

## Bishop Mule Days Hall of Fame Inducts Meredith Hodges's Champion Mule, Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T., and Tennessee Mule Artist Bonnie Shields

By Helen Taylor Hertz

No maybe's about it, Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T. has made it. In recognition of a remarkable career in both Western and English events, Bishop Mule Days will induct the 24-year-old champion into the Mule Hall Fame at this year's show. That's great news for Mae Bea's owner, trainer and biggest fan Meredith Hodges, and as if that wasn't enough, Meredith has another reason to celebrate: her good friend, Bonnie Shields, will also be honored, with induction into the Bishop Artist Hall of Fame. Bonnie and Meredith have been pals and creative partners for years, and with one of her favorite mules and one of her favorite people being recognized in the same year, Meredith couldn't be happier.

"These two are so deserving," Meredith says. "Each in her own right has done so much to make Bishop what it is today."

Mae Bea C.T. is a World Champion who not only made her mark in competition with other mules, but also excelled in the elite disciplines of dressage and combined training. She went on to star in *Training Mules and Donkeys*, Meredith's training series and long-running program on RFD-TV, and as a hall-of-famer, she'll join a select group of champions—true all-stars in an increasingly competitive field.

The longears equivalent of an Oscar for Lifetime Achievement, this award marks a show career notable for its diversity and excellence.

"Bea is such a special individual," Meredith says. "We've been through so much together, and she's always been such a lady."

Meredith describes Bea as a perfectionist. Never one to roll in the mud or lose her cool, this mule has an unflappable, "lady-like" nature well-suited to an amazing variety of equine activities.

Meredith trained Mae Bea from the beginning, and she'll be the first to admit that things didn't always go smoothly.

"I was really just learning how to do this when I worked with Bea," she says. "She had to go through some tough times with me while I figured things out, and she was really happy when I got my act together."

Meredith began showing Bea at halter as a two-year-old in 1982. She went on to show in Western Pleasure, English Pleasure, Hunter Hack, Hunter Under Saddle, Jumping and Side Saddle. Her awards at Bishop include:

- Reserve Champion 2-Year Mule
- Reserve Champion 4-Year Mule
- Reserve Champion Single Hitch Mule
- Reserve Champion Drive & Ride Mule
- World Champion Jumping Mule
- Bishop Versatility Hall of Fame Winner

In 1986 Meredith and Bea began dressage instruction with Fort Collins, Colo. trainer Lindy Weatherford. That same year Meredith petitioned the United States Dressage Federation for permission to take her mule into competition. It took some

convincing, but the organization agreed to allow them into lower-level schooling shows. Meredith also introduced Bea to jumping.

“Bea loves to jump,” Meredith says. “The dressage training helped a lot and really melded us into a team. She was willing to try almost anything.”

Meredith and Bea moved on to Combined Training events, which include dressage, cross-country jumping and the stadium jump course. In their first year at the Abbe Ranch Horse Trials in Larkspur, Colo., they came in eighth in the Novice Division. Two years later, they took first place against 56 horses!

“Everyone was so gracious. They just couldn’t believe a mule did it,” Meredith says. “But that’s Bea—always grace under pressure.”

Some of Bea’s best performances came at Bishop Mule Days, which over the years, has grown to accommodate more than 180 events. Once a humble packers’ rendezvous, Bishop now hosts 30,000 people and 700 mules each Memorial Day Weekend. The event might still have the feel of a friendly family reunion, but it has also become a serious equine competition. The Mule Days Board of Directors established the Mule Hall of Fame in 1996. Since then, more than a thousand mules have come before the judges, but only 14 have been inducted.

“This award is to honor the retired mules that have been true stars at Mule Days over the years,” says Mule Days Executive Director Julie Bigham. “We usually select those that have performed well in multiple disciplines.”

During the Grand Entry on May 27, Meredith will receive a trophy on Bea’s behalf, and illustrious rodeo announcer Bob Tallman will make the presentation. Aptly enough, Bonnie sculpted the bronze mule trophy. The Tennessee Mule Artist attended her first Mule Days in 1976, and she’s missed only one in the 30 years since. She has designed 12 official Mule Days belt buckles and a slew of shirts, souvenirs and street banners for the show.

“It’s so neat to be honored by my friends at Bishop, two-legged and four,” Bonnie says. “It makes me grin all over. I’m looking forward to all the hoop-la and being with my friends at Bishop.”

Bonnie and Meredith met at Bishop more than 20 years ago and since then, they’ve worked on several projects together. Bonnie drew all the illustrations for Meredith’s *Jasper the Mule* children’s series, and last year she completed a life-size bronze sculpture of Meredith and her champion, jumping donkey Little Jack Horner.

“Bonnie has a knack for capturing the mule’s intelligence and personality in any form,” says Meredith. “Her love for these animals shows in everything she does.”

If Mule Days had a hall of fame for mule advocates, Meredith Hodges would be a shoo-in. Her work as a breeder, trainer, educator and competitor has helped raise the bar for longears everywhere. She has personally trained more than 50 mules at her Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colo., and several have achieved champion status. To have one of her best recognized by an institution such as Bishop is a thrill.

“Everyone loves Bea,” she says. “She’s a wonderful animal and one of my biggest stars. No one deserves this honor more.”

*For more information about Meredith Hodges and her mules, visit [www.luckythreeranch.com](http://www.luckythreeranch.com). To learn more about Bonnie Shields, go to [www.bonnieshields.com](http://www.bonnieshields.com), and for more on Bishop Mule Days, go to [www.muledays.org](http://www.muledays.org).*

