

Meredith Hodges Answers Your Questions

“Traffic,” “hits,” sounds like a mess, but in World Wide Web lingo, these terms tell a different story. One web site that’s getting plenty of both is www.luckythreeranch.com. The recently re-designed site belongs to famed mule and donkey advocate Meredith Hodges and just in January alone, it received nearly 500,000 “hits” or visits.

Many of these folks come to the site to get their questions answered on the “Ask Meredith” page. Since launching her unique correspondence equine training course more than a decade ago, Meredith has always made herself available to her students through her web site, and for those going through the program, by phone as well. Beginning in March Meredith will offer additional, exclusive training tips through her free electronic newsletter. You can receive your monthly edition by joining the Lucky Three Ranch mailing list (see web site for details).

Here’s a small sampling of recent questions Meredith has received and answered through “Ask Meredith.”

My donkey will lead really well most of the time, but sometimes he will twist his head, turn away from me and drag me to the point where I have to let go of the lead rope. How do I stop this behavior?

Showmanship training is not just for the showmanship class at a show. Perfecting your showmanship technique every time you have your equine on a lead line will command your equine’s attention to detail, build his confidence in you and ensure that he is strengthening his muscles properly throughout his body at a fundamental level.

Just as a baby has to learn to crawl before he can walk, your equine needs to learn to walk at your shoulder in nice straight lines with his balance equally distributed over all four feet, so that when you ask for a halt or a turn he is able to do it easily, without a loss of balance. Be conscious of your own body position when practicing. When preparing to walk off, make sure you hold the lead in your left hand, face squarely forward, extend your right arm straight forward, give the command to “Walk on,” and take a few steps forward. Make sure you walk straight forward in order to give your equine a lead to follow that is definite and not wobbly.

When you ask for a halt, stop with your weight balanced equally on both feet (still facing forward), hesitate for a second or two and turn to face your equine’s shoulder. If his legs are already square, you can then give the crimped oats reward for stopping. If they are not, take a moment to square up the legs and then give the reward. Praise him for standing quietly for a few seconds to allow him to settle. You can then turn back to your forward position, put your right arm forward again, give the command to “Walk on,” and proceed a few more steps before halting again. Each time he complies, you can add more

steps before halting. When you practice the turn, he should always be turned away from you to the right, never into you while you are on the left side!

When executing the turns, ask your equine to take one step forward with the right front foot then cross the left front foot over the right to make the turn. Your own legs should execute the turn the same way, again giving your equine a good example to follow. Turns to the left should be schooled to develop the muscles equally on both sides. To do this, just change sides and execute the leading, halting and turning from the other side with the lead now held in your right hand with your left arm extended. Repeat the exact same exercise, but now from this position (though you will rarely have occasion to actually lead from this side). Be sure to dispense rewards only when he is settled and has done what you ask.

Paying attention to this kind of detail will greatly improve your animal's conditioning, his balance and his attention to your commands over time. Equines will learn EXACTLY what you teach and will be only as meticulous as you are. Lead your animal this way every time you have him on the lead to build good habits, facilitate good posture and to give him the few seconds before each move to prepare for what comes next. The result is a relaxed, compliant and confident companion!

My mule is running off in the drivelines, what do I do to make her stop?

First, I have, over time, come to appreciate that different equines have different personality types. It does seem that a general rule applies: the larger the animal, the more docile the personality. I've also learned that when a donkey or mule has a tendency to bolt and run, it's because they don't necessarily agree with what you are trying to do, nor how you are trying to do it. It is ALWAYS the handler's fault!

I have a mule that is acting the same way. She will allow me to walk beside her and drive her that way, but she'll run off if I get too far behind. I have had to deal with this problem with a few mules and donkeys in the past. What I do is continue to walk beside her and gradually lengthen the distance one inch at a time until she has accepted the drivelines correctly...no matter how long it takes. I will work her no more than 20-40 minutes every other day. I will make sure she gets her treats for "Whoa," and "Back." I will do a lot of "Back," while still close in to her and repeat "Back," frequently at every increased or decreased distance behind her, and I will keep things at a very slow walk until I feel her relaxation through the drivelines (not a trace of pull). I will always be calm and slow around her, willing to take all the time in the world if necessary. I will constantly review the lessons in showmanship in DVD #1, DVD #8 and DVD #9, going to and from the work areas, and during any ground interaction to help her to really, truly bond to me on a very personal level. I will treat her as my very favorite (I actually treat them all this way anyway, but sometimes there are those who are less confident and need this extra kind of moral support).

These types of personalities simply take much longer to come around, but with great patience, kindness, trust and respect, they eventually do. I just wouldn't necessarily use them for driving, but they can be very good under saddle. In fact, once they do bond more strongly with you and look to you as their "Protector," they are the ones who will have more "Go," and thus, more athletic tendencies and ability. Figuring out what kinds of things they like to do naturally helps a lot as well.

I have dealt with many animals that were the same way, and I know it takes tremendous patience, but I also know they can come around. You might just need to back up and do things even more slowly and more meticulously than you ever thought you needed to, but you should get positive results if you do. Lower your expectations of her for a while, and try to have more fun with the basics.

When she does bolt, never hang onto the reins, lead, or drivelines. Just let go of her if you are on the ground or let them loose if she bolts under saddle. Just make sure you work in areas that are adequately and safely fenced, so you can catch her easily again. Whether on the lead line, in the drivelines or under saddle, once she realizes that you aren't going to play "tug-o-war," she will get a reward for staying and as it is a waste of her energy to keep running, she will do it less and less.

For answers to your training questions go to "Ask Meredith" on the web site. If you don't see your question already posted, please go ahead and submit it. And keep in mind, Meredith's resistance-free techniques work with horses, too!