

Mule Expert Meredith Hodges Shares Her Passion by Helen T. Hertz

With nearly 30 years of breeding, training and showing under her belt, Meredith Hodges knows more about mules and donkeys than just about anyone. Hodges is a true educator. Her extraordinary expertise springs from a solid foundation of training techniques developed over years of study and a passion for these much-maligned animals.

Training a mule or donkey is like taking him through school, Hodges says. Just as every student must begin with kindergarten and advance only after he or she has mastered the material at each level, so it is with your mule or donkey.

“The first lesson is the most critical and probably the one most often skipped,” Hodges says. “This is where you forge a relationship with the animal, where you earn his trust, become his friend. Without this foundation, he will fight you every step of the way.”

Video One of Hodges’s award-winning, correspondence training series, *Training Mules and Donkeys, a Logical Approach to Longears*, includes a review of the differences between longears and horses—we all know it’s about more than ears—and a lesson in foal psychology. She also covers the fundamentals of handling, haltering, tying, leading, showmanship and loading. Begin here, says Hodges, and both you and your animal will benefit. If students have problems, Hodges is always available to answer your questions via phone or e-mail. Other programs in the 10-video series cover everything from animal maintenance to the finer points of jumping your mule. Each is designed to be viewed in order and studied until all elements are mastered.

Hodges has been helping people decipher donkey and mule psychology for years, not only to facilitate training but also to improve the animals’ standing. No one has done more to help eradicate the stereotypes that have plagued longears for so long. Her popular series, *Training Mules and Donkeys*, has aired on RFD-TV for six years. And most recently Hodges produced a documentary mini-series, *Those Magnificent Mules*, also seen on RFD-TV.

Meredith has also taken her positive message on mules to children, with her character Jasper the Mule. To date she has published four children’s books, *Jasper: the Story of a Mule*, *Jasper: A Christmas Caper*, *Jasper: A Precious Valentine*, and *Jasper: a Fabulous Fourth*, with a fifth, *Jasper: A Turkey Tale* due out this September. In 2005 Hodges brought Jasper to television with an animated version of *Jasper: The Story of a Mule*, also available on DVD.

“Jasper has become a big hit with kids because they can relate to him,” says Hodges. “They know how it feels to be lonely when you don’t fit in, to be brave when you’re scared, and to be happy when you’re with your friends. If they see that a little mule colt feels like they do, then maybe they’ll be less inclined to believe the myths that have surrounded mules for so long.”

For Hodges, Jasper the Mule was a step in the long journey that has taken her from her first encounter with mules at her mother’s ranch in California, to her own Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colorado, where she keeps nineteen mules, one donkey and eight horses. The ranch also features a Longears Sculpture Park, and Hodges frequently gives tours to the public. The park is part of a legacy she hopes will lead more people to

discover the marvelous mule and win greater support for the animals she loves so much. If you'd like more information about Meredith Hodges and Jasper the Mule, please visit, www.luckythreeranch.com and www.jasperthemule.com or call 800-816-7566.