

## **DONKEY TRAINING, PART 3**

MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- When your donkey is doing well with the trot, time to learn to canter
- Use Verbal Commands and Body Language with your donkey
- Training your donkey to move laterally
- Using the Hourglass Pattern in your training to improve posture and overall balance
- Using your Elbow Pull as a training aid
- Training your donkey with Cavalletti
- Training your donkey for Gymnastics & Jumping.

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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. We are back. And Meredith, you take the reins.

Meredith Hodges:

Okay, here we are in *Part Three of Donkey Training*. Donkeys need to be approached a little differently during training than mules and horses. Being patient and taking your time to be clear and concise is paramount. If your donkey has problems with the trot after the previously described exercises, it will probably be in the Hourglass Pattern while Under Saddle. It is critical that your donkey has spent *PLENTY* of time building his balanced Postural Core Strength in the Hourglass Pattern and gains sufficient coordination through obstacles before you even think about riding him. Remember that he has steeper angles in his hips and shoulders that will affect his balance, rhythm and flexibility. Like mules and horses, he needs to perfect his postural balance before going to the Round Pen to Lunge and Ground Drive. If he doesn't want to lunge right away, that is fine, but make sure he does all his Ground Driving exercises both in the Round Pen and in the Open Arena before you try anything Under Saddle with him.

If he has difficulty maintaining the trot through the Turns and Serpentine that include the “Gate Cones” through the middle and continues to “bulge” one way or the other, you can try one more thing to help him. Play *Follow the Leader*. Have your assistant ride a seasoned animal through the pattern ahead while you follow a few strides behind. Don't ride too close or too far away. Your donkey should be more than willing to follow another animal. Working with friends is always more appealing. His trot should markedly improve and make ready for him to graduate to the canter and to become awkward yet again! (laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):  
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

Beginning with a complete review in the Round Pen: walk the perimeter, lunge at the walk and trot, Ground Drive at the walk and trot, execute turns at the walk and trot and Ride at the walk and trot. Then dismount and try lunging first at the trot, then ask him to canter. Be sure that when you ask for the canter, it is during a moment when he is exhibiting a burst of energy. His core strength was not developed before, so the canter would have been impossible. When you encourage him after the work he has done on his core, he will offer it on his own if he can. Just use the same cues you did at the walk and trot. Lunge from your position in the middle, but make sure your Body Language is clear with your focus behind him.

While he is trotting with sufficient animation, give the Verbal Command to Canter, then shuffle your feet while raising both your arms. One arm should point in the direction of travel and the other one should be raised and lowered from behind him with your whip in hand, hitting the ground. If he doesn't comply, actually tap his gaskins with the whip. If he still will not move out, then hit the fence on his other side to send him forward in an abrupt movement. You may only get a couple of steps of canter before he balks again. Just stop him and reward the few steps of canter he gave you before you make another attempt. If he just won't Canter in the Round Pen, you can try one more thing to help him. Just put lunging at the canter aside. Canter is covered in detail in my book *Donkey Training on Pages 83 – 87*.

If he just won't canter, then it's not time to Canter, so don't ask him again right now. Just go back to what he already learned at the trot and stop the lesson there. If you are patient and consistent, he will finally Canter in the Round Pen if he is able and will canter further each time. Again, if he takes one stride of canter, stop him, give him a reward and say, "Yes, that is what I want you to do." Then quit, and don't ask him again until the next lesson.

If you keep these rules in mind as you work with your donkey, he will improve, but it may not be in your time line or in your order of presentation. If you're using an assistant, make sure that you and your assistant are exactly in sync with your Verbal Commands and Body Language since you don't want to confuse the donkey. After a few sessions, if he positively refuses to canter, fear not. You can always try something else where he *CAN* succeed and come back to cantering later.

If your donkey hasn't cantered in the Round Pen, go back to his last lesson at the trot. Allow him to succeed and be rewarded. Then take him Under Saddle to the Open Arena and allow him to follow an experienced animal through the Hourglass Pattern and along the perimeter of the arena at the walk and trot. Play *Follow the Leader* and ask him for the Canter once he is Under Saddle in the Open Arena. Remember, you have varied the different things that you can do with him now. You don't have to just stay in the Hourglass Pattern. Now you can ride along the fence around the perimeter following another animal.

If he's following another animal, you can ride around the perimeter and just teach him to follow the animal first at the walk and then at trot. Go ahead and do the long side and then do a serpentine along the other side of the Hourglass Pattern. Keep varying those kinds of exercises before you even think about asking for the canter.

Once he's following really well, you can have your assistant go ahead and go through the short side of the arena, pick up the canter at the corner and Canter down the Long Side. If he is cutting the corner, but he wants to canter, let him do it. It's more important at this stage to get the canter than it is to stay on the rail. Be sure to call out your Verbal Commands repetitively as he learns to canter. You will say, "Canter-Gee," for tracking right, and, "Canter-Haw," for tracking left.

Verbal Commands are important because donkeys are more responsive to Verbal Commands than they are to your legs and reins. Let him canter as long as he will, then let him stop and reward him.

No matter what the other animal's doing, reward him for the canter. If he gets tired and wants to stop, let him stop. Give him a reward. He'll go for longer periods of time as he gains *strength* and *coordination*. Make your circles as large as possible. I try to keep them 50 feet in diameter. If he begins with small circles he will tire more easily and will want to quit. He will start leaning to the side. There won't be equal weight on all four feet and he won't be bending properly through his rib cage. Simply, he will lose his balance, good posture and stop.

When he's cantering or loping easily around the arena, you can begin to facilitate control at the canter by varying your exercises. Have him trot the short sides and canter the long sides of the perimeter of the arena. Be sure that he is picking up the proper lead in each direction right off the bat. If he is on the left lead, his front and rear legs on the left will be tracking ahead of his right front and rear legs. If he is on the right lead, his front and rear legs on the right side will be tracking ahead of the left front and rear legs. If he doesn't pick up the correct lead, slow him down and then start again until he does get the correct lead. Always pick up the lead from the corner each time to help him. Don't try to do it along a straight line while you're cantering. It's too easy to make a mistake. If you come out of the corner and he's on the wrong lead. Just slow to trot and try again at the next corner.

Be sure your circles are large enough to encourage good balance, so he can keep equal weight over all four feet. Make sure his hind legs are coming up into the footprints of his front feet and he's not leaning out of balance to the right or left.

In the beginning, allow him to bend his head and neck a little bit to the outside because it will help to keep his shoulders in line with the rest of his body. As he becomes better balanced, you can gently ask him to move his head and neck in line with his body, and bend in his rib cage through the turns. We want him to travel in Good Equine Posture. This is why we will always ride and school him in the *Elbow Pull* for the first two years. Without it, you would be met with all kinds of resistance that would interfere with your postural goals

Take him out into the Open Arena on the Obstacle Course and let him canter some longer distances between the obstacles, both in a straight line and in very large circles. The obstacles can help you if you are cantering around them. He will be less likely to decrease the size of the circle and cut in if the obstacles are there to discourage him. It is a visual block.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

If you have obstacles a wide distance apart, you can Canter a Circle around two or three of them. I wouldn't try to canter a circle around one until he's established proficient balance at the canter. Keep the circles large so he can maintain his good posture. If he breaks to the trot at any time during any of the aforementioned exercises, do not let him continue at a *fast trot*. This is not a Lengthened Trot and it will inhibit his ability to learn to do the Lengthened Trot if he thinks he can just trot faster.

The Lengthened Trot will demand that he continues with the same rhythm and cadence, but covers more ground while he is in suspension. Just think of a *speedy or fast trot* as an unacceptable gait. Slow him to the walk, halt, regroup, and begin again. You always want to maintain control.

As the donkey canters more and more, he will become better balanced and better coordinated. He will become stronger and be able to maintain the canter for longer periods of time. You can measure his progress by watching the *Elbow Pull*. When it remains loose, he is in Good Posture. If it gets tight anywhere, he is leaning on it because he cannot consistently maintain his Good Posture. Be sure he is always working in his *Elbow Pull* and you will be able to tell when he is sustaining good balance and posture at all times. So don't get in a hurry. He will do as he is able. That is the nature of the donkey.

We are not teaching him to do *things*, we are conditioning his body to be able to carry a rider and do things in a logical sequence of small controllable steps. Just know that down the line, you'll be able to Rate his Speed and have him perform correctly. This is the end result of the slow, step by step training process.

When he's cantering easily, he will be obedient through Transitions from walk to trot to canter, and from canter to trot to walk. Always make Transitions upward and downward through sequential gaits. Make no abrupt changes whatsoever. That will only jam the joints and make him sore. It will create tension because he doesn't know what the heck you're going to do next. He can learn to skip sequential gaits later when his core is substantially and symmetrically stronger...from walk to canter, canter to walk and trot to halt, etc.

You can begin to teach him to Change Leads and negotiate smaller circles. Begin in a Open Arena and review his previous lessons, ending with Turns on the Haunches along the rail. Designate a circle in the middle of your arena. Starting along the rail, pick up a canter, make a full circle, ride along the rail a short distance and then ask him to halt. Do a Turn on the Haunches into the rail and resume the canter on a circle in the opposite direction, then repeat.

This will help him to be more attentive and promptly launch into the canter. It will be easier for him to do this from a Reverse. It's similar to learning to take up the canter from the corner of the arena. Don't just try to do a Figure Eight right away. It's a little bit more complicated and calls for his body to stay erect, but bend into a new position when done correctly. The incorrect response of an animal that is not strong in his posture will cause his body to lean one direction or the other and not bend through the rib cage. It will create bad habits.

When he learns to do a Reverse on the fence and changes direction that way first, he's getting the practice for what he will have to do in the middle of the Figure Eight. He will eventually learn to keep his body in good posture through the middle of the two circles, but that doesn't come until much later.

After about two or three circles, you can straighten your donkey as he rounds towards middle of the arena and ask him to trot down the center on a straight line. Then pick up the opposite lead and circle once or twice in the other half of the arena. Ask him to Canter-Gee, Canter-Gee, Canter-Gee, and Trot, Trot, Trot, Trot, Trot, Trot, and Canter-Haw, Canter-Haw, and so on. If he misses the Change of Lead, just stop him and start again. Only this time, bring him to a walk in the middle, then pick up the trot and canter as you round the new bend.

If he gets it wrong and tries to rush, you may even have to stop him in the middle, walk, then trot, then canter on the new bend. We want it to be controlled.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

A Figure-Eight actually doesn't have a straight line in the middle, but you want to put one in there and you want to make it long enough so that he has plenty of time to Rebalance his Body for the new lead. You don't want to just automatically launch into the new direction. This would throw him off balance.

If he doesn't slow easily into a trot, it's because he's out of balance. He just can't balance at the trot, so don't even think about going to canter until you have him solidly balanced at the walk and trot. Walk and trot on the straight line and then just pick up the canter at the bend from the middle of the arena.

If you want to stop and he's cantering, don't forget to use your Verbal Commands: *Canter, Canter, Trot, Trot, Walk, Walk, and Whoa*. If you just say *Canter* and abruptly say *Whoa*, it will produce a sloppy and resistant Transition. Donkeys aren't really into Sliding Stops and will often slide on their front feet because their weight is naturally shifted forward. If you are patient and deliberate about your cues, they can do short Sliding Stops. *Little Jack Horner* was able to do Sliding Stops, but not long ones. Don't ask a donkey for a long Sliding Stop and don't even expect it. It's just not going to happen. If you do want a Reining Donkey, just gauge how far he can slide when he offers it. And don't ask him for any more than that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

If he does it, just stop him where he is (laughs). Say, "Good, that was wonderful." He may slide further the next time. He may not slide as far. But you reward him every time he does because he *slid*, no matter how far he went!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

You don't want him to bounce through it. Stop him before he does that. Even professional Reining trainers will tell you that an equine only has so many good Sliding Stops in him and it's not advisable to do such strenuous and abrupt movements too often. So be concise with your Verbal Commands and try not to leave any out when conversing with your donkey.

While in the Open Arena, after he's getting more adept at the canter and he's Changing Leads fairly easily and accurately, you can begin to teach him to change leads on a straight line. When you do, use the same command that you do when you're asking him to change leads in the middle. What's going to happen if he's on the circle of a Figure Eight and you come to your straight line in the middle say, "*Canter, Canter,*" all around the circle. Then say, "*Trot, Trot, Trot, Trot,*" or maybe "*Walk, Walk, Trot, Trot and Canter, Canter*" and then "*Canter Haw*" or "*Canter Gee*" as you begin tracking on the new circle.

When you're Changing Leads on the straight line, do the same thing. Say, "*Canter, Canter,*" on a straight line and then, "*Trot, Trot,*" and then "*Walk, Walk.*" In the beginning, you'll probably have to go to the walk and then say, "*Trot, Trot and Canter, Canter.*" Don't be afraid on the straight line to transition through all the gaits to lead up to canter and down to the walk. If he's going to the left lead say, "*Canter-Gee, Canter-Gee, Trot, Trot, Walk, Walk and Canter-Haw, Canter-Haw.*" It's easy to teach him to change leads on a straight line that way because he will be listening to your voice. Without the circle, it can be hard for him to know what lead you will want, so he has to depend on that Verbal Command. Then he will clearly know.

In the beginning, you may have to ask for more bend through his torso a little bit than you would normally on the straight line. It is like Pole Bending. You are on a straight line, but need to drastically bend between them to execute the lead changes more easily in the beginning stages of training. Be sure to use your Verbal Commands! Pretty soon he will be able to change leads through those gaits in a straight line and going forward without being bent at all. These exercises will set him up for Flying Lead Changes.

Often donkeys are not comfortable with the size of a Round Pen canter circle. My Round Pen is 45 feet in diameter. This can be hard for donkeys, so playing *Follow the Leader* to get the canter is better done in a larger Open Arena. Donkeys are extremely sensitive to even the slightest loss of balance when trying to perform.

Learning to canter in a more open space, you'll find that your donkey is more willing to accommodate you in the Round Pen *later*. Do not bother with the Lunge Line in the Round Pen and in the Open Arena for the same reason. After your donkey is sufficiently broke to saddle or harness, or both, he will lunge very nicely on the Lunge Line because he will then have adequate conditioning to be able to balance himself. *Playing Follow the Leader* is always a good idea if your donkey has difficulty doing just about anything. They really do learn by watching other animals!

Next, it is time for your donkey to learn to move laterally. Lateral movement will improve muscle strength throughout his body and will reduce the risk of injury or soreness while he's being ridden or driven. You can begin his Lateral Work on the Drive Lines in the larger arena. Begin by Ground Driving your donkey through the Hourglass Pattern. As he approaches the first corner cone, ask him to circle it and turn down the center line instead of moving on to the next cone.

Let him move straight for a few steps. Use your assistant at his head and ask him to move forward and sideways away from your circle toward the Cone Gates in the middle. The Centrifugal Force from coming off the circle should send him onto the diagonal track with little resistance. Your assistant will be in front to keep him from just running forward.

This is very tricky stuff. There are diagrams shown in my books *Donkey Training, Moving Laterally Pages 69 – 105. Training Without Resistance, Chapter 6: Bending & Lateral Work, Appendix A- Page 178* and examples in *Equine Management & Donkey Training, Volume 2 : Chapter 1 Advanced Training Page 81 – Appendix D – Page 102*. It will show other patterns that you can do to teach your donkey to go laterally.

While you're Ground Driving him, you need to pay attention that your legs match his rear legs going laterally while he's moving and that he's crossing over *in front* with the leading leg in the direction of travel. Don't let him just step over with an inside leg. Have him cross over the outside leg and then you follow his back legs with your legs as he goes sideways.

With your assistant out front on the Lead Rope, she will be able to move into him and cause him to move away from her and follow your Leading Driving Line. Use a *squeeze/release* action with your little finger in the direction of travel while you keep a little tension on the outside line to keep his body as straight as you can. In the beginning, he's going to get a little crooked and have more bend in his body because it's going to be hard for him to move sideways and do all these things perfectly.

The first picture in of *Equine Management & Donkey Training* shows *Little Jack Horner* doing this very well. This is your goal, but it isn't what you're going to see in the beginning. His body will be *over-bent* with his head away from the direction that you're traveling. He may try to cross behind with his front feet and behind with his back feet, but they should be crossing in front and you should be aware of that when you're following his legs. If he does that, just encourage more *Forward Motion* with a tap from your whip. Always be willing to stop and reward him for what he's doing and get your lines re-adjusted each time you stop. Lay the lines across his croup to go forward to reward him and adjust the lines when you get back into your Ground Driving position. Rewarding this way in the Drive Lines will reinforce his habitual behavior of Standing Still and waiting for your cues and commands. Don't think you need to cover the entire distance in one move. Take it one step at a time!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

When he has learned to drive and ride laterally in the arena, you can take your donkey to the Obstacle Course and put these movements to work. Begin with your assistant aiding the Side Pass over a log placed parallel to a fence. His nose should be facing the fence with his body perpendicular to the fence. When he masters this, you can try Side Passing the "T."

You can try backing through barrels in a Figure Eight pattern using Turns on the Forehand and Haunches to negotiate the pattern. Finally, you can teach him to move appropriately while you are opening and closing a gate, both on the Drive Lines and Under Saddle. It can be a little tricky on the Drive Lines. He needs to know undeniably when to stop and when not to move. Once he is hitched to a cart, you will be able to open and close gates the same way from the seat of the vehicle. He will be highly maneuverable! See *Equine Management & Donkey Training, Appendix E*.

Once he gets the idea about how to negotiate the Obstacles, you can eliminate the assistant and ask him to take more responsibility for himself. He should be able to do everything he learns, both Under Saddle and on the Drive Lines. With donkeys, there is no rule as to which he needs to learn first. However, he should learn everything both Under Saddle and in the Drive Lines in order to be as responsive as he can possibly be.

So you've introduced your donkey to some Lateral techniques, both in the arena and through obstacles, and you're perhaps discovering that he is a lot better at some things than he is at others. You might find that he quits trying and goes through the bridle instead of moving laterally. Lateral work is very taxing for your donkey's muscles and it will tire him quickly. When he gets tired, he will run through the bridle and refuse to move laterally. Just stop, pick another task that he *CAN* do easily and come back to it later.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

If he starts doing that, stop your lesson and do something in a straight line that he can do easily and be rewarded for it. This will usually happen at the trot, but rarely at the walk. If you find your donkey behaving in this manner, it's best to go to walk and perform only one correct lateral bend, then end the lesson there and resume it on another day when he is fully rested.

Lateral work should really be done only once or twice a week at the most. This isn't something you can do every other day. It is very taxing. There should be at least three days between lateral sessions. Check to make sure that the placement of your donkey's Side Pass rail near the fence is correctly spaced. It should be about three quarters of your donkey's length from the fence and lay parallel to the fence, so that when he stands with his nose six inches from the fence, the Ground Rail lies directly under the middle of his barrel, equal distance from the front legs and rear legs. If it doesn't, he's going to be rocking back and forth and you won't get a good straight Side Pass.

When you lay out your Side Pass "T" poles, there needs to be plenty of room for him to swing his shoulders or haunches where all three poles come together. So don't put them too close together. This will just give him much more room to swing his haunches around and swing his front end around when he has to change his position to Side Pass the next rail.

While Ground Driving your donkey, your assistant can help to steady him from the front and after some repetition, he should begin to comply easily. When riding your donkey through these obstacles, your assistant can help to show your donkey what's expected, but then you're on your own. Using the next four exercises will help to clarify lateral moves to your donkey and make it easier for him to negotiate.

Begin from the rail on a large circle and spiral down to smaller circle in three revolutions, then Leg Yield back to the larger circle. Begin at the walk and then move into a trot as the circle gets smaller and see how long he can keep his balance. Don't make the circle any smaller than he can keep his postural balance. If he begins to lose his balance, just Leg Yield him back onto the larger circle.

You can use your *short riding crop* at his shoulder or hip to encourage him to move more sideways at the walk. Do it only a few times. Once he understands what's expected, you can pick up the trot as the circle becomes larger and yield at the trot onto the larger circle.

As you decrease the size of the circle, slow him from the trot into the walk and just walk the smaller circle. Take him to as small a circle as he can do in good posture at the walk. Then move him from your leg back out to the larger circle. And as soon as he seems like he's moving pretty easily, move to trot and then trot him out to the bigger circle.

You would do the same thing if you're going to canter the big circle. You canter and make it smaller and smaller until he starts to lose his balance. Then go to trot, maintaining good balance decrease the size of the circle. Then when he starts to lose his balance at the trot, move him to the walk and take him into the smallest circle he can manage in good balance. Then walk him around and around and enlarge the circle again until he feels good and solid at the trot. Go ahead and enlarge it more and more until he feels like he's in balance enough to go ahead and ask for the canter and then go ahead and canter. Finally *halt* and be sure to reward him.

This is going to take quite a few times because the ultimate goal is to be able to decrease the size of the circle enough to get to a Canter Pirouette or to slow down to a *halt* and plant the Pivot Foot for a Reining Spin. So keeping his postural balance throughout decreasing the size of the circle is vitally important. Don't hurry, don't force it. It will come. He will get to the point where he will be able to canter a tiny circle when he's strong enough to do it.

You can't really do canter while Ground-Driving, but go ahead and do your Ground-Driving in the Side Pass T-Poles, do it along the fence and as a Side Pass in the open. Take him into the Obstacles where there are opportunities to do more types of Lateral Moves.

He has already learned to walk through the Tractor Tire. Now you might think about having him put his front feet in the Tractor Tire and walk around with his back feet moving in a Turn on the Forehand. You can try taking him into the Tractor Tire, stopping with his back feet in and moving his front feet around the outside for a Turn on the Haunches. This will help to strengthen his *core* so that when he gets into decreasing circles, he'll be able to maintain the canter for longer periods of time as the circle decreases in size.

There are a lot of lateral exercises that you can do on the Drive Lines that will enhance his performance Under Saddle. Begin on the rail and spiral down to a small circle with three revolutions at the canter. Then Leg-Yield back out onto the larger circle. You won't be able to come down to as small a circle, but just keep him going and spiraling down as far as he can while maintaining good posture. You can pick up the circle at the trot as the circle gets bigger. Instead of making it bigger and faster, make it bigger and slower.

And each time he finishes a circle, remember to reward him for his efforts. When he's performing well at the walk and trot, we can vary this pattern just a little bit more. You can ask him to canter on the larger circle while you spiral down to the halfway point. We've described that before. Just do a lot of different variations on this as he is able to keep his balance. And don't make Transitions too often in the beginning. You could make the Transitions more often as he gets more balanced and stronger in his balance.

He has learned to Side Pass over a rail and along the fence. Now we want to Side Pass along the fence on a 45-degree angle without the Ground Rail. We're going to walk along the fence and as you come out of the corner on the short side, you're going to put your donkey at a 45-degree angle to the fence. With a partial Turn on the Forehand, ask him to maintain the angle all the way down the Long Side of the arena. In the beginning, only go as far as he can manage to keep his balance and stop him if he starts changing positions and end the lesson there. Take a break in between, three days in between before you try it again. And each time, he should be able to go farther down the Long Side before he's finally doing the entire Long Side at the 45-degree angle.

In the beginning, you'll probably find that he needs to first move his haunches and then move his shoulders. You will need to ask him to first move the haunches and then move the shoulders to give him a clear idea of what you want. Reward him often to let him know he's done it correctly because nothing works better than positive reinforcement with crimped oats.

Technically, you'll be Leg-Yielding your donkey from the corner of the arena to the center of the Hourglass Pattern Under Saddle and making circles and variations on the patterns like we did on the Drive Lines. When he's done them well at the walk, you can do them at the trot. Canteringly laterally is commonly called the Half-Pass. It is another movement at Third Level Dressage and the positioning is different. He actually bends his whole body in the direction of travel. In that position, it is no longer called a Leg-Yield or a Side Pass; it's a Half Pass. You're going to be working for at least three or four years with your donkey before you get to that point. This move is difficult enough for horses and mules, but even more so for a donkey. The donkey may never be able to exert that much effort.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

In Dressage, *Little Jack Horner* made it to the Leg-Yield in Second Level Dressage and decided that that was about all the work he wanted to do. But my mule, *Lucky Three Sundowner*, went to Third and Fourth Level Dressage. He was actually doing *Canter Pirouettes*, *Half Passes*, *Passage and Piaffe*. You have to take into consideration ability of each individual equine. Realize it will take extensive conditioning of muscles, tendons, ligaments, connective tissue, cartilage and positioning of the bones. Everything will need to be symmetrically and ideally conditioned before the equine will be able to reach that level of performance. Donkeys will be more limited in their ability to perform due to their more upright and steep-angled Conformation. However, these exercises should help to improve your donkey's negotiation of all kinds of different lateral movements and will greatly improve his Side Passing ability.

But remember to always take things slowly and build one thing upon another. Don't do anything any faster than you can execute it correctly. You are not only negotiating movements and obstacles you are also conditioning your donkey's muscles and tendons to perform properly and strengthening them while he's in motion. You had better do it correctly or you could cause extreme soreness, crookedness and other side effects that will inhibit his performance and affect his overall health. Be kind to your donkey and he will reciprocate.

We can go a little bit further even with the donkey. *Little Jack Horner* wanted to do everything the mules were doing. He didn't do real well at cantering laterally going into a *Half Pass*. So we stopped there in Dressage and went in the direction of Jumping.

He decided that he LOVED jumping! It's really important that your donkey be in the best posture he can be in while he is performing at this level of training. The way that he's moving with his body is the way his muscles and tendons will be strengthened and toned, and the way his bones will become permanently aligned. It's difficult for a rider to maintain this impeccable balance through every step and every stride. For this reason, you'll use your *Elbow Pull* throughout the training process to fully support his postural balance.

The *Elbow Pull* is most helpful during Lateral movements, but it also helps him to maintain his balance through Transitions and Changes of Direction. Get in the habit of using it all the time during this intermediate training process. When he's going well and staying in the proper frame, light on the bit and responsive to your cues and when the *Elbow Pull* is loose throughout all of his workouts, only then should you remove it.

Next you need to teach your donkey to Lengthen his Trot. A Lengthened Trot (also called the "Extended Trot) is not just speeding up the trot. It maintains the Working Trot with the same rhythm and cadence, but covers more ground with power from the hindquarters, raised shoulders and more time in suspension. Many donkeys travel with a relaxed single-foot gait, but that is just a lazy way of going. You can really tell if your donkey is truly gaited if he exhibits a four-beat walk and trot.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

A normal Working Walk can be a four-beat gait, but the hind feet do not reach well underneath the torso and Center of Gravity like a gaited donkey would do. The normal Working Trot is a two beat gait. A gaited trot is called a Running Walk where every foot hits the ground individually and reaches well underneath the body. The Rack is a faster and more energetic gait than the slow, gliding Running Walk, with more hock and knee action.

When you have your donkey in the *Elbow Pull* and you lengthen his trot, just urge him into it so his hind feet land in the footprints of his front feet in a two-beat gait. If he's doing a clearly executed four-beat count, he IS gaited. Lengthening his stride will then require tremendous power from behind to elevate the front and back quarters simultaneously while maintaining regular rhythm and cadence instead of just elevating his front quarters and speeding up. A Saddle Rack is a smooth evenly timed four beat gate that any of the Gaited Breeds are able to do. Since mules are bred from Gaited mares, many mules can be gaited, but it is questionable if there are many donkeys that are truly gaited. They might only have the ability to execute a Saddle Rack, but not the Running Walk or a true Rack.

Equine Racking refers to a smooth, four-beat lateral gait called the Rack, performed by the specific American breed known as the Racking Horse, and also by other gaited breeds like Tennessee Walkers and Spotted Saddle Horses, characterized by a "pucka-pucka" sound, minimal bounce, and independence of footfalls for a very comfortable ride. They range from slow pleasure speeds to incredibly fast "Speed Racking". The Racking Horse breed, developed from Tennessee Walking Horse lines, is famous for this natural, energetic gait and calm disposition, making it popular for shows and trails. When assessing the Rack, judges place greater weight on correct movement and speed, rather than extreme elevation.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

In the beginning, it will seem like there's very little difference between the Working and Lengthened gaits. As he gets stronger and the more agile, the difference will become more apparent because he will spend more time in suspension and thus cover more ground. You can use Ground Poles to help him Lengthen the Trot, and even to Lengthen the Walk. At first, you just set your poles according to what the normal working gait is. When you want to start lengthening those gaits, put more distance between the poles and ask him to keep the same rhythm and cadence as he's going over them.

Under Saddle you'll feel him going into suspension longer. It's a strange feeling because you kind of expect to go *trot, trot, trot* through the poles, like you did when they were spaced evenly apart for his Working Trot. But when you lengthen the distance between the poles, you're in suspension a lot longer, but you're maintaining the same rhythm and cadence while *stretching forward* at the same time. At first, he will expect to stop so he'll stay slow and listen to your aids. By the time he does realize that you're going over the poles, it's too late for him to bolt and run so he will negotiate the poles correctly. When he's trotting over the poles calmly and correctly, you can begin to school the lengthening over them by spacing them a little more apart at each session.

Don't add more than an inch at a time in any given session while you're trying to lengthen his trot more and more each time. He can't do a really good lengthening right off the bat. It has to be cultivated over time. Start by moving the poles no more than an inch more apart than you do at the Working Trot. If he does well then quit the lesson and leave a day of rest in between lessons. Next time add two inches between the poles. Just keep assessing his performance and lengthening the poles until he just can't lengthen his stride anymore. That is when he has given you everything he can. You'll know when that happens because he's going to start clipping rails or stopping altogether.

If you're going to be jumping your donkey or your mule, they need to be able to Rate their Speed and Regulate their Stride. Your donkey has learned to lengthen his stride, he's learned about timing and suspension, and he knows how to move his body into suspension when you ask for it. He's submitting to the *Elbow Pull* and maintaining a balanced posture so he can adjust his body with flexibility and efficiency.

He knows how to use the *Elbow Pull* for postural support when he needs it. Now you will introduce the Canter Pole to help him to get even better at adjusting his stride appropriately for Jumping and for Flying Lead Changes. The Canter Pole will be placed perpendicular to and in the middle of the long side of the arena. Canter a large circle using the whole width of the arena and the finish your circle by coming along the fence toward the Canter Pole.

Ask you donkey to slow by slightly by deepening your seat as you approach the Canter Pole. This puts you in what's called a *Three-Point Position* with your hands, seat and legs in a light contact with your donkey's body. As he goes over the Canter Pole, he will do a little jump as he goes over that lifts your seat slightly out of the saddle and puts you into what's called a *Two-Point Position*. The first few times he may hit the pole with his hooves as he goes over it, he may hit the pole. But once he knows it's there, he will gauge his stride accordingly and jump the pole in stride. When he finally does it fluidly, the "bounce" over the pole will disappear. He will no longer over-jump the pole, but will mentally gauge the Length of Stride and the height he needs to jump efficiently and smoothly. This exercise is to prepare him to learn how to negotiate a jump by Rating his Speed, Gauging his Stride and measuring how much energy he needs to expend to get over the "jump."

You need to know when he is three strides out from the pole or jump so you can adjust your rider position. Galloping between jumps should be done in the *Two-Point Position*. When you are three strides out from the jump, you should sit deep in a *Full-Seat Position* before the jump and go into your *Half-Seat or Three-point Position* over the top of the jump. Then you'll slide into your *Three-Point Position* again on the other side of the jump when you land.

Your donkey needs you to balance your body on and off his back. When you're on his back in a *Full-Seat Position*, it gives him the heads-up for what they call a *Half-Halt* which is a hesitation or call to action to collect his body, slow down and prepare to jump, or sometimes even stop. You will lift your weight off his back over the top of the jump and go into your *Three-Point Position* to ease the weight on his back over the jumps. On the far side of the jump, you will go back into your *Full-Seat Position* to deepen your seat, slow him down as his front feet hit the ground and ask him to either halt, or lighten your seat again in the *Two-Point Position* as his hind feet hit the ground and allow him to gallop between jumps.

This is covered in *Donkey Training, Lengthening & Jumping Pages 107 – 115, Training Mules & Donkeys, Video #7 – Jumping, Training Without Resistance, Part 7: Jumping, Pages 162 – 175, Equine Management & Donkey Training: Chapter3 – Jumping Pages 85-86, and Training Tips #98 - #108.*

Meredith Hodges:

You can practice these things. You can practice the *Full Seat, Two-Point and Three-Point Positions* through Cavalletti and Gymnastic jumps that are spaced accordingly. With Gymnastic jumps, you start with a Ground Rail, then *Cross Poles* to a *Vertical Jump*, then an *Oxer*, then another *Vertical* to the *Cross Poles* and back to a *Ground Rail*. Laying out the Gymnastic order like this allows it to be approached from both directions. Depending on how you lay out your jumps and Gymnastic lines offers you a lot of variation in the exercises you can do to help your donkey Control his Speed, Control his Strides, Adjust his Transitions accordingly, do his Lead Changes properly and how he executes his Figure Eights.

Perfect Flying Lead Changes should be done simultaneously with the front and back legs as he comes up into suspension. That is the ideal way to do it. Many people say, "Oh, my, my animal changes in the front first or mine changes in the back first." That just means your animal is out of balance. That means he's shifted too far forward if he's changing in the front first and he's shifted too far back if he's changing in the back first. He should go through the straight line through Figure Eight circles for an instant where he is in suspension and his legs just change in midair. Timing is important to sustain good balance and correct posture.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yes, it does.

Meredith Hodges:

I have a picture of *Lucky Three Sundowner* doing a Flying Lead Change that way. I don't think people realize it's an ideal Flying Lead Change because he wasn't exactly on the bit when he did it. However, His legs were right, his body carriage was correct, but his head was raised above the bit and that wasn't right, but of course, that is the first thing people saw and paid attention to...naturally...something to criticize! (laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

There are a lot of things that you can do with your donkey. *Little Jack Horner* proved that donkeys can do almost everything that mules can do. And mules can do everything that their horse mothers can do, and even then some.

Approach all jumps basically the same way. Keep in mind the elements that I mentioned to you and pay attention to accuracy, correctness, and slow speed until you know you've got it mastered. Your donkey needs to be strong to jump and should be schooled so he can jump from the trot or canter equally well. Always jump over the middle of the jump unless you are on a timed course and need to make up time by jumping from the corner of a jump to get to the next jump quickly. If he's built up slowly and becomes strong, agile and flexible in a healthy way, there is no reason he shouldn't be able to do this, remain in good posture and have a lot of fun in the process!

Do not just trot around and jump, or canter around and jump without this strategic preparation. That accomplishes nothing but put you and your donkey at physical risk. It is both unsafe and unhealthy. End each workout by allowing your donkey to trot and then walk on the Long Rein around the perimeter of the arena in both directions to relax his muscles and cool him down.

You can even do Passive Stretching Exercises, but be sure to do only the Passive Stretching Exercises that are appropriate for you donkey's level of performance. You don't want to sprain or tear any muscles, tendons, ligaments or soft tissue. This is what athletes have to do to be able to develop properly. Do your passive and active stretching exercises after he has had the opportunity to warm-up properly. If you manage and train properly, you and your donkey will have many enjoyable years together doing anything and everything that you want to do.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

This is really neat. Um, yeah. Do you happen to know what is the highest level of dressage that any donkey that you know of has achieved?

Meredith Hodges:

I don't know any donkey that has gone past what *Little Jack Horner* was able to accomplish. He made it to Second Level Dressage and into Third Level Dressage when competing against horses. *Little Jack Horner* did the same with jumping. I've heard of donkeys that have jumped up to 2'6" and 2'9", but *Little Jack Horner* cleared Four Feet in exhibition at the Bishop Mule Days World Championship show in 1992.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith:

But I spent a lot of, lot of years being very patient and breaking things down into all these little steps that I've written about. I didn't even know they existed when I first started. Most of us just want to go Trail Riding with our friends. Trail Riders tend to poo-poo showing, but showing is a place where you can be competitive and learn a lot developing your animals' Body Strength and Conditioning for any sport. You will learn a lot more when you get into Competitive Activities. That is when you find out how weak your equine really is and how inadvertently abusive you've been out of pure ignorance (laughs). Then you think, "Oh my God, why did I do it that way? I didn't know that." And you honestly didn't know until you challenged yourself.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right (laughs).

Meredith:

That's reason that I offer my experience to people for free. I learned so much from my Dressage and Combined Training instructor, Melinda Weatherford. I got so sick and agitated about people criticizing me and my mules until she gave me the best advice ever: "Just ride in a bubble, just you and your mule. Don't listen to anything that anyone else says. Don't worry about winning. Just do your best each time you ride and you will find that you will improve, your equine will improve and you will have fun doing it. The awards at shows don't mean a thing! If you do your best all the time, no one can ask you for more. No whining! Get confidence from knowing you are always doing your best and giving your ALL!"

That's why I decided to teach people how to be their own trainers. With the right tools, they can all do it if they really want to do it! No excuses! It's not too expensive because I share my information and give it away for free. If you don't want to take the opportunity, then it's on YOU!

There really is value in everything that everybody does. Even the most beginning horse and mule people can teach you things you never even thought of if you are willing to listen. The bottom line is that equines bond deepest to those that do the training, so if you think your equine will be reliable and stay that way when trained by someone else then think again. *Would you ask someone else to go out and make a friend FOR you?*

Meredith:

I just want to help people get the most out of their animals, the most from themselves and have stress-free fun. I'm not trying to short-change trainers or steal clients. There are a lot of clients available in the world and we all need trainers at every level as coaches to help guide us. Sometimes our equines need guidance too so we are able to manage them. The trainers should help US to train our own equines, but not do it FOR us. We learn much more by doing the work ourselves! If you're too busy showing off, you're not going to learn anything.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right, right.

Meredith Hodges:

This is the way I look at things. I can learn from anyone and everyone. When I do, I write it down and if it is legitimate, I'm going to share it with everybody.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh yeah. I'm constantly taking notes on stuff, and I keep a diary on everything.

Meredith Hodges:

I keep a diary on every animal because they all do things differently. I have different relationships with every one of them. I try to make it the most mutually satisfying relationship with each one of them. Each one will take me down a different path. I have a different journey with every one of them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):  
(laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):  
That's really cool, Meredith. This is really cool stuff. You have a wonderful afternoon and we will talk soon.

Meredith Hodges:  
Sounds perfect, Cindy.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):  
Meredith's website is [LuckyThreeRanch.com](http://LuckyThreeRanch.com) and you can call her at 1 (800) 816-7566. And I can be reached through my website, [EveryCowgirlsDream.com](http://EveryCowgirlsDream.com).  
Gotta go. My mule is looking for me.

Speaker 3:  
Mule Talk! is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production.

## **RESOURCES:**

### **WEBSITE at [www.LuckyThreeRanch.com](http://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
- 17) For Children: [www.JasperTheMule.com](http://www.JasperTheMule.com) for books & videos