

Mules Have a Friend in Meredith Hodges

By Helen T. Hertz

“You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.”

It’s a saying we’ve all heard. But for Meredith Hodges, it’s a personal philosophy—a practice born of necessity. Meredith has bred and trained some of the most accomplished sport mules in the country at her Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colorado. Years of study and practice and scores of victories and failures have taught her that patience, kindness and consideration are prerequisite to winning the heart and mind of a mule.

As a top-notch trainer, competitor and educator, Meredith has played a crucial role in winning respect for mules in the equine mainstream and showcasing their extraordinary athleticism and versatility. It’s been a challenging, sometimes contentious, journey. She’s generated curiosity, skepticism, even outrage; but the question observers have asked more than any other is, “Why mules?” To answer that, we have to go back a ways, to a time when Meredith was just a kid crazy about horses.

As a young girl growing up in Minneapolis, the eldest daughter of Peanuts cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, Meredith was an accomplished rider, with a fondness for Arabian horses. Her interest in equines stuck with her as she finished school and began a career in medicine. In 1973, she was employed as a psychiatric technician at Sonoma State Hospital when her mother Joyce Doty asked her to lend a hand on her 1,000-acre Windy Valley Ranch in Healdsburg, California. This wasn’t your typical ranch. It was a mule ranch, and Joyce’s mules were widely considered the best available. She traveled the country to find high-quality donkey jacks and mares and built a solid business breeding mules for clients such as Grand Canyon National Park.

Meredith agreed to come help, but not without some trepidation. After all, common knowledge held that mules and donkeys may be tough, but they’re stubborn, stupid, ornery creatures. She’d heard all the myths: “If you want to get a mule’s attention, you gotta hit him with a two-by-four,” and, “A mule never forgets. If you do him wrong, it might take a while, but some day, some way, he’ll get you back.”

As it turned out, Meredith had nothing to fear. Mules, she discovered, aren’t stubborn—only cautious—and they certainly aren’t stupid. In fact, she was captivated by their intelligence and sensitivity. Within three months of signing on at the ranch, she caught a case of “mule fever” she would never kick.

In 1980 Meredith moved to Loveland, Colo. Where she bought a 10-acre spread—an old, dilapidated sheep farm—and named it Lucky Three Ranch. She put her skills as a trainer to work and was soon training mules and horses full-time.

“Back then I still had so much to learn, but I was always looking for new ways to connect with the animals,” she recalls.

Meredith understood the physical and psychological differences between mules and horses, and she knew that traditional techniques designed to “force” an animal into submission are ineffective with mules. From their donkey fathers, mules inherit a powerful instinct for self-preservation. Meredith had to gain not only the mule’s respect, but also his trust.

“A mule is an ideal reflection of the sort of person you are,” she says. “He wants to please but won’t if he’s confused or fearful. It’s simple, really: If he’s not doing what you ask, then you’re not asking the right way.”

In her search for answers, Meredith studied the work of others trainers such as Richard Shrake and recalled her own work at the hospital where she’d learned behavior-modification techniques based on positive rather

than negative reinforcement—a reward for good behavior rather than punishment for bad. It was a gradual process but her diligence paid off. The reward-based training techniques she developed produced reliable, versatile, happy animals.

Meredith also began her own breeding program with Little Jack Horner, the last donkey from her mother's ranch and a direct descendant of George Washington's own breeding stock. Over the years Meredith has bred has paired Little Jack Horner with Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, Arabians, Thoroughbreds, Paints and Trakehners. The resulting mules inherit athletic ability and beauty from the mare and draw intelligence, strength and resilience from the donkey. Meredith's animals boast ample quantities of all of those attributes.

Both her mules and donkeys have excelled in competition. Many of their victories came at Bishop Mule Days, where Meredith has been a regular for two decades. Each Memorial Day weekend, more than 30,000 people gather in Bishop, Calif., to watch several hundred mules compete in 150 events. In 1991, Little Jack Horner cleared a four-foot jump and still holds the record as the only formal jumping donkey in the world. In 2006, one of her star mules, Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T., was inducted into the Bishop Mule Days Hall of Fame.

Other achievements at Bishop include a Reining Championship, Donkey Driving Championships, Single-Hitch Driving Championships, the International Side Saddle Organization's International Championship for two years running, and two Third-Level Dressage World Championships. That's right, dressage.

Although many equestrians pick one event and stick with it, Meredith's curiosity and competitive spirit compelled her to try them all. As her animals became proficient in traditional Western events, she ventured into the English riding disciplines. Dressage is considered both a path and a destination in competitive riding. Designed to develop the equine's natural athletic ability, the complex footwork requires suppleness, balance and obedience. Meredith was eager to give it a try, but first she had to convince the United States Dressage Federation to admit the mule. In 1986, she made a presentation to the organization and secured permission to enter the lower-level schooling shows. Meredith began training immediately.

"In some ways, it was like starting over," she says. "I was learning to ride in a whole new way."

Meredith and her mules made steady progress. Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T. advanced to third-level dressage, and Lucky Three Sundowner reached fourth level. Still it wasn't enough. Meredith and Mae Bea C.T. ventured into jumping, then into combined training, in which riders compete over two or three days in dressage, cross-country jumping and stadium jumping. Meredith raised more than a few eyebrows when she showed up at these events with a mule. Most who saw her were open-minded; some, however, were insulted by the notion.

"No forty-dollar mule is going up against my hundred-thousand-dollar horse," was a common refrain. It was an insult to the sport, some said; others had concerns about safety, suggesting that mules and horses simply don't mix. But none could deny the skill Meredith and Mae Bea C.T. demonstrated in competition.

Their crowning achievement came in 1994, when they took first place in the Novice Division of the Abbe Ranch Horse Trials in Larkspur, Colorado. Their competition that year? Fifty-six horses! Meredith considers it her proudest moment.

"We competed for three years and when we finally won, everyone was so gracious," she says. "It was a wonderful moment for us and a great moment for mules."

Since then, others have followed in Meredith's footsteps, and recently the USDF changed its rules again to admit mules into all but the highest levels of competition.

Thanks to efforts by Meredith and others mules and donkeys have enjoyed nothing short of a renaissance. By

the early 20th century, our indispensable partners in the fields, mines, mountains and battlefields had largely been replaced by trucks, tractors and other vehicles. By the 1960s, the number of mules in the U.S. had dwindled to fewer than 10,000. But in 1967, a Texas couple, Paul and Betsy Hutchins, founded the American Donkey and Mule Society with the aim to register and promote longears. Other groups followed, and today no fewer than a half-dozen magazines, more than 130 organizations and at least 300 shows exist to celebrate longears. As breeding standards improved and people like Meredith began to explore their potential, mules became increasingly versatile. Today they compete in an amazing variety of events, including dressage, jumping, hunter/jumper, endurance, Western events, English events, polo, racing, roping and driving. Mules even have their own holiday; National Mule Appreciation Day, established through an act of Congress, is celebrated on October 26.

Meredith's role in this movement has become that of educator and advocate. In 1993, she published her first book, *Training Mules and Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Longears*. A 10-video training series and several more books followed, as well as an extensive Web site and a television series for RFD-TV.

"My training program is like grade school for mules," she says. "Each tape represents about a year of training, and the 10 videos are designed to be followed in sequence, regardless of the animal's age or ability."

Meredith's resistance-free training series, *Training Mules and Donkeys*, is the first correspondence equine training course. Meredith encourages her students to call or e-mail with questions and progress reports. If they're taking the time to do it right, she says, it's the least she can do.

Meredith turned the spotlight on longears again in 2003, when, in honor of her father and inspired by her mother, she published her first children's book. The genesis for *Jasper: The Story of a Mule* was a letter she wrote to herself for her long-running magazine column "Mule Crossing." The missive from an imaginary young mule tells of his fears and frustration as he tries to please his human owner. From that piece, Meredith developed a series of holiday-themed Jasper adventures and produced *Jasper: The Story of a Mule*, an animated program based on the first book.

Today, Lucky Three Ranch sprawls across 127 acres at the base of the Rocky Mountain foothills. The ranch is home to nineteen mules, one donkey and eight horses, and Meredith frequently gives tours to visitors. Her own Longears Sculpture Park features a collection life-size bronze sculptures, including several she's commissioned to immortalize her own champion mules. Her long-term plans include an educational foundation and a Longears museum open to the public.

Meredith has plenty of new ventures in store. None, however, will take her far from home. Often enough, she's behind a podium making a speech or receiving an award, but you're just as likely to find her out back bathing and grooming half a dozen mules. And frankly, there's nowhere she'd rather be. As for the question, "Why mules?" Meredith says it boils down to one simple truth: because mules love you back!