit from a conditioning program Meredith has refined and perfected over many years. Whether you're just starting out or experienced, competing in shows or enjoying your equine on the trail or in the backyard, a sound maintenance and training program supported by a team of professionals is critical to your equine's well being.

This year Meredith released *Equus Revisited: A Complete Approach to Athletic Conditioning*, a four-part, two-DVD series and award winning, full-color manual designed to complement her correspondence training series *Training Mules and Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Longears*. This innovative series goes beyond anything Meredith or any other trainer has done before. Using her own mules, donkeys and horses and those of others as examples, Meredith draws from more than 35 years of experience to offer detailed explanations of her training methods and recommendations for maintenance, feeding and preventive care. The programs also include insightful interviews with Meredith's own team of equine-care professionals, including her vet, her farrier, her equine chiropractor and her equine masseuse.

"My original series *Training Mules and Donkeys* covers all levels of training, but this series goes deeper and covers many things most people don't learn about when they're first starting out—things that can be really helpful down the road," says Meredith. "This is more than a conditioning program for the equine athlete. We take the whole animal

into consideration and break the program down into its components to show people how important each one is to an equine's healthy physical and mental development."

During her years as a trainer, breeder and competitor, Meredith developed a program through intensive study and plain old trial and error that has produced one champion performer after another. Her books and DVDs offer students at every level keys to training success and her program on RFD-TV, now in its eighth year, continues to draw new viewers and introduce more curious folks to mules and donkeys.

"It's important to let people know about these wonderful animals," Meredith says, "but it's just as important to teach them how to get the best from them. I wanted to give people information that wasn't out there when I was learning and, in many cases, still isn't."

Primary tenets of her regimen include the following: Proper exercise. Whether you're training for show or for pleasure, the work to develop muscles, tendons and ligaments over a good frame doesn't start in the round pen; it begins on the lead line. Showmanship work on the lead line helps develop strength and balance on the flat, and leading over obstacles adds coordination to strength and balance. Meredith points out that physical loss of balance is the biggest problem in underdeveloped animals and the biggest cause of bad behavior. When you pace your training to fully develop muscles, tendons and ligaments over an aligned frame, your mule will feel good all over and be more willing to comply.

Proper stretching. Stretching may include passive exercises in which *you* manipulate the animal's muscles or active exercises in which the animal moves himself over an elongated frame, lengthening muscles in the process. Both will give your mule's muscles more strength and elasticity and help improve his performance and likely his temperament as well.

And proper diet. Opinions about the ideal diet for our long-eared friends vary, but there are a few points on which most agree: Mules eat less than horses, and the wrong kind of diet can severely affect performance.

This kind of program requires consistency and commitment, but the rewards are profound. Mules are doing more than ever these days, limited, it seems, only by our own efforts and expectations. And advocates such as Meredith continue to sing their praises. If you're working with a mule or donkey right now or thinking about it, *Equus Revisited* will get you on your way to enjoying many years with your equine friend.

For more information about *Equus Revisited*, *Training Mules and Donkeys* and other books and DVDs by Meredith Hodges, please visit www.luckythreeranch.com or call 800-716-7566.

*For more information about Meredith Hodges's training program *Training Mules and Donkeys* and her new athletic conditioning series "Equus Revisited," available in DVD and book form, please visit www.luckythreeranch.com or call 800-716-7566.*