

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL TRAINING, PART 2 –ATTITUDE & APPROACH

MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- Establishing a bond
- Feeding
- Consideration
- Structured exercises
- Body language and verbal communication
- Benefits of group lessons
- Take lessons periodically to stay on track to improve your own skills
- Lists of trainers and instructors can be obtained from the United States Equestrian Federation

Mule Talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production -

www.EveryCowgirlsDream.Com

www.MuleTalk.Net or www.LuckyThreeRanch.Com/Podcast-Appearances/

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 we will continue with Part Two, Keys to Successful Training, which is about attitude and approach. And I know, for instance, you can boss a horse around, but your attitude and approach is so important when you're working with mules. Right, Meredith?

Meredith Hodges:

Absolutely and you know what? Attitude and approach is everything, even with people. The response that you get is directly related to your attitude and your approach to someone or something. It doesn't matter who, what, dog, cat, horse, mule or whatever. You're just going to get a whole lot more resistance from a mule when you are not polite in your approach. I have learned this the hard way.
(laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, no, really? (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

Really! When I tried forcing my will in the beginning, I fell completely into the horse training techniques of the day. I thought, for instance, that if I wasn't fighting with the animal, bucking them out or blindfolding them, I was being a humane trainer. I sure set the bar low!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

I got away with that attitude and approach to training horses for a number of years. And I even got away with it with some of my mules until I got to trying to train flying lead changes.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

I remember it very distinctly. I got some information from a trainer who said, "If you want to train for lead changes, it makes things a lot easier if you train over a pole." Well, it does. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

But it doesn't necessarily work with mules. Mules are just too smart to be fooled like that. The trainer spent two hours doing flying changes over a pole on the ground...and it did work to a point I suppose. I sure had to wait for a long time to talk to him!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

All right.

Meredith Hodges:

I learned personally if you drill on things with a mule, they get tired and then they lock up. The trainer that persisted perfecting the flying change for two hours wound up teaching the mule to run off every time he made a mistake.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

Meredith Hodges:

I overdid the work with the pole; he got mad and locked up. I finally gave up kicking and trying to urge him to go. I tried to lead him out of the arena. He still wouldn't come with me. He just stood there and pulled against me. I got stuck in the arena for three hours, and my mule just refused to move. I thought, okay, what's happening here? I can't even get him out of the arena. Why does he want to stand here? This is a stupid place to want to be. He wouldn't move until I changed my attitude. I looked at him and said, "Okay, we'll stand here as long as you want to." (laughs) As soon as I said that, he started heading for the gate with me.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

(laughs) I thought, well, there's an illumination for me. He just wanted me to have a good attitude. He didn't want me pulling him to the gate or pulling him to the barn. By this time, it had been, almost four hours, and I had been doing everything wrong. I was making the whole lesson about being able to accomplish the flying lead change, even after I got it the first time over the pole. That's when I should have quit.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Our equines, and especially mules, will tell you if you're doing things the wrong way. Training is not just a way to teach your equine to do certain movements. It's a way for you to help him to grow physically and mentally healthy, to enable him to learn to cope with the demands that will be put on him during his lifetime. And it's much like raising children to grow up to be healthy and productive adults.

In today's modern world, there are a lot of things to teach our animals and how to give them a decent life in this world. Given our modern technology and convenience, we want immediate results and often get in a hurry. No longer do equines have wide open spaces available to them. There used to be a lot more farms and ranches where these animals lived. At the least, people were able to have larger lots with houses and small barns where people could keep larger animals.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

How many equines do we now have now who are stuck in stalls and runs in boarding stables?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

To me, a boarding stable is a good place to train vices. They promote boredom and claustrophobia. The equines start cribbing, pacing and knocking down fences. Limited space is a dilemma for people and their equines. When the animals have such negative reactions to their environment, they become dangerous and difficult to handle. People become afraid of them. You and I are introducing people to the positive aspects of mules and trying to get people interested in having one, but most people don't live in a place where they can keep one, where they can be with them 24/7 and manage them humanely considering the confined space. People are led to believe that if you have a patch of grass with a fence around it, it's enough. To create a real bond with them, like children, mules and other equines, need to be managed by you 24/7.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

They, they need to know that you're going to be there for a visit, for feedings and time in between to provide them with things to do like grazing, like playing with their "Compadres." Mules don't do well without friends to be with during the day.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

So if you're going get one equine, you should probably get two. They are naturally herd animals. Then you should get compatible companions for them. Don't get a mini donkey and put it with a big mule because you think it is smaller and won't cost as much to maintain. A big mule, and especially a male mule, will attack animals that are smaller and weaker than him.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Pay attention to the type of equine that you have and the kind of personality you would want in a companion, so they won't unintentionally or intentionally hurt each other. When you feed them, you'll be able to feed them the same thing the same way if they're not in separate stalls and runs. It's optimal to go ahead and feed them in their own stall so you can monitor each animal individually, but it's not always practical given your situation. Sometimes you need to house them together. If they are together in a pen, be sure it has adequate shelter so they each have plenty of space to rest during inclement weather. Feed them 16 feet apart to avoid aggressive pecking order battles. None can remain healthy they wear off all their weight chasing each other.

You should think about all these little things. Your attitude is super important because they watch you and listen to you. We've talked about the five senses that we are born with that we humans don't usually use very well.

Each one of these senses that you have, your eyes, ears, smell, touch and your taste, all have something to do with establishing your attitude and approach. When you taste the feed, like the oats or sweet feeds, you have a smell that they are attracted to on your breath.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Certain feeds, like sweet feed and alfalfa, are advertised to suck you into using them, but they are not necessarily healthy. They can make your equine fat and extremely agitated. That's one way I determine which feeds are really truly healthy and which ones aren't. I also try feeding certain products to my animals and then watch the way they sweat. I have seen animals start sweating after a 20-minute workout, the sweat is a yellowish color and doesn't smell good at all. It's sticky, doesn't feel healthy to the touch and actually stinks. When you feed the way that I recommend, they do sweat after a much longer period of time, but they sweat clear liquid and it doesn't stink.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Use your five senses to make determinations at that level. You're using your eyes and your ears to see what's happening with their body and listen to how their body is responding. You can monitor potential severe colic with a stethoscope, during workouts or when you suspect colic in their pens. You should hear the food passing through the digestive tract. When you use your five senses when communicating with your animal and really pay close attention, you can begin to read their body language much more accurately. Ignorant people will say things like, "Oh, their ears are back, they must be mad." I've been chased by so many mule foals with their ears back. All they wanted to do was play. "Hey Mom, come back here. Why are you running away?" (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

I used to think the same way until I figured out that if I run towards them, they stop. And if I tap them on the head, turn around and run away, then we can play tag! Foals love to play "Tag." Equines have a lot of positions they can put their ears in and they can use other parts of their bodies in ways that can be perceived the wrong way. "Oh no, he's going to kick me!" when he is only asking to be scratched on his butt.

You can learn to read different body language by observing them a lot more carefully. Look at their whole body and not just their ears, or their back end or their pawing. They are only trying to communicate with you because they are very intelligent.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

There you go.

Meredith Hodges:

People tend to take generalizations and stereotypes too seriously and pass them around as fact. Those are just talking points. That's not communication.

Communication is when you get down to the nitty-gritty details to learn. For instance, when you're brushing your animal and using the shedding blade, he turns around and nips you in the ear, or nips you in the shoulder, he's just letting know, "Hey, that hurts." (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) Right.

Meredith Hodges:

In the case of my mule freezing up in the middle of the arena, "Do we really have to do this anymore?" The answer to that question is, "No, you did it right the first time and I wasn't listening." Sometimes it takes us too long to listen and learn what our animals are trying to tell us. Ultimately it depends on our attitude approach. I have learned, if nothing else from my mules, that they always have an honest reaction to our approach. All animals do. Their reactions to what we're doing don't necessarily teach us very well due to prior experiences.

Mules and donkeys are usually naturally optimistic, but horses can be sulky and sullen like victimized people. They will go along, to get along, but they don't teach you much of anything when they are acting like that. Keep in mind that equines can't learn much from you either when you act that way.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

So, if you want your animal to learn to be a healthy and productive adult, you need to teach yourself to be one. The subtleties in your attitude and approach along with solid knowledge based on experience can make all the difference in your training program. Whether the equine is a foal or an older animal that you've just obtained, whether he is trained or untrained, the process is the same. It's never too late to get started with the right attitude and cultivating the right kinds of expectations.

People ask me all the time, "Okay, well my mule knows how to do this, this, this, and this, and he's this old. Where do I start in your program?" "You start at the beginning." "Well, which book or video is the beginning?" I said, "This is going to require a little analytical thinking on your part because some things are fine to put in text, and some things you need to put in video, and sometimes you need a coach to come on out and help you. So you're going to have to decide which one of those things you need at any given time." But if you don't have all the information to paint the big picture, then you don't even know what you're dealing with. "Where do you start with children...when they are born, of course! They will let you know what steps to take if you learn to pay attention and be willing to do a lot of research and learning."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

As I tell people, you don't start with DVD number one; you don't start with my first book, because each of my products describes different phases of training, different places, different situations, different attitudes and different aspects of the training. Sometimes it is feed, sometimes it's the arena and sometimes it's how you house them.

My books and videos provide you with a wide gamut of all the different things that pertain to training and not just going into an arena to do “training” like most people think it is.

My books and videos overlap, but they do not repeat. And that's why I offer packages of books and videos. I want everybody to have all the information to work with because it's going to make all the difference in the world as to the choices you make and the reactions that you're going to get from your mules and donkeys. Like Pat Parelli has said, “You must train a mule the way that horses SHOULD be trained.”

Mules won't allow you to take shortcuts in training the way that horses will. Yes, you might've trained horses for 20 years or more, but if you've never trained a mule, you don't know what you're up against. And if you did train a mule, you could have been training one that was a very forgiving individual with a willing personality. But God help you if you get one that's the opposite. It doesn't mean that they're not trainable and it doesn't mean that they need to go down the road to the glue factory. It just means they probably haven't been trained with the right approach because many people don't realize that TRAINING includes training themselves, too! I have never met a mule I didn't like and that didn't like me... eventually. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs) There you go.

Meredith Hodges:

The foals were all easy-breezy. It was the older ones that had been owned by other people that had not the benefit of a positive approach that were very testy. I learned not to fall into the habits of a testy animal due to his past experiences. It is more beneficial to act as if he's never had any training, never had anybody but me. And I didn't know how to do that for a very, very long time.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Ah.

Meredith Hodges:

In my early experience, I got bits and pieces of training, but never really put all the puzzle pieces together for the big picture. The reality of the situation didn't hit me to the core until I realized what I was really doing.

Whether your equine is a foal or an older animal that you've just obtained, whether he's trained or untrained, the process is the same. It's never too late to get started with the right kinds of expectations in mind and THAT is the beginning of training. You are creating a bond. A lot of people say they have a bond, but they don't even know what a real bond is.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

People think they are developing the foundation for a healthy friendship, when they don't even know what a real friendship is. Set ground rules that will dictate the positive extent of your continuing relationship with your animal. It's important to be an active participant in your animal's training. Don't leave it to a trainer. After all, you wouldn't ask someone else go out and make a friend for you, would you? Equines are not like automobiles where you can get them tuned up and just drive them. You need to actually do the training yourself because they bond most closely to the person who trains them. You can get a coach to help you, but YOU need to do ALL the work...maintenance AND training.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
That's right.

Meredith Hodges:

It took me a long time to realize this. How the animal is fed and maintained is going to dictate how responsive he's going to be to training. People love to give advice and always think they know better. No one can know your animal better than, the person who spends the most time with him! Although some popular feeds may build body mass more rapidly and may even seem to be promoting healthy physical development, these high protein feeds can also have drastic negative effects and especially with Longears. An animal's physical growth is accelerated and becomes disproportionate to his normal growth like when he is fed simple equine feed like oats and grass hay. He needs to be able to grow as Mother Nature intended, as God intended.

If the animal is feeling anxious or inattentive, or if parts of his body become sore from the unnatural growth spurts and inappropriate exercise, he may be less likely to perform in an enthusiastic and energetic way. Bones, especially need to grow properly to become hard enough to support the equine's body.

I feed all of my equines the same oats mix, just different amounts. And I do the grass hay the same way. I feed the grass hay in the mornings so they will be attracted to the oats in my fanny pack when I come to get them. I feed the oats mix at night so I can have it waiting for them in their stalls or in their pens when I call them off their turnout time. It's a motivation to come when summoned. I mix the crimped oats with a vitamin concentrate called Sho-Glo. It's your normal one-a-day vitamin for equines, and it has the amount to feed on, on the containers, and you feed according to size and weight. I feed Mazola Corn Oil the same way, and that's for their hooves, their coat, and for their digestive tract regularity. If the hay is little dry or something, it'll make sure that their digestive tract remains lubricated.

Although people are tempted to feed dehydrated products like hay cubes or pellets, I don't recommend it. Granted, Sho-Glo is a pellet, but it's only fed one ounce for an average-sized saddle mule, far less than that for smaller animals, and only twice that for draft. The same thing was true when I started feeding the older animals the pelleted Hoof Power, but you don't feed very much of that either. You don't feed what will deplete the digestive tract of its fluids. People have told me that they just go ahead and feed the hay cubes and pellets, but they soak them in water. You cannot put enough water with dehydrated foods to equal the amount of fluids that go through the digestive tract and are absorbed in the pellets or cubes. That's physically impossible.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Unlike any other equine reward, crimped oats are something that the animal will continue to work for. They'll never tire of them and they are healthy for them. They can get sated and refuse to work when rewarded with apples, carrots, horse treats, and the like. They seem to know that large amounts are not good for them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Some treats can even have the same effect that candy has on children. The animal might experience residual effects such as an upset digestive tract, short attention span, hypertension and aggression. They can get aggressive during training because they want more.

Feeding the same way and at the same time each day is not only healthy, but it fosters confidence and trust from your animal because you make him feel good. He learns he can depend on you for his welfare, and that his efforts will be rewarded with his favorite reward of crimped oats. I can go outside and call, "Hey guys, come on in! I got something you really like." And they ALL come running to me!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

If I'm outside the fence, they all line up on the fence and every set of ears are perked forward and attentive to me. Isn't that what we've been working on all this time? I've never seen that happen anywhere else, but my animals like to smile at me. And it's really convenient when taking pictures. I put a fence between me and them and then I say, "Smile for the camera." And they go, "Okay," (laughs) and stick their ears up.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

I can't tell you how many times I've been out there shuffling my feet, waving a plastic bag around to get a good picture. I didn't realize it could be this easy. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

It's pretty cool. Being patient, kind and considerate towards your equines and spending more time developing a good solid foundation before moving on to more elaborate maneuvers will yield much better results. Considering that it takes years to really condition muscles to their maximum strength, six to eight months of Hourglass Pattern leading training and doing Round Pen exercises is really not that long a period of time.

Think about how long it takes football players to do all those pre-game exercises that they do before they are put in their college games. And how long does it take them before they are graduated to the Pros? It's not just about how well they play, it's about how completely their bodies need to be conditioned to play well so they don't get severely injured. We should think about our mules in the same way. If you don't spend at least six months on flat work leading training and six months on obstacle leading lessons to promote strength and balance in good posture, you can greatly hinder your equine's ability to perform in the Round Pen on the circle. They will be out of balance, putting pressure in points you never knew they had. They can come up sore, they can come up lame, and you can't necessarily see where it's coming from because it might be very deep in their bodies.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

If you move through conditioning too fast, it will affect your animal's mental attitude toward training. He is likely to experience soreness and emotional depression. He won't want to go with you. He'll get barn sour. He won't want to leave his friends. And he will most likely become resistant to training altogether.

Learn to be your equine's best friend so he will pick you as a preference to grazing with his equine friends. If you take the time to develop his body in a slow and meticulous way with small steps, and the training is always for him, and he gets rewarded, he's going to enjoy his time with you. My equines all come when called and all line up at the fence. If they had hands, they'd all have their hands in the air saying, "Take me. Take me!"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

When you're in the Round Pen, pay special attention to how many laps your equine does in each direction and at each gait. How many reverses to the left? And then, how many reverses to the right? Take this opportunity to assess whether he will need more laps on a side that is weaker. If he's not in good posture, you may not only need to do more laps in the Round Pen, you may actually have to stop Round Pen work and go back to leading training in the Hourglass Pattern to revive your postural core strength.

If you prioritize these things, when you finally do start riding him, his straight lines will be straighter, his turns will be smoother and more fluid, his reverses and stops will be more balanced and with minimal effort. As your equine grows stronger and more mentally and physically confident, the upper level movements will come faster and easier than did the basic foundation training.

Sometimes when you're out there training and you might think, "I'm taking a lot of time doing this. Is it always going to be like this?" The answer to that is no. Once you develop a basic, strong postural foundation, movements are going to be a lot easier. Now he's in physical conditioning that allows his body to move correctly. And when things are moving correctly, you can throw anything at him and he will be able to do it all.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

People say that mules are more versatile than horses and a whole lot of fun to ride. They know how to do all kinds of recreational things that we've dreamed up, but they don't have to be bred to do those certain things. There are certain personalities and certain body types that are going to do better in certain activities than others. If you pay attention to the development of their bodies, with particular interest to their strong points, you will know where individual animals will excel. Mules will also be competent across the board in versatility if they are conditioned properly.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

A lot of training that we've been taught to do is fast-tracked with targeted movements in mind. When you think like that, you won't condition the whole body and it makes certain movements more difficult. It's easy to make an uninformed assessment of the animal's capabilities if you don't condition their whole body as if they were an athlete. That's why I produced that documentary, Give Your Equine the Athletic Edge. That's what that documentary is all about.

Since rescuing Rock and Roll, I've learned even more about considering my animals' development. I investigated the value of therapeutic tools like Equine Massage and Chiropractic. A lot of people look at those two things and go, "Oh, well, my equine's sore here. Well, let me call in the Chiropractor or let me give him a massage." They think that one visit with one of those treatments will do the job. Actually, you should have a Chiropractor straighten his bones into alignment BEFORE you begin training and anytime he seems irregular in his gaits. It should be followed up with a massage treatment right afterwards. X-rays should be done for specific concerns. If you are consistent with your postural core strength exercises done in the Elbow Pull, the incidence of misalignment will be rare. It is the Postural Core Leading Exercises that maintain the alignment and treatments from the professionals. Professional visits should decrease as your equine gains strength in his Core Muscle Postural Balance.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Even if you don't plan to show your equine, he needs be strong enough to perform easily, even doing something as simple as trail riding. Different exercises build different muscle groups. So it's important to know what exercises you need to do to begin with and which exercises should follow. Don't get yourself sucked into drilling on something that just isn't working.

If you run into problems and things aren't working properly, just go back a step and try something simpler in its demand. Stay in the sequential logical fashion that we've described here, so that you're not overdoing, so that you don't damage to your equine's body. Sometimes it's just a matter of approaching the problem differently or even leaving it to another day. Like humans, equines have their own individual ways of learning, and it's up to you to figure out what works best with your particular equine on any given day. And WATCH your Elbow Pull closely. It will be loose when your equine is in good posture and tight when your equine is not in good posture. Don't move through the steps too fast. You cannot graduate to the next step until the Elbow Pull remains loose through ALL movements with the lead rope slung over his neck, working with verbal commands and body language only.

Many people say, "Well, I'm not going to show my animal, so this doesn't really matter." They will even go into showing thinking it doesn't matter as long as they look good. They think that their equine is in good posture when they really aren't. The problem becomes exacerbated by judges that are not very well-educated and don't know what they're looking at. Like normal people, they look at the animals in a pleasure class, for instance and think, "That animal's moving nice and slow, looks like a nice smooth ride, and he is looks nice to ride so I won't fall off. And he's a really pretty color." Judges and riders need to know the Laws of Physic for Equine Movement so they know what they are looking at. For several years, Western Pleasure animals were encouraged to go with their heads held way too low while tip-toing behind wit their back legs..."Peanut Rolling"...definitely out of good equine posture and not healthy for their bodies at all.

An equine that is moving in good posture will be on the vertical with his nose, arched across his back from head to tail with elevated shoulders and hindquarters with the back feet stepping well underneath his center of gravity and into the front footprints. You can help your equine to employ his core strength muscles with Passive Stretching exercises...stretch forward, stretch down, stretch from side to side and by encouraging him to suck up his abdominal muscles by "tickling" his sternum with enough pressure to cause him to arc his back upwards. You can find a lot more details about PASSIVE STRETCHING exercises and their appropriate use in training in my EQUUS REVISITED MANUAL & DVD. Always do your Passive Stretching AFTER the animal's body is warmed up...not before.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

One of the things that my Dressage instructor told me that was very helpful... she said, "Meredith, even if you're riding Western Pleasure, you still need to ride in balance. Your animal still needs to be in balance and he needs to move in balance. And no matter whether it's Western or English or side-saddle or even driving, all of these things come into play. And it's only going to happen if you slow down, stop thinking about winning the class or the mule doing what you want, and just think about riding in a bubble with these goals in mind, these goals of getting your animal in his best physical condition with a balanced and strong core in a good posture and yourself the same way and riding every movement as if it was a singular movement."

Dressage is a word that means "training," It means breaking things down into the smallest details that you can imagine. That's why they have those meticulous Dressage tests. Each four tests at a particular level deal in only certain goals to be achieved. These goals build on each other in a logical and sequential fashion. They are all done with the equine's body development and conditioning in mind.

This is why I tell people that they don't know how difficult a Side Pass really is for their animal. To do a Side Pass correctly, he needs to have his body nearly straight, in an upright position, moving sideways in a perfect balance with regular rhythm and cadence without faltering.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

These movements all have purpose. The trainers are trying to make a living unless privately hired, so they aren't able to spend the time with students to teach them all they need to know about training and riding an equine. However, they can enhance your experience and they really do. They serve a tremendous purpose for students to begin learning, to gather interest in equines, to get started the right way, to build relationships, to have fun, to gather together in a social community and to learn the Equestrian Art together. We all have different interests, learn differently and our animals learn differently. We need a lot of options if we are to find the path of least resistance to achieve our goals and to build the meaningful relationships that we desire with our equines.

I'm just sharing my 50 years of experience with everybody who wants to learn, trainers and students alike. I want the best experience possible for everybody and every animal. If I don't put it out there, no one else has the opportunity to research and report about equestrian issues like I do, so I take that very seriously. I'm obsessive about Longears and I also love mule people. I just want everybody to get the same kind of satisfaction, bonding and enjoyment from their animals that I've achieved with mine.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

You bet.

Meredith Hodges:

I would like trainers to expand their client base and to bring more people into the equine industry for the same reasons. I don't think you can get this kind of joy from an urban situation. This comes from rural experience. This comes from knowing equines and seeing all the different things that you can do with them. I know when I got started with mules in 1967, they were no longer attractive to people and not as useful in farming, packing and driving with the onset of cars and tractors. Word was, there's no more use for mules. Tractors are replacing them. And I thought, "What a horrible thing. They're so cute. I love those long ears."

I thought, "I wonder if there's anything I can do to give them more use in the modern world." And that's when I came up with an idea. Maybe if I showed people all the different things that they could do using the horse industry as a template, I could show people that mules can do everything the horses do and then some. If I competed against horses in all those disciplines and won, I could give Longears new purpose in the modern world calling them Recreational Mules.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

All right.

Meredith Hodges:

Mules have turned out to be extraordinary! They have competed to the top with everything I have ever tried. David Van Hambone from the stadium jumping show at Fort Carson bested all the horses in show jumping. He was one of the first under saddle mules that I heard about, but he was also one that inspired me. Another inspirational molly mule was *Maryster Farms' Kit* that competed in the three-day event and did extremely well.

I knew, even before I got started with Longears, that they were superior in jumping. People complained all the time that they needed higher fences to enclose their mules. Actually, they just didn't know how to encourage their mules to WANT to stay home! I figured if they could do jumping, which is difficult for most equines, that they could probably do everything else. And I have not been disappointed.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

You bet. And you know that your mule is doing an outstanding job when they ask you to leave and not come back. (laughs) It's like, "Uh, you've embarrassed my horse."

Meredith Hodges:

When people at a show ask you and your mule to excuse yourselves, I think that's like a badge of honor. They don't think they can beat you!

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah. Cool.

Meredith Hodges:

There are those equine lovers that are not quite so snobbish, and they're the ones that not only want a horse in their stable, but they've learned to want a mule, too. From what I've seen there's a whole lot more of those cropping up everywhere. And the snobbier ones are kind of going by the wayside. There aren't as many critics as there were when I started training mules in 1973. Back then, no one seemed to like mules. They would say, "That's one of those stubborn, ornery creatures that will kill you if they get the chance."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:

I finally realized that the people that really got along with the mules were the people that had a kind, polite, considerate, respectful approach with their animals and enjoyed and rewarded the positive aspects of their animals. So attitude and approach is paramount, not only with mules, but with everybody and everything.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah. Wow. Every time I listen to these podcasts, they're just outstanding. I am so blessed that I get to do this.

Meredith Hodges:

I feel blessed too, Cindy. I think we truly are.

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.

Speaker 3:

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) Building of a Nation
- 16) Give Your Equine the Athletic Edge
- 17) For Children: www.JasperTheMule.com for books & videos