MEREDITH HODGES TRAINING APPROACH, PART 1
MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- Decline in mule numbers during the Industrial Revolution
- Performance capability of mules & donkeys
- Training donkeys to canter & jump
- Keep training logical & sequential
- Horses should be trained the way that Longears must be trained
- Inspired by Edith Conyers & KIT, LTR MULES began careers in Dressage & Combined Training
- Learning sequences
- Crimped oats reward
- Herd-bound & Aggressive Behavior Prevention
- Keeping diaries, photos and video
- Keeping diaries, photos and video for product production

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're going to be doing a series of podcasts with the world-renowned Meredith Hodges from the Lucky Three Ranch. She is known to be a breeder and a mule trainer for forty-plus years. An author, a judge, an animal inspector, and a representative of the Donkey and Mule Society. We have been talking throughout the interview when the Lucky Three Ranch went through a power outage. We are gonna pick up in the conversation where Meredith explains how she trained her mules to come to the gate.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Meredith.

Meredith Hodges:
Hi. Our power went out.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
I was like, "Oh no."

Meredith Hodges:
I have no lights right now.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh.

Meredith Hodges:
And this phone, I'm surprised this phone is even working.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Um, um, okay. We can, we can end this pretty soon. Um, I got you up to where you said and when you were getting ready to go through the gate, you know.

Meredith Hodges:
Okay. Yeah. Let me go ahead and finish that thought. So when we go through the gate, they learn how to do these things exactly the same way all the time. So when I have a bunch of mules in the pen, um, they're all used to coming to me when I called them because I never chase them. And, and so they will all come to the gate and then I go ahead and I ask them, you know, Lance, I want you. And then he will come to the gate and I go, the rest of you get back. I want you to get back. And I'll open the gate and Lance will come through the gate, turn around, stand in front of me, and wait for his halter to be put on.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
That's good. That and that's good.

Meredith Hodges:
Yeah. And, and that's how I catch my animals. I never chase them and I never have to. And they all behave like this. And it's just been, you know, because I go through the steps with them all the time, you know.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
That is good.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and do everything exactly the same way. And so getting back to Equus Revisited, I talk about that and how important it is to break these things down into little steps. And I have continued to keep diaries about everything that I'm doing. And my most recent, well, uh, actually, I, I adopt, or I rescued two draft mules back in 2010, Rock and Roll.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yes.

Meredith Hodges:

And I used the same techniques to rehabilitate the worst-case scenario on these draft mules. They had a ring bone, they had side bones. One of 'em turned out Rock had ended up having a completely shattered hip joint.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and going through, uh, these same exercises, I was able to prove that this approach undeniably is a therapeutic approach to building your animal's body in good equine posture at the very core. And they proved this works. It's not teaching your animal how to follow you or anything like that. This is truly a postural therapeutic approach to training. And so I had tremendous success with them. I did lose Rock after a year because he did have a completely shattered joint. But I did also in that year, get him completely sound at the walk and trot, even with a shattered hip and no medications.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

We only had him on Butte two times when he had a couple bouts of Laminitis, and it was only for five days each time.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Uh, but finally the ligament that was holding his leg together let loose. And I had to, uh, put him down. But I got nine years out of Roll and Roll, had, uh, three feet with ring bone and side bones in all three of those feet. And I got him to where I was able to actually ride him at walk and trot. Is that beeping bugging you?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

No, I don't hear any beeping.

Meredith Hodges:

Oh, good. Well, that's good because it is beeping in my office and this is the only phone that's been working. Yeah. So, so anyway, so I thought, well, we've got the Rock and Roll thing, and I have always, I wrote the articles about them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

And then I decided that I wanted to do a video about it three years ago. Um, but I got into a lot of stuff with production companies and we weren't getting it done. And so I parted with them in 2017 and my crew and I just finished putting that together and we're gonna watch that video on September 1st about Rock and Roll.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, wow. Cool.

Meredith Hodges:

Yeah. So we're really excited about that. But in the meantime, I, uh, took on another donkey that needed rescuing, per se.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

I saw that. I saw that on your website.

Meredith Hodges:

Yeah. That's Chasity's Challenges is the latest series of articles. And Chasity is coming along really well. And I was really happy to be able to do this because the draft mules were mules, but people were asking me, they said, oh, well, you have to train a donkey differently than you do have to train a mule. Well, not with my approach you don't. I am using the same approach on Chastity that I have used on

all of my mules, all of my horses, miniature all the way to draft, they all eat the same, get trained the same, and they all behave the same.

Meredith Hodges:

And they are all just perfect little gentlemen and gentle ladies. And I am now 70 years old, and I am so glad that they are as polite and considerate and in good posture as they are.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) Yes.

Meredith Hodges:

So it, it was, it was just amazing, you know, I mean, in, in my earlier years I was getting bucked off, run over and all of these other things, you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

I'm trying to use horse training techniques, you know, and I had to figure out that that just wasn't gonna work. If I keep getting older like this, I'm gonna get hurt.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and, uh, you know what? I'll tell you what, in my whole mule and donkey and horse career, I have never broken a bone. The only time that I broke a bone, I broke my ankle and it was because my house was in construction and the contractor put an extension cord across the doorway and I tripped on it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) Oh. Oh, that's a shame.

Meredith Hodges:

But my mules and donkeys, they've all done great. And at one point here, not too long ago, I was assessing where I was at, well actually it was about 10 years ago. I was going, oh man, I've done all the groundwork on on these, these, uh, 10 mules

I've got that were younger, but they're not younger anymore. They're like 12 years old and I haven't ridden them yet, you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, no.

Meredith Hodges:

And so I got on 'em and I rode 'em, and they did everything perfectly because of the groundwork they did. I didn't have to be riding them. And, and I did. And their cords were good. Their bodies were good. They carried me really nicely. They did everything I wanted 'em to do. And I determined that all I would have to do to show them is put in maybe three months of bulk training, bulk muscle training, and, and they'd be ready to show. Every one of 'em. Every single one of them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That's phenomenal. That is just amazing. Um, now are you taking in any outside mules at this time?

Meredith Hodges:

Uh, I don't do that anymore because as a trainer I used to do that. And I found that mules and donkeys bond very strongly more so than horses even, although the horses are the same, they bond to the person who trains them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And what happens, uh, is that you may train some animals for people and then they take 'em home and they don't know what you know.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And they expect the animal to be able to retain the training when the animal needs ongoing continuing education, just like I did. That's why I kept my dressage trainer all those years.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

Because I needed to continue to improve and I needed my training that I already had reinforced to be able to do it. And so I now, well, at that point, when I had got to that realization, I decided that it was important for me to train people how to train their own animals. And so that's what I do. I stop taking people's animals in training and I decided that I would just train them how to train their own animals. At the same time, I realized that a lot of people don't have the money to go out and buy all my books and videos. So I kept the prices low on them. And then I built my website not as a storefront, but as a research center.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Ah.

Meredith Hodges:

Where I just keep posting all this information that I can.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

I charge a very, very low fee for some of it. But most of it, like the training tips are all free. And they all, you know, they, they all represent everything that's in the books and videos. I, I don't leave anything out. Those training tips are exactly like my two blue manuals, uh, training without resistance and, uh, Equine management and Donkey training. And those two manuals are just a text version of the videotapes one through 10 so that people don't have to go back in their houses and look at the videotape to see what was in it. And they have a lot of extra information in them as well. So my products overlap, but they don't repeat. And my website just reinforces everything that's in my books and videos and will help to get people started if they can't afford to buy the books and videos.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That's very, very, very good of you. And I, that's what I admire about you. Um, so if anybody, what, what is your website, Meredith?

Meredith Hodges:

My website is at www.luckythreeranch.com all spelled out, not the number three. And you'll also notice at the bottom of the page there's a button that goes to our children's website, jasperthemule.com because that was another challenge that, uh, I realized that kids are the future. And so they need to get started with their animals in a good way too, and learn how to manage their animals in a nice, polite way. And so that is the point of the books that I do. They teach a lot about history and holidays that are associated to history, but also they teach how to handle the animals in a polite and considerate way to get the best from your animals with these characters, Jasper the Mule and his buddy, Moxie.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

I like that. That's all, that's all good stuff. And is there a phone number if somebody wanted to get ahold of you at the Lucky Three Ranch?

Meredith Hodges:

If you would like to get ahold of me at the Lucky Three Ranch, you are welcome to call 1 800-816-7566.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That is wonderful. Meredith, I wanna thank you so much for taking the time to be on today and, um, we're gonna talk again 'cause there's just so much, uh, to learn from you about the mule industry. So, um, I really appreciate you coming on.

Meredith Hodges:

Well, and I appreciate you too and I'm happy to do it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

This week's episode of Mule Talk has been brought to you by Metal Art by Sandy. The perfect gift for your mule friends is Metal Art by Sandy. Sandy has captured the beauty and unique style in all of her metal artwork. Sandy carefully handcrafts your metal art to the likeness of your mule, donkey, or horse. Orders are promptly created by Sandy, wrapped and then shipped. Want a ranch sign crafted for your driveway or barn? Metal Art by Sandy. Go to Metalartbysandy.com. Metal Art by Sandy is also on Facebook. Gotta go, my mule is looking for me.

Speaker 4:

Mule Talk is an every cowgirl's dream production.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

MEREDITH HODGES TRAINING APPROACH, PART 2
MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- Importance of breaking training into very small steps
- Developing postural core strength
- Rehabilitation of Rock & Roll
- Gate Training
- Learning good manners
- All learn the same way
- No differences in training among equines
- Keeping diaries, photos and video
- Training your own equines, but using a coach
- Equines bond to the person who trains them

Mule Talk is an Every Cowgirl's Dream production - www.EveryCowgirlsDream.Com
www.MuleTalk.Net or www.LuckyThreeRanch.Com/Podcast-Appearances/

This week's guest on Mule Talk is Meredith Hodges from Lucky Three Ranch. And we spoke before last month, and we had a power outage. The interview was so explosive (laughs) that we had a power outage. So now we're gonna-

Meredith Hodges:
(laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
... we're gonna pick up where we left off. Meredith, thanks for coming on the show.

Meredith Hodges:
Oh, you bet. It's fun to do this.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Now, before the lights went out and everything just got fried, let's talk about what you have seen in the mule industry or the mule world, uh, from way back in the 1980s. What was your experience like?

Meredith Hodges:

Actually, it was even further back than the '80s. I got started in, uh, 1973 on my mother's Windy Valley Ranch back in Healdsburg, California. And I was introduced at that time to the American Donkey and Mule Society that had begun in 1967. And in 1967, there were, uh, declining numbers of mules in the country, with the onset of the industrial age. There were no more uses for them since the tractors came in and everything, and so, uh, their numbers were declining. And, uh, I think there was pretty close going 10,000 mules in the country at that time. And when I came on the scene in 1973, um, I had been working with Arabian horses, uh, and, and I was 23 years old when I started with mules. Uh, and I thought what everybody else did, that they were stubborn, hard to deal with and everything, and I had no real inclination to do anything with them, but my mother needed a trainer and somebody to help out at the ranch, and so I told her that I would go ahead and do that.

So I got to the ranch and I was cleaning the barn and working with the colts, and she produced about 30 colts a year. And at the same time, I went ahead and, uh, joined the American Mule... Donkey and Mule Society out of Denton, Texas, uh, so I'd get more information about them. And, uh, I decided quickly that they were a pretty amazing animal, and they were quite capable of doing anything and everything recreationally that horses were doing. So I made it my mission to train the mules that I was exposed to, to go ahead and do all these different recreational things, starting with gymkhana, running barrels and poles and flag races and all those fun events.

At the same time, uh, the American Donkey and Mule Society was being established as the national organization and the national registry. And so, we were writing a rule book back then for donkeys and mules. But in each different area, we found that different people did different things with the mules. And there weren't a lot of, a lot of judged events, but there were a lot of gymkhana events and games that people played with them, and things that they did with them, uh, like coon jumping and raccoon hunting and, and things like that. And so we incorporated those kinds of things with general rules into the rule book that we were writing, and kept things really general with the understanding that each area could write the details in their own rule books for their own individual areas, as they saw fit.

And that way, we could keep the, uh, umbrella, uh, American Donkey and Mule Society there to kind of structure things a little bit for the industry. And so we spent a lot of years doing that. And when we were, when we got into judged events and people started doing, you know, English and Western pleasure, and Western riding, and things like that with them, then we had to really think hard, because one of the things I remember that was really humorous was writing the, uh, Donkey

Pleasure class rules. They said that, "Well, we really shouldn't have a rule that you have to canter in the adult (laughs) western pleasure class."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
What?

Meredith Hodges:
I said, why not?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Why?

Meredith Hodges:
Yeah, why not?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And they said, oh, because donkeys don't canter. And I said, "Well-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
... haven't you seen them cantering out in the pasture?" And they said, "Yeah, but when you put a rider on 'em, they won't canter." And I said, "Well, isn't that really just a training issue?" (laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And, and they said, "Yeah, but we can't get 'em to do it." And, and so that prompted me, um, later on in the 1980s, uh, when Little Jack Horner was three years old in 1983, I was training him because he wanted to do everything the mules were doing, and this was a perfect opportunity to show what donkeys could really

do. And so I got him to walk and I got him to trot, but he really didn't want to canter. (laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, no.

Meredith Hodges:
So, you know what-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
... The thing about donkeys and mules and training them, is that you have to make them think it's their idea.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right, right. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
And then you can pretty much do anything you want if-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Sure.

Meredith Hodges:
... you're clever enough to figure out how to do that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
So when I was training with Jack to canter, I put the mares at one end of the hayfield, and I took him to the other end of the hayfield. (laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
So I just pointed him at the mares and said, "You wanna go see your girls?" And I just let him go.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And I'm darned if he didn't start cantering and-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
... then galloping and running to his mares.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And he was very happy, and so we kind of did it that way. And I just, after a while, after he got to do it really easily, then we would just do circles on the way to the mares (laughs)-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
... And so that's how I got him to do that. And then I was trying to train him how to jump, because he was a go, a go getter and I wanted to see if a donkey could jump. And so I took him out on my jump course and I started over low cavaletti. Well, he really didn't want to pay attention to what I wanted to do. And I had all kinds of different size jumps on that jump course. And he went over the little ca- cavaletti and then he took off with me, and he went over the two-foot jump, then he went over the two six jump, and then he (laughs) went over the barrel.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

And I, I just rode it. (laughs) I just, well, there's no point in pulling on the reins, 'cause he's gonna do what he wants to do anyway.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Exactly.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and so that's kind of how I got started. And I slowly worked the, the cues in and I, I started figuring out that, you know, trying to make them do anything by any kind of force at all just wasn't gonna work.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

So ge- get getting back to all those different events, that's kind of how I approached it with mules too, is that I just kind of, uh, assimilated what I wanted from them, and then let them do it. And I tried to apply a lot of horse training techniques, but I found that when I got too bullish about it, I usually got dumped off or run away with. And I thought, well, this isn't working very well, you know,

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(Laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

... And so (laughs)-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

... But, you know, I was learning and I was willing to learn. I kept an open mind and I, I decided that really if I wanted my history lessons correct, if I read my history lessons correctly, that there were people way back in history that got along with mules very well. And those were people who were very patient and worked with them and not against them. They didn't try to force anything with them. And anybody who did was a trainer that did not have much success, and then

perpetuated the same myths about mules, that they're stubborn, they're hard to work with, you gotta hit 'em with a two by four to get their attention.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm.

Meredith Hodges:
No, I don't think so.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
Um, my grandmother gave me the best advice ever, when she told me... she put a book on my head one day.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
... And she said, she, she said, "You are gonna be a very sorry old woman if you don't learn to walk in good posture and use good manners." And those words were just ringing in my head for the rest of my life. And they are the foundation of my approach with the donkeys and mules after learning horse training techniques. The other thing was that I found about the horse training techniques was that, uh, when I was trying to use them, I read a lot of books and everything, but they were by different authors and different levels of training, you know, from full training to lunging to ground driving, to all of these different things that you wanna incorporate in your training program. But they were all written by different authors and done different ways, and by the time I got to a [inaudible 00:09:11] sequential way of training, I was reading books by Colonel Alois Podhajsky from the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, and Klimke in dressage, and I found that those books were way over my head. I didn't understand half of what I was reading back then.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And so it was, I didn't, I, I thought these were different things, you know, that people did and everything. And I thought, well, wouldn't it be nice... And of course, there were no training books on mules and donkeys. None. I mean, there was military guidelines-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

... and, and, and farming guidelines, but nothing that really was logical and sequential and easy to follow, or anything like that. So I decided that that was what I was gonna to do. I was gonna go ahead and try to train these guys to do everything the horses did, and I was gonna put it in a diary and write about every experience that I had. And so that's what I did. And, and I even employed a dressage instructor later on, uh, after I had gone through English and Western Pleasure and Western riding, and even got into some reining. And, and we introduced reining, uh, to Bishop Mule days, uh, after Pat Parelli had shown bridleless reining with one of the mules that he bought from my mother.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

And that kind of got interest, uh, you know, going around for reining with mules.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And then when he put the bridle on her, she ran off with him (laughs)-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

... and the class.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, no.

Meredith Hodges:
She didn't wanna be told what to do.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(Laughs). Oh.

Meredith Hodges:
And, uh, but that, that's okay. You know, we've all had those kinds of experiences-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
... And everything. So Pat's focus went more to the horses, as he's always been very good with them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:
But I, uh, I think... you know, Pat said way back then too, that horses should be trained the, the way that mules must be trained. And mules must be trained with a polite and considerate attitude. They need to be asked what to do, and then allowed to respond. And that's what I've discovered over, over time. And, and I've gotten... the training has become a whole lot easier that way. And I see people these days doing all of the different things that, that I did. And I even got into dressage and combined training, I trained the first mule ever to reach fourth level dressage.

And then I took another mule into combined training. I was inspired by [inaudible 00:11:51] and Edith Conyers, who had, she had evented her mule. And so I was inspired by her and took my mules in. And in 1993, my combined training mule won the horse trials down in Abbey Ranch horse trials against 56 horses. In dressage she got the highest score.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

And so I was just amazed that I was able to teach them to do all this stuff, but it was because I had to use a polite and considerate, you know, way of dealing with them to get all these different things from them. And then writing about them all, I started out in 1982 by writing articles that appeared in 25 different papers internationally, and about all these experiences I had, training experiences, just general, uh, psychology stuff and, and history and all of that. And in 1993, I published my first book from a lot of the training articles that I had written. And so that one was training Mules and Donkeys, a Logical Approach to Longears. And it was the first book that kind of went in some order.

But then in 1997, I found that it was a little bit of an overview, and it had a lot of good stuff in it for people, and I've been told that people considered that the Longears Bible, but I knew that they needed more detail. Uh, so I produced the 10 videotape, or DVDs now, they were VHS tapes when I started, um, uh, Training Mules and Donkeys series, and one through 10, and began with bowl training. Then I went into pr- uh, preparing for performance, groundwork. Then I went into driving, and then under saddle, and intermediate, then advanced, then jumping. And then a general video about, uh, management fit- fitting and training. And then two tapes about what donkeys do a little differently than horses and mules do. And each one of those tapes represents a year's worth of training. So you, you've got about eight years of training in there, plus the extra stuff with the donkeys.

And so that went on for a little while, and then I realized there wasn't really enough management information in that. So I wrote my book, uh, A Guide to Raising and Showing Mules, which also includes donkeys and horses. But it's a lot of management stuff about breeding, about foal care, mare care, uh, about general care, diseases, aging animals, better teeth, health care, den- dental care, um, and all the different things that aren't really specific to training.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And then, w- then people said, "Well, you know, I like the DVDs and everything, but we, it's kinda hard to go in and watch the DVD if you, you're out with your animal-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
... And then you wanna go back and-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
... Find out what was that on that DVD, you know?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And then at, at that time too, I was drumming up a lot of international clients. And so, uh, I wanted to put those DVDs uh, into foreign language, but that would've been very expensive to do that. So what I did was I developed two manuals, one called Training Without Resistance, that represents uh, videotapes number one through seven, and Equine Management and Donkey Training, that includes tapes number eight through 10. And I published that manual, and then I published it in French, German, and Spanish and English.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:
So that, and, and I made the, the videos so that they could be internationally, uh, played, so people could actually watch the video and read along in their own language. And it was, the script word for word was in the manuals with a lot of additional information that was mentioned in the videotapes, but wasn't really done in much detail.

Uh, I've got an appendix in there with all the patterns that I used, uh, when we got into combined training, how they built the j- the jumps, and what kinds of knots they used to tie those things together, so that they would break away if an animal landed on 'em. Uh, the conversions from, uh, the metric system to our number system. Just all kinds of stuff that I knew that people would need all this information. And it, it is an ongoing learning experience. I mean, I had no idea, you know, a lot of people just put out one or two books or one or two videos, and they're specific to different things.

But I find that a lot of people really enjoy being able to get all of these different details. And the way I feel about knowledge is that, you know, when families were growing up together in the old days, the elders would sit around and tell stories to the younger people about the things that they've learned in their life. I've always felt like knowledge was something that should not be sold, it should be shared for free. And that the, that you should pass down the information that you learn as you're going through life. And so that's basically what I'm doing, uh, with the, the products that I do. And I even wrote a series of children's books called Jasper the Mule, because it occurred to me that children need to learn these things as they're growing up too, and they learn in a more cartoony way, you know?

And so I wrote these books, and they have a little bit of history in 'em, they've got a lot of, uh, training information on how to get along with your animals. And so I came out with those. And then in 2009, people were using my methods. And then they said, "Well, why am I doing all these exercise this way? And so, you know, what's different about your program, uh, in relationship with, uh, you know, the natural horsemanship that so many people are using now?" And so I came out with Equus Revisited, which explains how you can get a really good response from your animal by using natural horsemanship techniques.

But the one thing that you cannot do is develop good posture in a quadruped without using a bit in their mouth, and, and a mild postural restraint like mine that I use, uh, which is called the Elbow Pull. It allows full range of motion in the animal, uh, but it restricts them from raising their head too high and hollowing their back and their neck. And posture is something that needs to be practiced and developed, it's not anything that any of us human or animal are born with.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

So, so in-

Meredith Hodges:

And there you a-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

... a way, but in a way, if you can, um, put it in these terms, you're developing their core strength, 'cause we talk about our core body strength. So is it-

Meredith Hodges:

Exactly right. Yes. Yes. And, and people misconstrue what core strength is a lot of the time. They see the b- muscle that they're building on their animal, and most of

them do it while they're riding. You cannot build core strength that way. If you look at the way that humans build core strength, they do it with exercises like Pilates that are very slow, they're very deliberately done, like laying on your back on the floor and raising your legs and lowering your legs, very slowly. And, and that addresses not just the musculature, but it also addresses the tendons, the ligaments, the soft tissue, and the wear and tear on the cartilage that supports the bones. And that's what core really means. And you can only address the core by doing leading exercises properly, and by, uh, encouraging self-body carriage in the animal, so that all of those elements are developed symmetrically around the bones.

When we get on and we just ride, we develop the core asymmetrically, and cause compromises in the body, and thus we get uneven wear and tear in the joints that causes arthritis. And the internal organs start to fail because there's uneven pressure on them. And, and so this stuff has to be done in a slow, meticulous way. It takes a long time of these groundwork exercises, to really develop a strong core. And it must be done repetitiously, and it must be done in a way that encourages the animal to symmetrically walk straight.

So when you're leading them, for ins- instance, you don't want to hold the lead rope in your right hand, because if you, as you're standing on the left side, because if you do, every step you take causes your hand to move, it's attached to their head and their neck, and their head and their neck swings ever so slightly back and forth, and it pulls 'em off balance. So what I do is I hold the lead rope in the left hand, and leave the lead rope loose across my belly, I point in the direction of travel, uh, with the animal, have... with their head at my shoulder.

I say their name, I ask them to walk on, I look down and see what foot they're leading with in their front feet, and I go ahead and match my steps with theirs exactly. And then when I wanna stop, I go, "And," to prepare them for a command, and then I say, "Whoa." And I stop with my feet together, then I turn to their shoulder and undoubtedly they don't stop with their feet together. So I go ahead and I square them up, every single time I stop. Now, the other thing that I do too, is that this behavior has to be rewarded, nobody works for a pat on the head.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) Right.

Meredith Hodges:

They need a, uh, they need to be paid well for what they do.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

And so, and I need something that they're willing to work for consistently that they won't get tired of, and that happens to be crimped oats. And the crimped oats are very healthy for an equine.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yes, they are.

Meredith Hodges:

And they're getting the energy, the quick energy from the crimped oats, while they're working. I don't feed them very much on their, their daily, you know, oats mix. I only mix the vitamins in there, the Shogo and the Mazole corn oil, uh, in their, their oats, which is usually no more than one and a half to two cups of oats for an average sized animal. And it's only a quarter cut for a mini and, and double that for a draft. But then that's just to get the nutrients to them.

And then I feed those at night because I, I keep my animals in a dry lot so I can monitor their weight. And so they get turned out for monitored turnout time, and I want them to come in when I call 'em. I don't wanna chase 'em for anything, not for any reason whatsoever. So when I have 'em out, then I, and it's time to come in for supper, I just go to the gate and I say, "Come on in, it's time to supper."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

And they come in because they know I've got the oats waiting for them in the bin. And I get cooperation, and I get them to stop running away from me where I wanna go get 'em to train, by only feeding grass hay in the morning, and then I go to the gate or the stall door and I go, "You wanna go for a [inaudible 00:23:56]? Come on." And they go, nah, I don't think so, and they start walking away from me, and then I've got this fanny pack full of oats, and I'll stand there and I'll shake it and I'll go, "I think you forgot I got the fanny pack, and guess what's in it?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

And they all turn around and they go, oh, that's right, she's got the fanny pack, man.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And they all come running. Um, and of course you can get, you can get bombed by a bunch of animals, you know, when they figure that out. But, but that's where boundaries come in, they need to know their boundaries.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
And there has to be a way to, you know, deal with an aggressive behavior like that. And they're a thousand pound animals, and if they get too aggressive with me over those oats, then I just take the flat of my hand and I smack 'em upside their lips, up the side of their lips where there's no teeth. It just kind of stings and catches their attention, but it doesn't really hurt. And then I immediately turn my hand over in front of their face, like a stop sign, and I go, "No, back up." And of course, they roll their heads back and they go, "Oh my God, you hit me."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(Laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And I, I, I, at that very moment, I don't let seconds pass, when I reach in my fanny pack, I take a step forward and I go, "Thank you for giving me my space." And they take a double take and they go, "Oh, she's giving me the oats now." And they stop and they wait where they are. And I go, "Yes, thank you for giving me my space." And then I give every single one of them something for backing up and being nice about it. And if I do it right the first time with 'em, I'll never have to slap 'em again.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Really?

Meredith Hodges:

All I gotta do is just put my hand up like a stop sign and say, "No, back up."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
That's good.

Meredith Hodges:
And they will do that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:
They will definitely do that. And, and so it makes it really nice, because when Mom comes to the gate and says, "Who wants to work?" I get everybody, they all wanna go. And, and I've never had a problem with them being herd bound. If I have animals that are difficult to get away from the barn to go to the training area or anything like that, I will just take their friend with them, and, and I'll do training on two at a time, and I'll take 'em both to the training area. I'll take 'em both to the grooming area, groom 'em, take 'em both to the training area, tie one to the fence while I'm working the other one, and swap 'em out.

And then when they discover that I'm not going to deliberately separate them from their friends, then they're more willing to leave their friends, because the other thing is, is they know that they only spend a short amount of time with me, and then I put 'em back with their friends. I don't, I don't separate them from their friends, or punish them, you know, for behaving that way, you know, being herd-bound. I just wanna be as good a friend to them as, as their other friends are. And I kind of look at it like that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
That's interesting. I mean-

Meredith Hodges:
It works.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

It works wonders and it, it greatly reduces resistant behaviors like running off, you know. When you're doing things and they both see that they're both working and leading, training, and one's standing by the fence, and the other one's working in my hourglass pattern, is what I use because it's a good pattern-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

... to balance them to both, both sides. The internal pendulum swings back and forth. So doing straight lines doesn't always work, um, when you screw an animal on the rail, for instance, uh, their, their balance tends to lean away from the, the rail and, and, you know, it's an optical illusion, but nevertheless, less, it has a physical impact on, on their bodies. And so then they start to lean to the inside. And the, the same thing happens, and you can see it most often in the round pen, if you start your animals in the round pen, you'll see that they start going around, and their first impulse is to go really fast, and then when they do that, they lean like a motorcycle.

So you don't want to do that, and what I do is I will spend, uh, three to six months on leading training in this hourglass pattern, to build that core symmetrically, by walking in sync with them, by stopping periodically between cones, and squaring them up by leading from both sides. All of these different things, Peter... people are often afraid of pattern training, but patterns can be helpful, and patterns can, can help shape behavior and, and the way that an animal moves, uh, physically. And so with the repetition of this hourglass pattern, it changes their, uh, natural way of moving to a more, uh, correct postural way of moving, that over time becomes their habitual way of moving. And, and if you're willing to spend that time and you're building that core, and when you build it right, it lasts for a long time in between workouts, you know, before you have to tune it up or anything like that.

Because every time you let your animal out, uh, after that, that core movement becomes habitual. They're moving in good posture, so they're actually reinforcing it themselves in turnout. And, and the easiest way to tell if one needs a little bit, bit of work, uh, a reminder, if you will, uh, of their, their postural way of moving, is just watch them when they're at rest. Because an animal that has a good strong core that is symmetrically built, will actually rest four square.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yes.

Meredith Hodges:
They'll not have their feet, they will not have their feet splayed. They will, they will not be dropping a hip and cocking a foot.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Uh-huh.

Meredith Hodges:
You know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
Sore animals do that. Animals that are sore in their back will do that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yes.

Meredith Hodges:
And, and so, you know, a- and you gotta think about these things too, in terms of how do we, you know, how do we actually address our human athletes? You know, they go out, they don't just go out and play the game and build up muscle with the muscle groups that are used in the game, they have to prepare for the game by using, doing exercises that address all the muscles in their body. So if they accidentally have to use some other muscle group in the game that's not normally used, they won't hurt themselves. And, and we don't do that with our equines, we just get on and ride. We look at 'em and we think, oh, they're really big, you know, so they can carry a little old me no problem.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah (laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
But as you well know, you know-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

... put a lightweight backpack on yourself and walk for 25 miles and see how you feel the next day.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right, right.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, you might be able to do it that day, but you won't feel good the next day.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That's, that's all true.

Meredith Hodges:

You know.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

And I've got to, uh, compliment you because you have truly made a difference in the mule world, and as far as adding details to the training programs, and you've made us think about why we need to apply these exercises, uh, to our equines. So, um, you really have done so much for, for the mule world, and I've told you this before, Meredith, we need to clone you.

Meredith Hodges:

Well, you know, I'll tell you what, I think I'm being cloned every day by the people that take my stuff seriously, and put it to work themselves. Because I have seen the quality of the mules increase exponentially over the years. The, uh, performance ability and, and the way that it's done has just skyrocketed. Um, we got mules into dressage out at Bishop, and now, for the last four years, we've had our mules competing in the United States Dressage Federation Finals in Lexington, Kentucky. And they're doing an amazing job.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

So, you know, I, I, I have to give credit to these people that are coming up in our industry that are serious enough to take this seriously, and to use what I have and, and help these mules to shine, where they, they were the most maligned critter on the planet, you know, everybody makes jokes about mules and donkeys, but not anymore.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That's right.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, when you start, when you start watching them and their people, it brings tears to my eyes to see, you know, what's happened with all the work that I've done, and it's certainly made it worthwhile. And thank you so much for recognizing me for, for all of this. And there's other people too, it took us 18 years with Carol Sweet, Leah Patton, and me and Marsha Arthur. We all worked on getting mules accepted in the United States Equestrian Federation. And like I said, it took, I started it in 1986, and we finally got them into the dressage division in 2004.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That, now that is truly, truly awesome.

Well, Meredith, we wrapped up another one. So you enjoy your day and we will talk soon. 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