

DONKEY TRAINING, PART 1

MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- Begin with imprinting the foal
- Introducing the halter to your young donkey
- Leading your donkey
- Never be in a hurry when training your donkey
- Lead your donkey around your workstation
- Begin training in Round Pen
- Using the lunge line in your training session
- Do not drill your donkey OR mule
- Line driving your donkey and more!

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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. And we are back in the studio. And of course, Meredith is at High Energy today. You're a fighter, I like that energy.

Meredith Hodges:

I'm just always moving 90 miles an hour with my hair on fire.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Cool. All right, so we're going to talk about Donkey Training. And you know it very well. I can't wait to talk about this because donkeys are really cool.

Meredith Hodges:

They really are. You know, they're the male parent of the mules, and the female parent of the hinnies. And of course they are very intelligent, durable, easy-keeping animals. It's been quite a journey over the last 50 years with mules and donkeys. Once I discovered Longears my horses went by the wayside as far as riding was concerned.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Horses were good for breeding, but that was about it. It was nice to have the horses as a comparison in the books, but Longears showed me how drastically different they were. One the first questions I was asked when I was training mules was about the difference in training the mules from training horses. I can honestly say along with most people, once you ride a mule, you don't even want to ride horses anymore.

The way I trained was a little bit different from one animal to the next because people convinced me that there was a difference between training donkeys from training mules, from training horses, from training ponies. Over the years, I've discovered that when you have a complete, logical, sequential training program, it's not any different from one animal to the other.

The only really important thing is that you need to address each individual animal differently, whether they were a mule, horse or donkey. Like people, it is their personalities and their dispositions that make them different from one another. You can have a lazy horse and a lazy donkey. They have the same issue with training, even though one's a horse and one's a donkey...resistance. Being logical and sequential when devising a training program with very small steps makes sense. Climbing up the ladder of training with small steps, allows the animal to adjust to the level of performance that you're asking both physically and mentally.

It doesn't really matter what kind of animal they are. It's more important to make it easy for each individual to learn. Training your donkey isn't really much different than training horses and mules, although there are differences in instinct and attitude that will determine your approach in given situations at any given level. However, the mechanics and the techniques remain the same. You just have to be flexible and adjust yourself to the animal and the situation. Donkey pecking order is different. They interact more like a family rather than trying to establish dominance like horses and mules. Horses are very reactive in their responses, mules tend to be more curious and donkeys will take their time to assess a situation and are more prone to freeze rather than flee. Ponies are the worst. They've all got a Napoleon complex because they are small, but they are also a "horse" which makes them over-reactive most of the time.

They go ballistic when they're determining who's "big man on campus" and that kind of psychosis usually scares everyone else away!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Big horses are a little bit more subtle about it, and Draft animals are even more so. Mules are more into threatening than they are actually getting into kicking and biting. They only do that when the other animal gets too close. If you go ahead and use some of the techniques that I have outlined for mules, like spacing their food dishes and their piles of hay 16 feet apart, that can usually control pecking order fighting. But with donkeys it's very different. You can put horses and mules out in a pasture and they will intermingle, in herds according to who they prefer personality-wise. Donkeys do not co-mingle with other equines unless they are forced.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Generally speaking, the mules prefer to hang out with the horses, and especially female horses. The adult male mules want to be big man on campus. So they will fight with the other male animals to be the dominant one in the herd. Molly mules will blend more easily. Donkeys on the hand don't want anything to do with all of those radical, reactive animals. Donkeys like to hang with donkeys.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

If they're in a pasture with horses and mules, you'll see the donkeys will go off by themselves in their own little family herd. Within the family herd of donkeys, they have their own rules. It's a matriarchal society. The jennet will not run off and wean her offspring from the year before if you leave them together. She will slowly get the offspring off the teats when she has a new foal. She won't be as tolerant of last year's offspring suckling as she was when she didn't have the foal. But everything happens gradually.

The younger animals that are growing up are allowed to stay with the herd without pecking order fighting. There might be a flip of the head or a threatening behavior from behind during feeding, but Mom's just saying, "No. You go over there. Now this one goes here." She's much harder on the little boys than she is on the little girls.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

And as long as the little jack foals behave themselves, they are allowed to hang in the family. If they start getting dominant, however, she will run them off from the family herd. They won't get the privilege of hanging out with the family herd. A lot of jack foals will become subservient just so they can hang out with the herd.

When the jennets are foaling, I leave them alone in their own space. When old enough to be with the herd, I will still keep the young foals away from the jack foals. The older female offspring of the jennets will usually not pose a threat unless they are alpha females.

In a pasture situation, it's okay to leave the foaling females together because that's what they do naturally. They like it when the whole family is together. It lowers the level of anxiety and tension, and the pregnancy goes better when you do that. The other thing to keep in mind with jennets that are in foal, just because you've done all your training, imprinting and bonding, don't assume it will be that way once they foal. It will all go away and they will become extremely aggressive and protective of their baby. All of a sudden you are their worst enemy and they will run you off. They will take you to the ground defending that foal if you're not careful.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

One of the things that I recommend doing right from the very beginning is teaching the jennet that she's to stand still and allow you to handle that foal so you can do the imprinting.

In order to do that, you need to halter the jennet, tie her up right next to her hay rack or next to a pile of hay. You must tie her up so she doesn't come after you. Then allow her to eat while you handle the foal.

Imprinting should be done as we described with mule foals, horse foals, pony foals, et cetera. You teach them to be handled. Put your fingers all over their faces. Stroke their ears, stroke their nostrils, put your finger in the nostril and run it around, but don't be invasive about it. Rub above and below the eyes in a gentle manner. It is what Mom does to calm her babies. Keep it a nice, light, comfortable touch, but not a tickle so that they can learn to enjoy it.

When you're all done imprinting the foal, remove the jennet's halter and let them go. Just make sure that you're right next to the gate so you can exit the pen quickly as they walk away from you. You should always be looking over your shoulder with donkeys. They are very protective of their foals and their family. They know you're a human being, they're not easily fooled into thinking you're part of the family because they know that you're not.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Ah. Okay. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

A mule, on the other hand, is different from a horse. A horse will let you go ahead and imprint the foal, and the mare might even walk off. A mule that's older in a pen with younger animals that you're imprinting might get jealous. They might wrap their body completely around you to prevent you from touching the other animal. So, separate them when you are working with the others. It's prudent to only imprint one animal at a time. Don't try to do it in a herd.

Like intelligent human beings, they all have those little characteristics that humans have that get them in trouble. In order to prevent accidents and injury, it's best to keep yourself in a confined space while training and keep only the animals that you are working with in the confined space. Restrict them and control them as needed.

It's really important to do imprinting with the foal. You don't have to do it every day, but every other day is advisable, just to reintroduce yourself to the jennet and foal in the beginning. When imprinting the foal, think of the kind of attitude you want to cultivate in him. Don't come at him with the idea that he must accept you. This would be a forceful and intrusive attitude, and can foster resistance. Come at him with love, patience, and kindness, and encourage him to come to you. Be patient and willing to wait for his approach. Just be careful not to get between him and his dam! Give him respect and ask that he respect you. He'll begin to learn about behavioral limitations and boundaries. When he's in the herd, the adults will demand that he respect their space with well-placed discipline. That's what you have to do with them as well. These are the things that you both will learn.

Take your example from the way that the adults in the family act towards each other. Get used to assessing the behaviors and watching them closely. You need to learn corrective behaviors without overdoing them. If he bites, a well-placed slap on the side of the mouth for biting, and on the rump for kicking, and a loud, "No," will do the trick. Reward good behaviors with gentle imprinting strokes of the palm of your hand and fingers. When he starts eating, you can start using the crimped oats reward. The oats will be introduced to him by his mother. You'll be able to tell then whether he likes the oats when he's ready to eat them.

But until he is, be generous with scratching his rump and stroking his face and body, especially under the eyes. Stroking under the eyes is what the jennet or mare does to calm her foal. Donkeys get goopy eyes at the inside corners, so carry a damp cloth with you so you can wipe it out of the corners of their eyes to prevent infection. Mules like their ears stroked lightly, but with donkeys, not so much sometimes. Donkeys will yank their head away from you if you're not polite and considerate about touching their ears.

A foal will be more tolerant than the older animal. So it's advisable when you're doing your imprinting, to start with the pleasurable thing, and start stroking the insides of the ear in a way that is pleasurable to them. You have to watch your pressure, you have to watch how deep you go into the ears, and you want to stroke towards the tip of the ear and not down towards the deep end of the ear. That's the direction the hair grows inside the ear. You don't want to stroke against the way that the hair goes. You want to go with the direction of the hair.

When you are careful with the ears and the donkey feels pleasure, he will learn to trust your touch and not jerk away from you.

Being attentive and careful with the donkey will foster understanding between you and your donkey. This is just the beginning of a long-lasting bond of friendship.

Friendships would not be complete without a good balance of work and play. Teachers who make learning fun for children make it easy for the kids to learn what they need. Adopting this approach encourages a good attitude towards life in general that will carry the foal through the most trying situations. Donkeys are no different than a child that way. If learning is fun and non-threatening, he will enjoy his time with you, and you'll discover his innate desire to please and to serve. The best teachers are those who realize that they too can learn from the donkey in the process. Each individual is different in his or her own way, and it's important to recognize the differences in order to foster confidence and self-assurance.

Your donkey will appreciate that you do not only wish to teach him, but to learn from him as well. This will encourage his enthusiasm for learning and will ensure that he learns well and with confidence. He will learn right from the beginning to follow you anywhere because it's the best place to be. Now, when you're teaching him to follow you, you don't always need to do it with a halter. In fact, donkeys like to play "Tag" just like mules do especially mini donkeys. They have more energy than larger donkeys do.

You can tag him on the forehead and run away from him. Run a few steps away and encourage him to come to you. When he does, if he's eating oats, you can offer the oats. If he's not yet eating oats, then you can scratch him where he likes to be scratched best. Watching him carefully will let you know where that is. The most pleasurable spot on each individual is going to be different. So you really need to pay attention. Don't get in a hurry with your donkey. As a rule, horses have really quick response times, but they have minimal comprehension and memory retention. A mule's response time is slightly slower than that of a horse, but their comprehension and memory retention is very keen because he is half donkey. The donkey's response time is measurably slower. They appear to be in thought for what seems like an eternity to you and me, but their comprehension and memory retention is the keenest of all three. A donkey might begin perusing the answer to a question at sunrise and not get his answer until sunset!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

When training each of these different equines, learn to gauge your body language and expectations accordingly. Always go about things in a repetitive, logical and sequential way that does not overwhelm them. That means you have to identify each of the smallest training steps. If he's not leading easily, spend some more time in the confined pen, tie him up to a stout post, let him be there for a minute or two, then give tugs on the lead rope to ask him to follow like you did in his earlier stages of training.

You should have about three feet of slack to the end of the lead rope. Stand next to him so he doesn't get tangled up in the extra rope. If you feel tension, if he is sitting back on the rope, just go ahead stand there and be still. After a couple of minutes, take a couple steps back and say, "Well, you know, it's going to be more fun if you follow me. We can go more places and do more things." He's going to either sit back again, or he will step toward you. Don't insist that he follow you on the first time out. You've got him in a confined area because when you try to take off the halter, he's going to sit back on it. It's a donkey thing! "Okay. You were really nice. Will you let me tie you up...that's good." When he sees the oats when you tug on the rope, he will probably take a SMALL step forward. If he does, go ahead and give him his oats.

While he's chewing the oats, he's distracted and won't sit back on the halter so take the halter off then. You don't want to reward him while he's sitting back on the halter. When you take off halter the next time, he is going to look for his oats first and not be so inclined to sit back. If you give him the oats first before you take off the halter, when he comes toward you, he'll learn not to sit back on the halter. That's just one of those tiny little steps. Take off the halter and call it the end of the lesson. Don't do it 10, 20 times to make it perfect. Drilling is not a good thing to do, especially with donkeys. It's bad enough with mules and it's really bad with horses too.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

This is why I break my program down into these tiny little steps so that you have a chance to succeed at something before you call it a day. What I've seen other people do is set an unrealistic goal, "Okay. You're going to follow me this many steps," before they even try the tying option. And of course the animals pull the lead rope out of their hands and run off. So any reward they're getting when they return would be rewarding the negative behavior. You don't want to do that so just break it down into tiny little steps where you can succeed and reward.

If you reward him for stepping toward you to loosen that lead rope, that's the beginning of him following you. When he habitually reacts that way upon your approach, tell yourself "Self, it might be time to untie him and see if he'll do it when he is not tied up." Go ahead and untie him after he's been rewarded for loosening the rope. Then you stand there with the rope and give a little tug. Then if he comes to you, give him the oats right then and there, take off the halter and call it a day. Save actual leading any number of steps for the next time.

Gauge the number of steps he takes following you, each time. If he stepped one step forward the first time, reward it, call it the end of the lesson. Don't expect any more than two or three steps if he offers the next time. Don't let him overdo it either. Because if you think, "Oh, he's doing really well and he wants to go more than three steps," the next thing you're going to feel is him tugging on the rope and then running right past you.

He needs to learn to come to you and then stop. He needs to learn to lead easily. This is a real tricky point with donkeys, and especially when you're teaching him to trot on the lead rope. More people have no trouble getting them to walk along with them, but when they ask a donkey to trot, the donkey will sit back on that lead rope. You can pull, and pull, and pull, and they won't come. One of the things that I do when going from walk to trot is to get another person to walk ahead of me and my donkey with a bucket full of oats. Sometimes they need the extra incentive to move faster. Remember that Longears are energy-conservers, especially donkeys. They don't see any point in going any faster from point A to point B. You still get to the same place!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

It's better to learn to do things willingly. When he learns to move willingly when you're doing leading training with your foal until he's two years old, you don't need to have the Elbow Pull on him. The main thing to concentrate on is, "Is he following me easily?" In the beginning, you don't even get into your leading position where you're holding the lead rope in the left hand and pointing in the direction of travel with your right hand, and then matching his steps right away.

It will be enough that he follows you easily on the lead rope. I would still hold the lead rope in the left hand, but instead of putting that arm out in front of his face, which might cause a negative backwards reaction, just stroke his neck while you're walking and keep it out of his peripheral vision so that he learns to walk freely forward.

Only take a couple steps at a time, bring your feet together and say, "And, Whoa." If you're in the Hourglass Pattern, or wherever he stops is where you're going to ask him to square up. With the horses, mules, and ponies, in the Hourglass Pattern, it's between the corner cones and the middle cones. But with a donkey, it could be anywhere. It could be anywhere he decides to stop. If he decides to stop, then you have to make it his idea by saying, "Oh, good Boy! Now square up. This is perfect." Make him think it was HIS idea!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Always, square him up whenever he stops and give him some oats. Then stand there for a few minutes. He's going to like that because donkeys like to stand for hours if they're allowed to do that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, right. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Employ the mindset that whatever he does is fine, but don't go beyond the steps that you can control. Try to make it his idea where those stopping points are going to be. Try to make it to the designated stopping points in your lessons. But, don't push him any further than he wants to go on any given day. There's always another day.

In my Donkey Training video, there is an illustration that Bonnie Shields did where the donkey is sitting at the window thinking over his lessons. As he's thinking, the sun is up, but he doesn't figure out what he's going to do until the sun goes down. So (laughs) when you are dealing with donkeys, you need to think of things in those terms. If you get in a hurry with anything, you must realize that getting in a hurry will only create resistance and make things take longer than you anticipated.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

So, slow down. Take it easy. Yes, donkeys are very easy to train. You can basically just jump on their back and go. They will tempt you into trying to do that, however, you are being manipulated if you think it will be that easy. They're stronger than you are and when they tire of you, they'll just get rid of you. They'll go right ahead and buck and it isn't easy to ride. They're really good at getting that rear end right under your seat and they just launch you.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

So, they DO have their ways, I can. What we want to do is divert their attention and make them believe that it's more fun to play with you than it is to get rid of you. You do that by keeping your lessons structured while establishing boundaries. Don't try to do everything all in one lesson. Realize that you have many lessons that you can do over a longer period of time to the same end.

Lead him in the Hourglass Pattern in his halter without the Elbow Pull. It will probably take six months until he is following you really well. Eventually, you will be able to drop into your correct leading position, stop in the right places, square up, reward and continue with more finesse.

With mules and horses, you can accomplish it in three to six months. I would not say that same thing about donkeys. Donkeys will need the six months to get totally comfortable with yielding to what you're asking. You might never be able to toss the lead rope over the neck and get cooperation with verbal commands and body language alone. Donkeys ALWAYS do things their own way, in their own time. Only after they're doing their Hourglass Pattern correctly, is it time to move on to your obstacles like logs, bridge, tires, and other things. The donkey will be reluctant to pick up his feet and put them on any foreign object. So, you will need to break down obstacles into really small steps. The tractor tire seems simple enough to lead through the middle, but donkeys don't see much point in stepping through it when you can go around it. Being that a mule is half donkey, they will sometimes act that way, too.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

They're intelligent animals. They don't see any point in going through something dangerous if you can go around it. That's just logical. And with a tractor tire, you might even have to pick up his foot and put it in the middle and give him some oats for just doing that. And then after you've done that for a few lessons, the next time, you might get both feet in the middle. Often, you might place the foot and when you go for the other foot they will just take it back out. They could suck you into that game for quite a while, so if you manage to get one foot in the middle of the tire and they put weight on it, call it good for the day!

Even if the bridge or the rails are straightforward, it does seem logical enough to step through those things in a straight line. A donkey will not do that. A donkey will step into a space of obstacles then step sideways and back and forth.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

When you're moving into your correct position through obstacles, you might even have to walk ahead at first. If the donkey is nicely doing the obstacles, has already had extensive training in leading and the weaving has been phased out you can get into the correct leading posture. With every obstacle from day to day, he's not likely to remember that he's supposed to be following on a loose rope while he is looking down at the obstacle.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

What I do to get him to follow me and still maintain attentiveness, is to put the oats in my hand and put them right in front of his nose. I use the hand that I would use to point in the direction of travel. That will help him to concentrate on what he's supposed to be doing.

When is going well, you can introduce him to the Round Pen by walking him around the perimeter as another leading training exercise. By the time mules and horses are finished with the Hourglass Pattern and Obstacles, they're ready to be lunged. Donkeys do things a little differently than horses and mules so you have to approach it differently. Leading will take on a whole new meaning with a donkey than it will with a mule or a horse because you can let the mule and horse loose in the Round Pen. The donkey needs it broken down into small steps first.

You' lead him around the perimeter of the Round Pen and teach him that this track goes in a circle. "See, this is an ongoing fence that goes in a circle. After we go all the way around, then we can stop and square up again." He's already learned square up in the Hourglass Pattern, so you're repeating things that he already knows. Just introduce it simply by walking the perimeter and halting. Then you'll go in the middle of the Round Pen to teach him the turns on the forehand and the turns on the haunches.

The turns on the forehand are fairly simple because all you have to do is stand still at his shoulder and poke him in the flanks. And he will be okay with moving his haunches over from the pressure from your fingers. Keep your lead rope very short in your hands.

Don't ask him for more than one step to start. As soon as he's taken that one step, stop and go to his head and feed him his crimped oats reward. Let him chew it up completely while you wait patiently. Then do it again and see if he'll take two steps. If he won't take two steps and he locks up on you, lead him around the perimeter, halt and then just ask him take the one step. After taking the one step, reward him and end the lesson there. You can always do two steps in the next lesson.

When you try to execute the turn on the haunches, it gets a little more difficult. They will lock up the front feet when you try to move their shoulders. When you try to have him pivot over that hind foot, you don't want to push your whole hand into him. If you poke him in the shoulder with your index finger or thumb, he might move over. If he won't then you will need to take both of your hands and shove that shoulder over one step. Even though you had to force it, if he takes the one step sideways when you shoved him, say, "Oh, good boy," Feed him his oats and then end the lesson there.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Now, he'll have all the way from sunrise to sunset and the day in between the lessons, to think about what you just did. That's why Bonnie did that cartoon the way she did. That's the thought process they need in between lessons to really figure out what the heck were you doing to them. The conclusion, "Well, if she really wants me to do this, how hard would it be for me to just do it?" Don't let him overdo it. Because what the donkey will do, if you ask for four steps and he wants to give you five or six, he's going to give you five or six. And then he is going to run off and jerk that lead rope right out of your hand.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

You only do as many steps as you can control. Don't assume that just because he was in the Round Pen the day before, he'll remember that it was all right.

Begin every lesson with a brief walk around the schooling area. After all, things do have a way of changing from day to day, even if it's as slight as a new plant or a stick that wasn't there before. You may not remember things in such minute detail, but donkeys definitely do. This is a way you can minimize distraction and resistance during the actual training process.

When he's doing really well, you can go ahead and introduce the bridle, the surcingle or saddle and the Elbow Pull. You'll enter the Round Pen with your donkey, tack him up and introduce him to the Elbow Pull for pre-lunging training. Then just review everything again the same way. He'll learn to move away from pressure. You also have to remember that donkeys are amazing crowders; they like to get as close to you as possible. If you're not careful, they will crowd you right between themselves and a fence and trap you. That's just taking control from their point of view. Male donkeys especially will try to knock you down and will hurt you if you are not careful. They like to snuggle, but they can also be very aggressive in a heartbeat.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Crowding is a defense tactic that they have. Horses and mules have the initial natural instinct to flee when they think they're in danger. Donkeys do the exact opposite and freeze. If the donkey is attacked, he will move his body into the predator in hopes of knocking him to the ground where he can then use his hooves and teeth for defense.

So, it's important that you teach him right from the beginning that you are not a predator, and he must not move into you. If he does knock you down, it could be very dangerous, especially if he's a jack. So, do your lessons in these very small steps. After he's learned them really well, walks really well and goes around the circle in the Round Pen really well, then you can introduce him to the Lunge whip and show him what it means. You will use the Lunge whip to touch his sides to do the turn on the forehand and use shorter crop on his shoulder to do the turn on the haunches. When he is walking around the perimeter of the Round Pen, use the Lunge whip by dragging it on the ground behind him.

You don't want to be too far away from him or you'll lose control. He has to learn that his job is to walk around the Round Pen and that it does have purpose. This is in preparation for Ground Driving. It makes more sense to him later when you attach the drive lines. But for now, he just needs to get used to the whip.

If he stops, just tell him to walk on and strike the whip on the ground, or swivel it on the ground and make some noise. If he's sensitive, he will go ahead and scoot forward. And you say, "Good boy." As soon as he's done that, then he'll probably stop again. And as soon as he does, you go to his head, reward him and say, "That's what I wanted. I wanted you to move."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

There you go.

Meredith Hodges:

Then he knows that if you swivel that whip behind him and make a lot of noise, you want him to go forward. There are those donkeys that will just tell you, "I don't care what you're going to do. I'm not moving." One of the noises that I employ is to strike the fence behind him. Then it sounds like it's coming from the other side and he can't see what it was.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

It might make him move. They can see almost all the way around themselves, so they can see when the whip's on the ground. They can tell that it's the whip, you're just sliding it around the ground and they're just going, "You think I'm going to be afraid of that?" Then you say, "Well, are you afraid of this?" And you hit on the other side on the fence. Then he might scoot again. If he does, you can go up to the front and, "Oh, good boy. That's what I wanted you to do. I wanted you to move."

If he's a real cranky, ornery little guy, who's really smart, he might not move after you do that either. So you might actually have to strike him above the hocks in the gaskin where it will sting. There's a tendon there. With the mules and horses, you can strike the fetlock where it doesn't sting.

With donkeys, if you've gone that far and they're not moving, you need to make an impression. Don't strike him more than once. Just sting him and wait for him to move. Then you can raise both your arms in unison, jump up and down and tell him to "Walk on." If he still won't move on, just repeat the same thing. Be sure that you use the verbal command to walk on for consistently. He will learn that if you give the verbal command and he doesn't move the next thing he is going to feel is a sting on his rear.

You also have to watch your own body language with these guys. If you get too close, they'll stop. They'll tuck their tail, scoot forward a couple of steps and they'll stop. What you want is for the tail to remain relaxed and for them to move out. You want them to go all the way around the Round Pen and then stop. You will need to teach the reverse too. It is nothing more than a turn on the haunches, but you need to be clear with your body language. So, you'll step in front of him, tap him on the shoulder and make him turn around. When you do, be advised that this is a brand new direction. You will need to do the same series of stop and go, and stop and go, and stop and go. Now it's just going the other way. The Halt is not usually a problem with donkeys.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yes.

Meredith Hodges:

Getting them to halt and then square up might be a little bit of a problem. They usually learn the turn on the haunches pretty quickly too. Turning into the fence is easy for them. When you want them to execute the turn on the forehand, you can step to their head while they're by the fence, get between them and the fence with your whip and tap their hindquarters over. Make them do the turn on the forehand with their face to the fence. Just be advised they might try to crowd you. If they do, sting them on the side with the whip if they start coming in your direction, you just immediately say "No! Move over."

You just keep reviewing and practicing all the steps that you're doing. Be aware of his space, don't rush him or he might do turns improperly. You don't want him to do that either. You want him to keep his good posture. You want him to bend through his rib cage.

You want a correct turn on the haunches while he keeps the pivot foot planted while the front feet cross over until he has turned 180 degrees and is pointed in the opposite direction. He'll start swapping ends if you're going too fast. So, you must really pay attention to how he's moving.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Since you've worked only in his halter, now it's time to add the bridle. He shouldn't have any problem with these things in the bridle because now he's in a better posture. The way he moves might be a little different than when he was in the halter and allowed to move in his habitual out-of-good posture way. Just realize that with the Elbow Pull, it will be a little difficult for him. He will need time to ponder this new task, "Why are you tying me up and asking me to do something that I already did when you asked me in my halter?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Once he feels better in his good posture, he will start to see the purpose of why you put the Elbow Pull on him and why you are reviewing all these things. It's actually going to make him feel better, so he'll want to go along with you, but you're going to have to take these small steps to get there. Just don't get in a hurry.

When you introduce the drive lines, you will have a little bit more control and you're going to put rein cues to everything that he's already learned. Drive him along the perimeter of the Round Pen and he should move nicely. A good thing to do at this point is to introduce one lunge line at a time. You're going to Ground Drive with two. But just like we do with the mule, if you plan to lunge your donkey in the open, he has to learn the cue for staying on the circle on the lunge line and not try to drag you from the circle. So you put the line on and you let it drag on the ground as you're encouraging him forward. You can't get as close to the middle with a donkey as you can with a mule in the beginning, but you still want to get far enough away to drag that lunge line on the ground and then have him start circling.

He's going to be along the fence, so what you want to do is let him walk along the fence, and then as the outside front leg comes forward into suspension, close your fist. And as it hits the ground, open your fist so he's feeling the cue of staying on that gradual circle. If he feels like he might come away from that fence for, you can go ahead and squeeze/release the lunge line and put him on a smaller circle than the Round Pen's on, and ask him to walk around you.

When the outside leg comes into suspension, then close your fist. And if he comes onto the smaller circle, let him pick the size of the circle. He will go around in his circle, eventually complete the circle and then go back to the fence of the Round Pen. That's a good way to teach him how to do a small circle, spiral in and spiral back out. If it's done at the walk, it's fine. No problem. Donkeys don't like lunging that much anyway. They will offer walk and trot, but canter can get tricky. At least you have now introduced a cue that can keep him on the circle in the Open Arena on one lunge line. Then you just put two lines on him and do his exercises at the walk along the Round Pen fence.

While Ground Driving your donkey, make sure that your legs are following his back legs. Do not just drop in right behind him. As he is walking around the Round Pen, ease your way in behind him gradually. If he starts to scoot forward a little faster, back off and only get as close as he can tolerate. Remember, it can take from sunup to sundown for him to learn to accept things.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

But you still follow his legs with your legs. And you still follow his bit with your hands and let him go forward with slack. Eventually he'll figure out what you're doing. He will accept that you aren't trying to control him with the bit, you're just communicating with him through the bit. And communication means, "**I'm here behind you. I'm walking with you.**" And that's all the further it goes. It's not control, only cooperation. You will never be able to control a donkey. They are so much stronger than we are. You're going to lose that fight. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

So you must give him time to think about it. What you might not realize is his core strength is being developed symmetrically around his balanced skeleton. He needs symmetrical and balanced posture and strength at the core. That supports the skeleton. Only then will he be able to do the things you're asking him to do.

When he attains core strength in good posture he will have strong self-body carriage with great strength while you mount. You won't be able to pull him over sideways so he won't feel threatened. It's not just muscle that you are conditioning. It's the tendons, the ligaments; it's the even wear of the cartilage in the joints that are being developed evenly and symmetrically to support their bones. The way that they move is totally symmetrical in good posture, and their movement is completely and totally balanced. Their organs are healthy and their joints move properly giving them confidence and enthusiasm. The thing that disturbs equines the most is when they lose their balance and feel vulnerable. An equine that has balanced postural core strength is an optimum performer with increased longevity.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

It's truly important to take the time to execute all these steps while training your donkey. Do not take advantage of him by taking shortcuts with his training despite how willing he may be. He deserves optimum health, management and training!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Well, this is all good, Meredith. I can't wait to hear part two. So you enjoy the rest of your day.

Meredith Hodges:

Sounds perfect.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Meredith's website is luckythreeranch.com, and you can call her at +1 800-816-7566. And I can be reached through my website, everycowgirlsdream.com. Gotta go, my mule is looking for me.

Mule talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production.

RESOURCES:

WEBSITE at www.LuckyThreeRanch.com /TRAINING:

- 1) Another Augie & Spuds Adventure
- 2) Chasity's Challenges
- 3) Longears Music Videos
- 4) Mule Crossing Articles
- 5) Mule Facts
- 6) Podcast Appearances
- 7) Training Tips
- 8) Rock & Roll: Diary of a Rescue
- 9) What's New With Roll?
- 10) Video On Demand
- 11) Wrangler's Donkey Diary

BOOKS/VIDEOS IN THE STORE:

- 1) Training Mules & Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Training
- 2) A Guide to Raising & Training Mules
- 3) Donkey Training
- 4) Training Without Resistance
- 5) Equine Management & Donkey Training
- 6) Equus Revisited Manual
- 7) Equus Revisited Video
- 8) Rock & Roll Documentary
- 9) Building the Jasper Carousel
- 10) LTR Hay Production
- 11) The Road to Bishop
- 12) The Bishop Experience
- 13) The Bishop All Stars
- 14) Walk On: Exploring Therapeutic Riding
- 15) Build of a Nation
- 16) Give Your Equine the Athletic Edge

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17) For Children: www.JasperTheMule.com for books & videos