Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

The mules are in the corral. Welcome to Mule Talk. And I'm Cindy K. Roberts, your host. And our author, TV personality, and world-renowned mule trainer, Meredith Hodges of the Lucky Three Ranch. Okay, we're gonna talk about, a bit about communication, achieving balance and harmony with your mules and donkeys. Welcome back, Meredith.

Meredith Hodges:

Oh, thanks Cindy. It's good to be here. First of all, I might start by saying that everything that I talk about is coming from experience. And it's coming from, uh, learning all of these things, and beginning with all the mistakes that all of us make along the way. And there's just no way to know all this stuff that you need to know right off the bat. So just be okay, forgive yourself, and be ready to make mistakes, and be ready to go and take all the bumps and bruises that your mules are gonna dish out. Because they will. Nobody's born perfect. And the one thing I can say is that these animals will have a completely honest response to anything and everything that you do. And over the past decades, we've seen horse trainers try all kinds of approaches that did nothing but infuriate the horse and create resistance. They would go to harsher bits, they would blindfold them, they would force 'em. They'd put the saddles on and buck 'em out, trying to make 'em tired. Just accept things in a very impolite way, by the way.

I have discovered in my interactions with equines over the years, several decades, that there is a safer and more beneficial way to approach them. And... But you have to take in all of the different aspects of what's gonna make this work. How are you gonna get your communication with this animal clear? Well, the first thing is, is by making 'em comfortable. If they think your main thing is to make them comfortable and not just try to control them, then they begin to start interacting with you in a reasonable way. One thing I might say off the bat, you know the, the ongoing thing today is to do natural horsemanship and not use a lot of mechanical devices. Bitless bridles are popular, liberty training is popular.

But as I've said before, good posture is not something that we are born with. Not animals, not people. And yet it has such an amazing effect on, on them when you do pay attention to their good posture and make them more comfortable in their bodies. Because then they're more willing to comply with all, all of the things that you are asking them to do. Because you put them in a position where they can actually do what you're asking. Otherwise, it's gonna be difficult and it's going to create a fight. You just gotta know that. I would say that finding the right bit for your bridle is really important. You need a bit in order to affect postural correctness. Bits are all about establishing a good, clear communication between the corners of your animal's mouth and your hands. Bits are not about control, like we've been led to believe that they are. People automatically think that if the animal's disobedient that you need a harsher bit. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

If you spend adequate time developing your equine's ideal posture and his movement, you can later ride him bridle-less and do liberty training, knowing that he is now moving correctly. This is the most important thing. And you can't get him to move correctly without using a bit. The first thing he needs to do is to learn to go forward at the beginning in his training. And a snaffle bit is, is extremely important in eliciting the correct postural response with, I might add, the help of my elbow pull postural aid. This is a

self-correcting aid. Your hands aren't operating it. The animal is operating it. This postural aid will get him to stretch his head and neck forward, to step well underneath his body to propel himself forward, to elongate his overall frame and keep the vertebrae in his back from becoming compressed and rigid. When he is moving correctly on a straight line, he'll have more suspension, he'll have more flexibility to his gait. And when he turns, he'll be able to bend easily through his ribcage and that's what he needs to do in order to keep good posture.

Otherwise, he's gonna start leaning like a motorcycle and shifting the weight to the inside feet, which means that he's not gonna have equal weight over all four feet. Which is what good posture demands. So it's really important, this good posture thing. You can't just go into a round pen and start training them because the first thing they're gonna do is lean like a motorcycle when the gait gets faster. And they will not bend through their ribcage. They're gonna go around kinda stiff. And you'll notice that they kinda put their head to the outside and that shifts the shoulders to the inside on the circle. But it does not put them in good posture. It just keeps them rigid. And they need the flexibility in their body in order to do all these different things that we ask them to do.

Now, it would seem that a bitless bridle could achieve the same end, but it actually has a different effect on your equine's head and neck, which inhibits that proper bending through the turns. The straight forward motion can be achieved with a bitless bridle. However, the reins on a bosal or a hackamore with shanks on it are going to affect the animal differently than a snaffle bit with a direct rein action does.

They actually brace against the bosal, they brace against the hackamore shanks. And it doesn't allow them to bend through their pull as smoothly because the contact of the reins is higher on their cheeks than a snaffle bit is at the corners of their mouth. So when you pull on those reins, it creates a stiffness in the pull. Because now they have to bend right through the throat latch and it doesn't create that nice comfortable triangle in... I would say that matches. The neck should match the... From the pull to the nose. And when you pull on the reins and the reins are at the corners of the mouth, they can actually stretch their spine and bring their head around easily.

When you're pulling from right below the check bone, it's shorter from the pull to the middle of their nose than it is from the pull to their withers. And it restricts this smooth, comfortable action of bending the head and the neck. And it's uncomfortable for them because it's pulling all these muscles and ligaments and everything that are in that area. It's, it's creating a stiffness and a soreness in there when you do that. Because the pull, the [inaudible 00:08:09] is attached higher on eq- equine's jaw than where the bit would be. And the angle of pull is sharper. And it does cause the equine to try to turn his head too sharply from the pull. Which can cause kinks and pain in the neck. I did test this with Roll. Roll and I did a demonstration and I just put a halter on as if he was going ahead and in a bitless bridle or being ridden in a halter. Or something that has the pull higher. Uh, in a bosal, when you pull the reins, it twists the noseband and creates pressure points on the nose. Which they will resist against.

Again, I stood next to his shoulder and I took the side of the halter and did a squeeze release on the side of the halter right by the, the ring that goes down where the cheek pieces would be on a bitless bridle. And he pulled against me. And when he wasn't pulling against me, he just got rigid and resisted the pull that I was trying to get sideways through the halter. And I thought, "Okay. This is really interesting here." So then I put my hand, my fingers, in the corners of his mouth. I just took all four fingers and stuck in his mouth right there over the bars. Did a... The squeeze release again. And he gave to that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Really?

Meredith Hodges:

And you'll be able to see pictures of that in the article that we're gonna attach to this interview. And the name of this article is A Bit About Communication. And he did this because he was able to stretch his head and neck and be pulled from much lower down on his head. And from a really good focal point, I found that this length of nose and length of neck, when you draw the line across, is basically a triangle with equal distance on all three sides. And that does give the... Makes the movement a lot easier for him to do. And I did it with my fingers in his mouth. I didn't even do it with a bit. I just squeeze, release, squeeze, release, come around, come around. And he bent his head and neck all the way around easily. And what this told me was that if I create this postural correctness in his body and I have the equipment that is correct to help him to move correctly, then I am gonna have a mule that's gonna be really light in the bridle.

When you're communicating with your animal through a snaffle bit, he is waiting for the feel of the rider's cues at the corners of his mouth. And your cues can become nearly imperceptible till it, it looks like you're riding without the use of the reins. And what you're actually doing is the squeeze release of the rider's little pinky fingers on the reins is what gives him the indication of what direction you wanna go, what kinda thing you wanna do. And he will learn to respond to that and he will be very, very light in the bridle. But that's not just because you're pulling on the reins correctly, it's because he's in good posture in his body. He's got a solid foundation and he's learning to move correctly. And you are just saying very, very slightly, "This is what I want us to do."

He is not gonna be as anxious or as willing to bolt through anything. Because good posture gives them confidence in everything that they do and they become reliable underneath you. And because they feel like they're really... You really care how they feel. And you're developing this communication with them that is solid in good posture. And it promotes a good attitude.

And he will be more reliable. Whether he is a pleasure animal or a show animal. Really doesn't matter. And then you'll be allowed to ride your balanced seat effectively and get in sync with your animal. You'll be a much safer and happier rider. Your finished equine will be one that's dependable. If you like the idea of the novelty of riding bitless or bridleless riding, um, you use the snaffle bit to train and to get him in good posture and develop his confidence, not only in himself but in you, 'cause his self-carriage will be solid. But you train with a goal of clear lines of communication between your and... You and your equine. And it makes everything you ask him to do easier. He becomes happy, reliable, a willing partner and in a mutually satisfying relationship.

But in order to do all of this, you have to understand what bits and bridles are all about and how they operate. And not just focus on, "I wanna do this move." Or, "I wanna do that move." Because when you start piecemealing things t- separately, you don't take into consideration how much athletic development he needs to be able to perform the things that you're asking. And a lot of things that people ask their animals to do are really advanced move, particularly the side pass. You know, I mean, that comes way, way later. And it's a response more t- from your leg and your seat than it should be from the bridle. And yet when he's not ready to stay in good posture, then that's a very difficult move for him to do.

So taking your time... And it takes about two years of groundwork like this to help him to develop his body. Because if you're developing core strength, you can't do it with just a few months of training. This, this takes a long time. And first it takes time in leading training and time adding coordination to it. And then time ground driving and doing both... All these things. First in the round pen where you're confined. Then in the open arena to open it up a little bit. And... But it still has to be confined. And his response to you when it's... He's finding it difficult, is be... Gonna be to bolt and run.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

But you, you don't wanna... Like we talked about last time, you don't wanna chase him. Because he's telling you something. He's telling you, "No. I can't do that." When you take the time to go ahead and do this groundwork that he needs to develop the core strength in his body, it will greatly increase his ability to respond to your requests with no resistance because he can. And if you don't go chasing him around, you won't be sucked into the games of avoidance. I'll tell you what, mules have more avoidance behaviors than a dog has fleas.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That's right.

Meredith Hodges:

And if they can suck... (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

If they can suck you in, then you will spend more time responding to the games than you are to the job of really developing his core strength. And when you develop core strength, this has a- an effect on his total welfare. Because he needs the core strength in order for his bones to be aligned so that all the joints operate properly. He needs to be aligned so the pressure points in his body are not putting undue pressure on the internal organs, one side or the other side, or partial, or at all. All of these things can affect things like arthritis, locked stifles, ringbones, sidebones. So doing the core strength postural training will drastically reduce the risk of physical problems later. Like random soreness and all the things I just mentioned.

You wanna make sure that he is able to put equal weight on all four feet. And that's not only standing still, but that is when he's moving. And he must learn how to keep that equal weight over all four feet and use his body properly by bending through the torso on the arcs of these lines and circles, and how to maintain that equal weight over all four feet on the straight lines. And backing and turning. When he turns, when he's turning off, off the rail, he needs to bend through the torso and not just rigidly pivot back over the inside pivot foot. He needs to be able to be really, really flexible throughout his entire body.

And because of the reason that I gave you about having the bit in his mouth, the bit is going to be very, very important. Fitting the bit is important. You're gonna need a bit that gives him a quarter inch on each side of his mouth. And one that's not too wide so that when you pull, it pulls the ring snaffles halfway up the sides of his face. Because that will affect the communication from your hands to the corner of his lips. You want it to be a direct contact between your hands and the corners of his mouth. The bit should lay over the bars and tongue. A lot of people will tell you, "Well, we gotta stop him from putting his tongue over the bit, so let's just adjust the cheek pieces tighter. And then he can't do that." That's just pulling the, the bit further back in his mouth and increasing the possibility that it's gonna be hitting his teeth.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

It needs to be over the bars. And if he's got wolf teeth, that makes it even more apt that the, the bit's gonna hit the wolf teeth.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

And you don't necessarily have to have them pulled. I've had mules that have wolf teeth and they're set fairly far back, right in front of the molars. But if they're not loose, then I leave 'em. If they're loose, I'll have 'em pulled because then they will end up affecting the animal. There's nothing worse than loose teeth. And the thing is, you know, even we, if we have loose teeth, it, it annoys us. And these wolf teeth can do that if they're loose in the mouth, as can molars or any other teeth that become unhealthy.

So you kinda gotta look in that mouth and get your fingers in there and start feeling what those teeth feel like. And if they're solid, that's fine. But like I said, when you're fitting the bit, make sure that it's, it's going over the tongue of course, but that it's also set in the middle of the bars. And that it is setting right next to the corners of the mouth so that when you do communicate with him, that, that little finger action will cr- will create a vibration on the reins that he can feel. You know, they're very, very sensitive about that. So there's no reason to put your fist on the reins and drag 'em backwards.

You know, that just means you need a little bit more work on letting him get adjusted to his own good posture by leading exercises in the hourglass pattern with you not interfering. And just leading him through in your correct posture. And going ahead and walking in stride with him, stopping with your feet together, setting him up for a square, and then waiting for him to chew up his, his crimped oats reward. And keep everything very calm and very, very calculated. And then he has no reason to get anxious. Now, a lot of people talk about bit metals and they look at the salivation and they go, "Well, you want him to salivate. And if he's salivating then that means he's relaxed." And like I said before, you know, they, they were talking about how if the animal's chewing, then he's relaxed and how you should wait until he's chewing. And I kinda got really impatient with that. So I decided that if he is chewing rewards, he's gonna be chewing. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) Yes.

Meredith Hodges:

(laughs) [inaudible 00:20:59] sit there and wait for it. I just thought, let him know that I appreciate, you know, his, his response. And he can let down and be calm about it too. You know? And it's kind of the same with these bit metals, you know, that they use. They say copper hav- helps 'em to salivate more. And there's steel and stainless steel which... And stainless steel is non-reactive and non-oxidizing. And iron and its alloys, is what you call sweet iron, I found that these metals don't necessarily induce salivation. Although some do have a small amount of reaction due to electrolytic reactions with moisture, warmth, and air. And this is called oxidation and it does promote salivation as you see it, but I'm not sure that it really means that they're relaxed. Plastic bits can be flavored, they taste good, and

they do promote salivation because, you know, if we look at something for instance and it looks like it's really gonna be good to eat, we salivate when we see stuff like that. That doesn't mean that they're connecting with your, your hands on the bit.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

You know? And with plastic bits they promote more chewing than salivation, which means the bit's gonna wear out quickly. And this is gonna compromise the mule's ability to come to full acceptance of the bit and sensitive communication in your hand. Now, there are two basic kinds of bits. One is a direct rein and a bit with a shank is, is an indirect rein curb. The direct rein snaffle is the direct rein. The indirect rein curb bit is a bit with shanks on it. And when you directly pull on an indirect curb bit, those shanks actually cause the shank to dig into the side of the mouth, which creates an opposite reaction of... From what you're, you're asking for.

In a direct rain snaffle bit, you wanna avoid bits with extreme hinges or moving parts in the mouthpiece because these things will be the onset of bad habits. Like pulling the tongue over the bit. They lead you to believe that if you put a roller in a bit or a hinge, a small hinge in the bit and give 'em something to play with, that they'll stop flipping their tongue around. When actually that exacer- exacerbates the bad habit of putting the tongue over the mouth because it's encouraging the tongue to play. So that should not be your goal. Your goal should be to establish that communication between your hands and the corners of your mouth. And in order for that to happen, he needs to be really comfortable and he needs to just take the bit and hold it in his mouth.

And generally speaking, what they will do, contrary to popular belief, the snaffle bit does not have a crackerjack action on the tongue. It slides over the tongue when you pull on the reins. And when you don't, it just allows it to bend a little bit as he puts his tongue underneath it and tries to settle it in his mouth by pushing up against the, the upper palate. And he can hold it there. And if the bit's not too big or too, you know, too wide or anything like that, then he can hold it there very comfortably and he can feel your vibrations going to the corner of his mouth. This is why you should never use bits such as snaffle bits with twisted wire mouthpieces, bicycle chains. I've seen, uh, bicycle chain bits advertised as mule bits.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Um, this is for people who are afraid of these animals and don't wanna negotiate with them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

They just wanna force them into compliance.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

If you put the proper amount or an appropriate amount of time with groundwork, if you spend the time considering every step that you're doing, you won't have to use any drastically leveraged equipment at all. They will learn very calmly with no resistance, really, just exactly what you're asking. Be aware too of the kinda reins that you're using. Reins are designed to have certain effect. They're English or Western. They're leather, nylon, or braided leather, or horsehair, split reins or romal reins. Continuous reins for Gymkhana.

And you can, you can kinda tell what the reins are for by their construction. And leather split reins, for instance, are for a very calm, very well-trained pleasure horse. They will go on a loose rein. You can hold the reins in one hand because it will be Western. These split reins will be coming off a curb bit shank. And you don't want that shank to move because we've already talked about how if it goes one... Sideways, one way or the other, that it's going to have an opposite effect because the top of the shank is going to dig into the face of your mule.

So when you're talking about neck reining, you're not talking about putting your hand from one side to the, the next, holding the reins in one hand. That's not neck reining. It leads you to believe that's the way it goes from just the term itself. But neck reining is for a fully finished animal. Mule, horse, pony, it doesn't matter. But this is an animal that has learned to move from your seat. And your hand, this is a Western way of riding, should be... Whether it's split reins or romal reins or whatever reins you have, you keep your hands right in front of that horn down the center of your animal's spine. And you leave it there. That's where it stays. And all cues are done through your seat and your legs. And that's how they learn the neck rein.

If you wanna go right, you are gonna keep that hand there, but your seat is gonna be a little bit turned to whatever direction you wanna go, and your leg will back up that pressure by pushing them in that direction. And you keep your upper body in a good, balanced, balanced seat, so that you do not affect the movement of your animal adversely. When you're riding English, of course you're gonna have both hands on the reins. When you do that, you keep your balanced seat, you keep a light connection to the bit, to your snaffle bit, which is your direct rein to the animal's mouth. And you will have a light contact with those reins. And you will feel in your hands whether your animal is traveling on the vertical with his nose or not, by the pressure on... That he's taking from you, from your hands.

Because he should maintain the same pressure when he's on the vertical. And if it loosens up in your hands on one side or the other, or in both hands, that means he's doing something. He's either going behind the bit or he's going in front of the bit. He's either taking more from your hands than you're willing to give on an arc or not. And you learn to feel where his body is by the pressure that you're feeling in your hands at the corners of his mouth. And so, you know, you... To, to kinda... I... When I first started, I had braided reins on my English bridle because, uh, that way I could tell where my hands were supposed to be.

When I had a solid leather rein, my hands would slip back and forth. I couldn't really tell where they were and w- you know, like I could with the braided reins. Because the, the braided reins are braided in the middle of the rein and then they got a flat spot on either end. So I could tell where my hands were by how far away from the braided part, or if I was into the braided part where they should be, because I could actually see it.

And a lot of times that's what you have to do when you're learning something. You have to be able to see it. When you go into an English trot where you've got to post, for instance, they tell you to post by

coming down on the hind leg that's coming forward. But you can't see that leg. You know? And, and sometimes... And to feel it... I mean, asking an, an unskilled rider to feel a hind leg coming under their seat, that's a tall order. So I found that it was easier to post down on that front leg, which was on the outside, sit on the outside front leg, go up when it goes forward. And that was easier to do because I could see that front leg going forward.

And, and so after a while of doing that, then I was able to actually feel the hind leg coming up underneath as that front leg was leaving the ground and the front leg was going forward. And the same thing, when you're following with your reins, a lot of people wanna slow their animal down by preventing the front leg from going forward. But all that does, it's not real collection. They think it is, but it's not. And the, the effect it has is bending the head and neck, but it doesn't bend the whole spine from head to tail. It just restricts them and shortens their stride. And that's the last thing you want. What you wanna do is allow them that freedom of motion. And before they get strong in their core, they're gonna wanna go fast. And that's a little scary for some riders to... You know, when they speed up like that, it feels like they're running away with you, but they're really not. They're just trying to maintain their own balance and the balance is falling forward. And that's just centrifugal force. And you learn to tolerate that at the beginning stages.

And if you do, then you find out that later on they're slowing down for you more easily even though you're following that, that rein forward because y- they're feeling that your seat and your legs would like them to please slow down because it's hard to keep up. So you're kinda blocking 'em with your seat and your legs a little bit. But it takes a little while before they begin to react to it. But as they gain more strength and suspension, they will react to it. They will slow down their gait. And they will maintain the same rhythm and cadence. And they will gain more suspension to the gait and cover more ground and go slower.

And it all becomes more manageable. But you, you know, that's all part of learning how to communicate effectively with your animal. It's not just pulling on the reins. It's not just going through the reins. It's putting your whole body in sync with their whole body. And that's why, when we're doing the leading training, we're paying attention to holding the, the lead line in the hand farthest away from the animal. If you're on the left, it'll be held in your, in your left hand. If you're on the right, it will be held in your right hand. If you're on the left and you're going forward to keep them from coming around you because it's the left hand, you're gonna go ahead and point in the direction of travel with your right hand, which blocks their head, but shows them you're pointing in the direction you wanna go. Then you ask them to walk on. You look in the direction of travel, you pay attention to what foot they're leading with, and you match their steps. Right leg to right... To the right front. Left leg to the left front.

And you get into sync with their movement. First on the lead line through the hourglass pattern, with the halts and everything in there. And then you graduate and you take that one step farther and take it into your obstacles to add coordination. And then when you get into the round pen, you're going to first get away from them because you have been standing right next to them and affecting their self-body carriage. But as you move away, now they're gonna be more responsible than they were even when you were leading because they're further away from you in the round pen.

And you can watch them and make sure that they're sustaining their, their good equal weight over all four feet at walk, trot, canter, and even at the backing. Then you go ahead and attach drive lines. And then with the drive lines, and while you're ground driving, now you're gonna get in sync with the back legs. And you're gonna move with those. So your body, very subtly, is getting tuned into their rhythm and their cadence before you even get on. And I might make a comment, at this time, you want to make sure that when you are ground driving, uh, if you're l- using drive lines that have a little buckle in the middle, undo it so that your lines are separated.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Because there's a a very good chance of getting your foot caught in those things.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

And if you do and you trip, they're gonna bolt and run.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And they may drag you with them. So just make sure when you're dr- ground driving that you have two separate unattached lines on your animal. When you get up into a vehicle and you're driving, then you can reattach those lines. So that you don't drop them down in front of you and lose total control of your animal. You know? So these things, they do have a purpose, but you gotta think it through. What's gonna happen if I just take it like it, it is? No, you don't take it like it is. You, you think about the consequences of your actions and what the... What this tack and equipment was actually designed for. And with the harness in the lines, it's designed for being in the vehicle. But not necessarily for the groundwork. So you gotta kinda think about these things. And, uh, think about the effect of the, of the lines from the corner of the lips and the effect through the pull.

And even your driving animal is gonna be a much more attractive driving animal if he's not cocking his head when he has to make a turn. If he actually bends in the shafts. And he will with core strength [inaudible 00:36:14] work done the way I've described, the driving animal without you on his back is going to be in good posture. And... But if you spend plenty of time learning to walk in sync with the front legs when leading and walking in sync with the back legs when ground driving, you're just in sync and your aids an- and your cues to your animal are getting fine-tuned. It's going to show in his motion. Your aids when you start riding are gonna become practically imperceptible. And as I talked about, neck reining is done from your seat and not the reins.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And it takes a lot of time to get steady with your hands because the hardest thing for us to do is to just keep that hand right in front of the saddle horn and think we don't have to do anything with it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

But that is the beauty of a pleasure animal.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

You bet.

Meredith Hodges:

When you can have those reins loose and hanging in a show. And your hand just stays steady. And the reins just kinda swing with the animal's sideways motion. But he is listening to your seat and your legs. And he's speeding up and slowing down accordingly, and even backing, without you moving your hands at all. The bits can be a little bit different from driving to riding. And generally speaking, the driving bits that you use will... You might wanna try a half, half cheek snaffle to start with, if you have an animal that's really responsive. But if you need a little more leverage, then you would wanna use a Liverpool bit that has a shank on it with several different settings on that shank, depending on how much leverage you want to use.

Um, when you're talking about riding bits... And I'm talking mostly about training here, because when you get into showing, they're gonna tell you what bits you can use. When you're prepping your animal for showing in training, you can get away with a lot of different things. But I stick pretty close to the eggbutt snaffle bit. I ride all my mules in the eggbutt snaffle bit, whether I'm going trail riding or not. And I've only had a few of them that were a little bit finicky and had some problems getting their tongue under the mouth and holding onto that bit.

Now, the eggbutt snaffle bit gives in the middle of the mouthpiece. But some of 'em just didn't like that and fiddled with it. So with those guys, I used what's called a mullen mouth snaffle, which has a straight bar that goes across their tongue. And if they are a little bit strong in the bridle, like the jacks tended to be, I will use a Kimberwick bit, which has a chin chain on it, give you a little bit more leverage. Also has a couple of settings so you can get leverage from the very small shank that it's got on each side.

Those bits are very effective. And when you've done all your homework here, your animal will know that you're expecting because you've moved up to it slowly. You know, you haven't just jumped on this and used your bit for leverage. Most of the bits that, that we use are used for leverage. And the Western bits are the ones that, uh, are most popular. I've never used anything more severe than a low port curb bit. And with a two finger space between the jaw and the chin strap. And actually on most of my animals, I use leather chin straps 'cause I don't need the action from the chain really.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Your animals should respond to the touch of the chain or the touch of the leather chin strap. And when they feel that they should stop. Or collect. Or whatever you're asking them to do. Even when riding side-saddle or the upper levels of dressage in a full bridle or a Pelham, what I do is I loop the chin chain around the bridoon ring, which is the snaffle ring, to avoid any pinching from the chin chain. They don't need that leverage to respond to you. And leather chin straps are much more humane. Headstalls are important and there's a lot of different headstalls. I prefer headstalls that have browbands on them. And in the case of training in the beginning I use English bridles with a flash noseband. Because this flash

noseband where you have the noseband around... Behind the bit and in front of the bit, it encourages them to keep their tongue quiet and learn how to hold the bit.

If they're flapping their tongue all over, and they're allowed to do that, they're interfering with the lesson of teaching them how to hold the bit. And whether I'm gonna have this animal as a Western mule or an English mule doesn't really make any difference. The lesson is still the same. You need to learn not to flap your tongue at me.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Every time I pull on the reins, your tongue comes out of the mouth. Even when I don't pull on the reins, your tongue goes flying out sideways and like you're just showing me your discomfort and you're displeased and, you know, there are some things you just gotta do. You know? And we have that conversation. And generally with the, uh, flash noseband, with the drop noseband, you don't have to strap that thing down really tight. It just needs to be snug. Just to give them, "Oh, gee. If I start to open my, open my mouth and put my tongue out, it puts pressure on my nose. So it's better when I don't do that."

These mules yield pressure. And so this is also why the hackamores can't help you there, and bosals. Not only do they give you the wrong angles for pulling on the reins and stuff, and not putting their whole spine in line with any turns or arcs or anything like that, but it gives him way too much give and too much room for mistakes, when they don't learn what the lesson's really all about. Which is, holding onto that bit the right way so that you can make a direct contact with the corners of his mouth and begin to communicate.

Now, headstalls are also a very interesting thing. And I found out firsthand in the drill team at Bishop with 30-something mules going in all these patterns and everything, that a fancy head stall is not exactly safest thing to do. I bought a really pretty one with buckles on the cheek pieces that slid over thing that pokes in there. So I'm in the middle of this drill team at a gallop with a flag galloping around. And Sarge is yelling all of the, the orders at us, "Go left. Go right. Now thread the needle. Now do this. Now do that." And just in the middle of this thread the needle, my bridle fell off.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

Because that buckle slipped and let go. And the bridle just fell off her head and went down to her chest. And I said, "Sarge. My bridle fell off." And she says, "I don't care. Keep going."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

(laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Well, that just solidified the fact that it's much more important to learn to ride from your seat and your legs than it is to use your reins. Because I had reins, but they were hanging around her chest but luckily I had done all of my core strength training and everything. And so I went, "Okay." So we finished out the pattern. In good form, I might add.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Well, good.

Meredith Hodges:

Yeah. It, it was very interesting. I'll tell you what.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

So I'm very suspicious of bridles that are not solidly on their head. I think that they're very pretty a lot of the times. The one-ear bridles are another thing that will come off their face. And a lot of 'em are, are really, really attractive. But I think there's an avoidance for getting bridles with browbands on it because most of the bridles that we buy are made for horses. And mules have a broader forehead than a horse does.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

So it, you know, it's hard to fit them. But what I have learned works is to go ahead and get a bridle that you like. And then go ahead and from Dover Saddlery you can get browbands sold separately. They do that for warmblood horses. Because warmblood horses have the same issues. They've got a wider forehead than most horses do. So you kinda learn how you can kinda piecemeal your bridles. And if you've seen pictures of my mules, you'll see that they are in English bridles with browbands on them. And on the Western bridles I found a browband that is kind of interwoven. And it has two little tabs that would hang down about, oh, maybe an inch and a half. But they were kinda braided through each other. And I found that I could loosen those up on my Western bridles.

And granted, it wasn't as attractive as having an inch and a half tab on the, on the middle of their forehead, but it still had two little silver things on the ends of the, the leather pieces. So it, it looked like they had a little silver thing hanging there. But it gave me, uh, just enough so that the browband actually fit my mules in the Western bridles. Which was good. With all this training too, I cannot impress upon you how much it is important to spend the two years developing all of this with your mule and getting the right equipment and using it the right way and making any adjustments that you might have to make so that it will fit.

And don't focus so much on the movements that you're trying to achieve, as much as your animal's comfort and his responsiveness to your communication. It's really important that you remain quiet and steady in your seat and your hands. And avoid any restrictive restraints or restraints that are in your hands that can get too tight on him. Make sure too, that when you use the elbow pull, that it's, it's adjusted over the leather crown of your bridle. That will prevent any chafing [inaudible 00:46:50] across the pull. When he's moving, in the beginning, that elbow pull's gonna be a little bit tight. When he reaches forward, it's loose. But when he takes the step forward and then it gets tight when the other leg goes forward, it rubs back and forth with the back and forth motion of your animal. So what I've done in the beginning, and I use them [inaudible 00:47:14] through all the different stages that I have to use the elbow pull, is I just use fleece protectors at the crown when training in the elbow pull to avoid this kinda chafing.

And as I've spoken about before, behind the elbows is another place where that can cause chafing. And if you just pull the elbow pull rope back behind the latigo on your saddle, it won't get up into the armpits and rub there. It'll kinda stay a little bit back and then you can avoid the chafing that way. Your equine's gaits, as he gets into a better frame and as he learns to move fluidly, in balance and everything, there's no such thing as bad gaits or bumpy gaits. Those bumpy gaits are caused by imbalance, by being out of good posture.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, okay.

Meredith Hodges:

That's why you see a lot of people as they age, they start falling down. When you're going through the hourglass pattern, you may not realize it, but what's actually happening is you're... By virtue of looking where you're going, keeping your arms in the positions they need to be in, your one with the lead rope down at your hip, the one up at your shoulder pointing in the direction of travel, matching your equine steps, and I might add too, making sure that you are pointing your toes in the direction of travel, creates balance. And you will sustain that balance in your core the rest of your life. Because core only needs to be tuned up every once in a while. And it only takes one more time through the hourglass pattern to remind your brain, the muscle impulses that no, we're not gonna get sideways on this. You know, we gotta get back to the right impulses and the right movement.

And it does. I watch my animals when they're playing and if somebody, when they stop playing and they go to rest and they're not standing square, that's the one that needs to come in and go around the hourglass pattern. Only once to remind them. Then they go back out and they're reminded and they get back into good posture. So it doesn't take a lot of time to do core muscle training either. I had 32 animals in training at one time and I thought I was gonna be overwhelmed, but that was when I thought I had to drill on everything and I was focusing on movements instead of physical development and good posture.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

You see? Because when you spend that two years developing that core and then you have to aid in the practice of that good core strength in a good posture. When you have to aid in that, yeah, it takes a little

bit of time. But as I have said before, doing that hourglass pattern, you only need to do it once a week. And you only need to go around it once with all of the little glitches in it where you have to stop between cones, square up, change sides and all of that stuff. But it only takes 15, 20 minutes. You do it once around the pattern, cross the diagonal, and do it once the other way, and you're done. So what you can do is if you've got multiple animals, just take 'em all into the arena, as many as you think you wanna work with, and tie the rest of them to the fence and take each one through the pattern once. And you only have to do it once a week.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

I like that.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and the core will get built.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

There you go.

Meredith Hodges:

It does. And then it, it sticks with them. But it's really, really cool. And the value of this kinda development of communication between you and your equine, once you get on, it will become evident as you progress. The gaits of your equine will become fluid and much more suspended, as I was saying. And it also... Because you're not getting bumped around and thrown one way or the other, it will actually enhance your riding ability. In harness your equine is gonna look like he's floating over the ground. And when you're riding will eventually feel like you are both floating on air. That I experienced one time... Well, not one time, but only when I got Lucky Three Sundowner, when he reached fourth level and he was doing piaffe and passage. And even just walk, trot, canter, canter pirouettes, and all this stuff, I suddenly had this feeling like I was floating on air. It was astonishing. I never knew that riding could feel that way.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yes.

Meredith Hodges:

But I always thought, Cindy, that I was a good rider and I was following my animal's motion and everything.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

But my animals were not necessarily trained with core strength in mind. And when it... When I finally got to that, that's when everything kinda came together. And it was just a- an amazing feeling. That's all I could say. No matter what we did, it was like I could see how there could be such a thing as airs above the ground, like the Spanish riding school does. Because they go from floating to flying.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, my gosh. Yes.

Meredith Hodges:

Right?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah. And that is just the ultimate high, I think, when they're happy in the bridle, relaxed. You do feel like you're on a cloud.

Meredith Hodges:

You do. You really do. And, and the more you get into this core strength development, the closer you're gonna get to that kinda feeling. And I talk about it a little bit in the article that I'm going to attach to our interview, called Achieving Balance and Harmony. And that's what that's all about. And I talk about all of these things coming together and how important it is to train in this logical and sequential way and not get in a hurry to do certain things, but rather think about it in terms of developing your animal's postural core strength.

That means all of the elements that are supporting his bones so that he can move correctly. He can move in, in good posture. And if he's moving in good posture, then he's not gonna develop arthritis because the joints are moving the way they should. They're flexing and contracting the way they should. He's using his legs. He is pointing the direction of travel. He is going with his toes pointed forward and not wobbling from side to side. He is self-correcting whatever, whatever cow-hockness he has in his conformation. He is maximizing his conformation by the way that he's moving.

And no animal is ideally conformed, but we can get as close as we can possibly get by having the goal of postural balance and movement in good posture. And so I talk about all these things and different ways that they apply, in my books, Training Mules and Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Longears, Training Without Resistance, Equine Management and Donkey Training. We do this with the donkeys too. And most of the reason donkeys go so slow is because they have poor postural development and not enough strength to carry their oversized riders-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Ah.

Meredith Hodges:

...in good posture. So rather than try to do it, they just go slow 'cause it's easier.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And people aren't paying attention to the development of their posture and they know it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Huh.

Meredith Hodges:

So they don't try.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And Equines Revisited was, was a book I wrote in response to this natural horsemanship that I looked at very carefully and realized that when you don't put a bit in their mouth, when you don't try to affect their posture, you are re- reinforcing bad posture. And movement becomes very difficult for them. It's not to say they can't do things, because they can, but when they age, then you're gonna start seeing U-necks and lordosis or swayback.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

You know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

And then you're gonna start seeing arthritis pop up, ringbone, sidebones.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

All those things I talked about. Organs will not function right. They'll colic more often. Different things that affect them physically when they're not in good posture. And you could see that in people too, if you make the comparisons.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

People that don't worry about their posture age and become hunched over. And sometimes humpbacks even. And they deteriorate very quickly. Another book I address these things in too is a Guide to Raising and Showing Mules and in all the corresponding videos that correspond with these books. And you can find them at luckythreeranchstore.com or you can always call us at (800) 816-7566. And I'll be glad to talk to you about them. And if you can't afford all the books at once and you only wanna buy one, we can talk about that. I recommend getting the packages with all the books 'cause we've given them substantial discounts.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

S- because all these books, although they have a lot of the same information in them, they address these things from different perceptions. So although they overlap, they are not duplicated. So you just need to know that. You can listen to our podcasts on muletalk.net and get a lot of the details there because you and I are talking about a lot of these details.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

And taking people much deeper into looking at training.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

This is another wrap for our podcast. This has been a very-

Meredith Hodges:

Yeah.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

...very stimulating discussion. This is so neat.

Meredith Hodges:

Well, as I've told you before, Cindy, as I was learning all this stuff, I was trying to keep up with it. And I learned a long time ago that doing just a few videos and, and a few books was not gonna do it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

There is-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, we... Living is a constant learning situation.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

And I've found that as I learn and as I age, I wanted things to get easier between me and my mules. And I didn't want 'em knocking me down and pushing me around when I got older. And a lot of people told me that if I fed them that was what was gonna happen. They take great delight that I care so much about how they are physically developed so that they can do all these things that I'm asking them to do. And they really enjoy participating with me now that we're all older. And so it's kinda nice to know that I have a whole herd out there of... Oh, well, how many do I have? 13 ride-able animals still. Or actually 13 mules and two standard donkeys that I can... I can still use. The donkeys aren't as old as the mules, but the mules, got two 28-year-olds and the rest of the mules are all over 30.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, wow. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

And and they just... You watch 'em out there playing or, or you go ahead and ride them and you feel like you're riding a 12, 15-year-old. So I know that this program increases longevity. And I might mention at this point too, if you want to watch the proof of this whole program on the worst-case scenarios, then either get up on video on demand on my website at luckythreeranch.com or you can purchase the video of Rock & Roll: Diary of a Rescue. Because I didn't wanna make a claim that this program was the end all and be all until I was absolutely sure that it was.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And we tested it, with professionals, I might add-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

...to validate everything I was doing. And that's all in Rock & Roll: Diary of a Rescue.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Well, Meredith, this is awesome. And you have a great afternoon and, um, we will talk soon.

Meredith Hodges:

Sounds good to me.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Gotta go. My mule is looking for me.

Speaker 3:

Mule Talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production.

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