ROUND PEN TRAINING AT LUCKY THREE RANCH

MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

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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. This gal is at the top of her game. We are again talking with Meredith Hodges from the Lucky Three Ranch. Meredith, welcome back.

Meredith Hodges:

Well, it's good to be back, Cindy. Good morning. And it's always fun to talk to you, because we get into some of this detailed stuff that, you know, you just don't hear about.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Well, I know. And this week, we're gonna be talking about the round pen. And I think that's a really good topic, so let's get started.

Meredith Hodges:

Yeah. Sounds really good. Well, you know, the round pen was developed so that, uh, Western trainers could round up these wild mustangs and have a place where they could hold 'em and have some kind of control over 'em. Although, uh, I think it was Monty Roberts, the horse whisperer, he spent literally months, if not years, out there with those wild horses, just sitting there and waiting for them to come to him, which was the absolute right thing to do.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Because when a horse gets, you know, anxious or suspicious about anything, there's no telling what they're gonna do to try to get away from it. And their flight reflex is extremely, uh, intense. And it's, it's less intense with mules and donkeys. Donkeys just basically stand their ground, stare at you. And if you get to be too, too threatening, they'll just flat attack you,(laughs) you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm, wow. Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Yeah, they will. And I, I've, I've seen this happen with a lot of people who had, uh, donkeys that they had shown for years.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

And the donkeys just finally said, "Enough is enough." And when they went to feed 'em, they got attacked, and they broke their legs, and all kinds of horrible things like that. So you, you know, and these were jacks. Granted, they were, you know, the ones I heard about that did the most damage were jacks, but the, my own jennet went after me when she had her first baby.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure. Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And she was as docile as she could possibly be, and I thought nothing of it when I climbed in that pen, but, boy, did I exit in a big hurry.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, boy.

Meredith Hodges:

I cleared that five foot f- fence and did not even touch it, (laughs) trying to get outta her way, you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and you hear about, uh, animals that are pushed in training like that. And, but the thing is, we get so caught up in the behaviors that, and how we wanna change these animals' behavior, that a lot of times we don't think about what that round pen training is demanding physically from these animals.

Now, I've listened to a lot of trainers of, of, uh, event horses, thoroughbreds, warmbloods, bigger horses with longer legs, and even drafts and everything. And they were saying years ago how detrimental starting an animal in a round pen really was, and how they didn't like the round pen, you know, at all. And so, you know, I was starting mine in the round pen, too, but it, they did make me think about what the ramifications were about putting an animal that's untrained into a round pen from the beginning. And I got to thinking, you know, they have a point. Because when you put an animal in a round pen that has not had any real training, and you're trying to do all the training to gain control in the round pen, you're gonna have an animal that's going to get anxious. He's gonna try to get away from you. It's gonna make him run faster. And a lot of times, if the walls are solid, when they're going around, they lean so much like a motorcycle that they're galloping on the fence.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Ah.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and that's anything, anything but good for their body.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, if you train 'em like that, and what you end up with is asymmetrical training at the deepest level, with, uh, the support elements, like the muscles, right,

uh, there at the bones, the tissues, the tendons, the ligaments, and all of that, are way off.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

And they, they will develop soreness, and sometimes, uh, you know, almost permanent asymmetrical support to those bones. We're not talking about bone muscle. We're talking about the stuff way deep in that's wrapped around not only the bones, but the, uh, the organs as well. So you get organ dysfunction. You get movement dysfunction. You get soreness in the body. It can, uh, affect their digestive tract and cause colic and founder. And if they're not getting the right nutrients, it can even affect the shape of their hooves.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm, okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and s- so this is, you know, I think why a lot of people were saying that they didn't like the round pen, you know, training, because they were seeing these kinds of things in the animals, and nothing was being done before they were thrown into the round pen and asked to lunge. So I got to thinking about it, and I thought, you know, if you spend time with them, going ahead and doing this leading training thing that I do on the hourglass pattern in, in the elbow pull, and this, the, the snaffle bit, and ask them to go ahead and develop these core muscles before they go to the round pen, then by the time they get there...

This takes almost a whole year. It takes six months of just walking in the round pen and learning all the things that go along, or in, on the hourglass pattern, and learning all the, uh, elements of that, and then that addresses, uh, postural balance. And then you have to spend another six months adding coordination to the whole, uh, equation. And you do that by asking them to go over and through obstacles in good posture. By the time you get done with that, that's about a year's worth of training that you can do without a round pen.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

However, however, if you are dealing with a mustang or an animal that hasn't been touched and has ha- has, is not young, and even if they are young, they're gonna have a strong flight reflex, they're gonna be very suspicious of you, and you can't exactly put a halter on and go through the hourglass pattern and, and expect them to just be led. That, that in itself is, you know, that is a challenge.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:
So what you need to do is you just need to put them into, you know, a fairly decent-sized dry lot. I wouldn't say any bigger than maybe an acre to start with.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
And it's pre- preferable to put 'em in something like a 50-b- foot by 50-foot pen, and, and then just start the routine. And the routine is that you feed, as I, as I described.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh.

Meredith Hodges:
And when you do it, you do it at the same times every day. Hay in the morning, hay midday, uh, the oats mix in the evening. And when you've got that oats mix, you can encourage them to come closer to you as you're pouring it into their little buckets or into their, their feeders or whatever, and talk to them. And, and just do the Monty Roberts thing. Just introduce yourself, don't put any pressure on 'em, and allow them to come to you.

And depending on what animal it is and what their personality is and, and how suspicious they really are, how anxious they are, that's gonna be different in every single animal. And, but you need to learn how to exercise patience and not get in a hurry and let these things happen. Let them take the lead on that. And then you just kind of fall into it, and you begin to negotiate with them how much you're gonna pet 'em. Because that, you know, even in the beginning, if they let you pet them, it doesn't mean they're gonna let you stand there for 20 minutes and do it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
They may only have a tolerance for a couple of seconds, so you kinda gotta adjust to what, what's gonna be good for them, and just don't get in a hurry about the whole thing.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
[inaudible 00:08:47].

Meredith Hodges:
You know, most of us are in such a hurry to ride that we neglect, um, to think about how long it took us as children to learn to do all the things that we did, and with the address of the physical, uh, development. I mean, we laid on our backs and cried before we could even roll over and crawl. And then we crawled before we walked. And then we wa- we did kind of a teeter-totter-tipsy thing for quite a while before we could walk very well.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm.

Meredith Hodges:
And we definitely walked before we ran. And how long did that take? You know, uh, a kid is usually about a year old before they start walking, you know, fairly regularly.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Huh, huh.

Meredith Hodges:
So we, we need to learn to be patient with these things with these animals and look upon this round pen as a training tool. But in order to make it really effective and really helpful and beneficial for the equines, there's a lot of things you gotta think about. And one, the first thing is prepping your animal to be able to go in circles in good posture, so that they don't lean, rush, run, climb up the walls, and hurt themselves. And the only way to do that is with leading training and being patient and getting them prepped for it. And like I said, we do, you know, the preparation,

walking through the hourglass pattern with its bends and curves and straight lines and halts and all of these things. And at the same time, you know, we're, they're becoming attentive. And this is assuming that they will come to you of their own free will when you go to halter them. That's the first thing you gotta do, is get 'em to come to you, allow them to be haltered, and led to the working area.

And if you don't have a round pen, um, you might say, "Well, I ca- I can't do this, because I, I don't have a round pen, and I don't have the money to get the materials for one right away." And, uh, most of us, after a year's worth of training here and the leading thing, and probably more than that, after waiting for 'em to come to us, gives us the time to save the money to be able to build a round pen. But let's just say you, you get to that point with their training after about a year or six months, uh, leading through the hourglass, uh, six months of adding the obstacles and everything. You're ready to go to the round pen, but you don't have a round pen. All you have is a small pen that you've been doing some leading training and beginning your leading training in. And, uh, so, but now you wanna do a little lunging.

Well, the first thing that I did, uh, was... I, I knew that if I put 'em in the square pen, they were gonna stand in a corner. They were gonna run to a corner and put their butt to me.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right, right.

Meredith Hodges:

And I couldn't keep 'em going, you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

So (laughs) that was a little bit of a challenge, but, um.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Well, sure. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

And I didn't have a round pen. I didn't have a round pen then, but I, I needed to move to that next step. So what I did was I bought myself some 16-foot rails. And I

could afford four 16-inch rails, so I g- I got those and I crossed the corners with them. I cut out the corners in the square pens so they... Although the side, the sides weren't round, but the corners weren't square, so I could actually keep 'em going around like it was a round pen. And it was a little difficult. 'cause sometimes those pens were, uh, more than fity- 45 feet across, and, uh, that, so I would have to run a bit to keep up with 'em and keep 'em going, so.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

And then, of course, when you're running like that, then they don't like it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

No, no.

Meredith Hodges:

They get anxious and they won't slow down. And then they, they get, they get a little fast and slow, and fast and slow, and they don't pay attention to you, other than to go, "That freak's running after me," you know, (laughs) which only exacerbates the situation. So I thought, well, you know, this round pen is more important than I thought it was.

So I did manage to save up enough money for the poles for a 45-foot round pen, and, uh, 2x12's to go ahead and attach to the poles. And they were just regular wood. I didn't worry about getting anything really expensive. I did try doing tires. I did try doing electrical tape. I did try doing things. They went right through the electrical tape, because they got anxious, didn't like to be chased in the circle, didn't want any part of it. So they went through that. They went over the tires. They, they can really jump, let me tell you.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

And I... (laughs) And, and, and on that note, even when I got my five-foot round pen built with the 2x12's, if they didn't like being in there with me, they went over it anyway.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

I'll be darned. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

So, so that just, that just made me think about how important that leading ground trainer, training really is, because that's a bounding, uh, a bonding issue when you do that as well as a physical development set-up. And you wanna set your animal up for success. And if he enjoys what he's doing, which he will in that, that hourglass, that hourglass leading pattern, he will, he will stop, he will learn to square up. He will learn that you're gonna get him oats that he can stand there and eat uninterrupted, and that you'll wait for him, and all these different calm behaviors will develop there. And so then they don't, uh, present themselves in the round pen when you put 'em in there, because now they're learning that, you know, time with you is pretty, pretty okay, and that you're not in a hurry, and you spend a lot of time.

And usually in the beginning with a really wild animal, it's gonna take about a year through this ground training before you even get into the round pen. So you just use that time to go ahead and save your money for the materials to do the round pen the right way. And I learned a lot of things, too, from building that round pen with just regular boards and, and, and posts. It has to be a, a regular height. A lot of people think a round pen should be enclosed, uh, with solid walls, and I don't think that that's necessarily a plus. Uh, I learned when, when I had animals in the round pen with a solid wall and I took 'em outside, then they looked at everything, and they were suspicious of everything.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right, right.

Meredith Hodges:

So I thought, okay, I'm gonna do this differently. And when I built my round pen, finally, out of the boards and, and posts, I put it right next to the road, right next to the driveway, where all the trucks, the cement trucks were going in and out when we were doing, uh, construction, where the cars were going down the road, and God knows what would come down the road, you know, bicycles, people jogging, everything. And at first, they were spooking from all those things. And that's to be expected; these are all new things.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

But the other thing that I discovered in this process, and a lot of people make a big deal out of desensitization, and they start throwing things at these animals, like tarps and, and alleyway blowers, dust blowers.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

People are even grooming with dust blowers, and all that does is just spread the dust all over and it lands right back on top of 'em.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

I, uh, I thought, you know, (laughs) i- i- my mules are looking at me like I'm out of my mind doing this desensitization stuff. And I thought, you know, I am a fool. I am a damn fool by doing these things this way, because this is so artificial.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And they know it, you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

They're calling me on all of this. And, and so I thought, well, if I just build this round pen, you know, right next to the road, that's fine. If I groom in the same area and I get myself an equine vacuum cleaner that actually makes a lot of noise like a blower does, but instead of blowing the dust all around us and making both of us start coughing, uh, it takes the dust away, gets them clean, and they see the purpose.

So I discovered that everything I do with my mules has to serve a natural purpose. That's natural horsemanship. That's what it means. When they can see the purpose

in what you are doing, that makes all the difference in the world. Because now, they don't think you're an idiot. Now, (laughs) now they, now they think that there's a purpose to all the different things that you're doing, and it benefits them. And when they get to the round pen and start going around on the circle, and let's just assume you picked the flattest pa- place on your place to build this thing and to make it round, it makes sense if you're spooking them by running at them, that maybe you need to build a round pen that you don't have to run in.

And I have found that 45 feet is ideal to allow me to, if I have to take a step towards them, I can without running. It gives them enough room in the circle so that they can stay on the circle easily without, uh, exerting their bodies in an erratic way. Uh, they can walk, trot, and canter the round pen in a balanced fashion. After their hourglass leading for almost a year, uh, they learn to travel in good balance, and now it's just a matter of taking that balance from an hourglass pattern onto the circle and adding the faster gaits to it. And it gives you a working area that is totally functional and, and that you can work together with them.

They're still in their elbow pull to kee- help keep them in balance, because this is a new environment. And every time they get in a new environment, they're gonna adjust their bodies accordingly. And they will raise their heads too high, and they will invert their neck and their back, and then they're not in good posture. So they can't learn the lessons in good posture unless they're in the right tack. And the tack has to fit so that it doesn't rub them or make 'em sore or anything like that.

... Has to learn to enjoy the time that they have with you, and they need to enjoy the comfort that comes with the, they need to enjoy the comfort that comes with it. And so this is why all this prep work is super important.

But there were things that happened, too, when I built those, those posts and rails and, and the wood. (laughs) And I would walk out of the round pen, and I'd come back, and they were chewing on the boards.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Uh-oh.

Meredith Hodges:

You know? And my round pen was slowly disintegrating. (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

So that was another lesson to be learned, is that, okay, they enjoy this time in here.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
There you go.

Meredith Hodges:
Some of them did. But like I said, I had one mule, my, my Trakehner, who, uh, was my first warmblood that was bred, and he decided that he didn't think round pens were fun at all. And when he got tired of me, he just jumped out.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs) Oh.

Meredith Hodges:
He wouldn't run away.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
He would just dru- jump out into the driveway and stand there and watch me.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Jump. J- Jump out. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
And then I would come stomping out the gate, and I'd go, "Vinnie, will you please come back here?" And he would come back. And then he would nose the fanny pack and let me know that he, he preferred a reward a whole lot more frequently than I was giving them to him.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
(laughs) So we had that discussion.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Uh-oh.

Meredith Hodges:

But, you know. And then, I was trying to decide what was so darned uncomfortable for him. And I finally figured it out when the other mule started getting a little sassy like that too. The round pen, although it was built on flat ground, wasn't really flat.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Hmm, okay.

Meredith Hodges:

So it was straining their development in good postural balance, because although it was flat ground, it was slightly on a hill, so they were going up and down. As they went around the circle, they would be running down the hill to the low side and up the hill to the high side. And it was undoing all that postural balance, and I didn't even really realize it until they let me know that it was not pleasant.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

And so I thought, well, looks like I gotta build another round pen. So we took that one down, and we went in with a transit and shot it. And it was not level. It, I mean, when you looked at it, it looked fairly level, and it looked like it would serve the purpose and everything, but it really didn't. And so we decided to go ahead and build one that was, was truly flat and truly round and keep that 45, uh, foot diameter on it.And so this required, first, a lot of grading that we had to do to make it flat, flat ground. And then we realized that we were gonna have to bring in fill dirt to make it level, because it went down so much on that one side. And so we did.

The other thing that I had to pay attention to was the ground floor. Now, it was adobe, and that was good because it would pack really well, but we needed to make sure that it got packed super well, so that when I was doing the halts and asking them to stop, from a canter or from a trot and all that, that their hindquarters would easily come underneath really well and slide on that surface. And that's what you're, you're prepping for, for a reining mule.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

But if it hurts 'em when they do it, they're not gonna wanna do it. So you have to make sure that that base that you're putting your sand on is super flat, super tamped, and, and hard as a rock underneath, so that when they tuck their hindquarters and slide into those stops, they actually will slide.

And in order to do that, when you get to that point, when you get your, your ground shot flat and all of that, and you build up the low sides and everything, then it has to be tamped down. But you can't expect it to be tamped hard enough, uh, to really put that really hard surface under the sand and, and expect it to stay. Because what will happen is the sand, as they're doing these halts and everything, the sand will, uh, be over the surface, but you can't see what's happening underneath. And what's happening underneath is the s- is the ground, the base ground, isn't as hard as you think it is, because ground shifts over time, and, and it swells and it contracts, and, and it needs time to do that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

So after you get your, your surface, uh, you know, prepped and everything, and tamped and all that, then you wait for a couple of months, even, for the rain to get on it, for the snow to be on it if it's winter time, and, and let that ground s- uh, swell and contract, and, and then run over it with the, with the tamper again. You can... Uh, we rented ours. We just rent it, and, and it's a thing you can ride around in, and you just keep going over it and going over it. And you give it lots of time, uh, doing that before you actually put the sand on the surface.

And then when you put the sand on the surface, you gotta be careful how much sand you put in there. So you, you wanna do about three, three and a half inches of sand, but anything over four inches is going to start straining tendons and, and ligaments and things like that, uh, even the muscles. And so you don't wanna have too much sand in there. Now, a lot of people might be, uh, tempted to put more sand in it, because we tend to be a little afraid of that first mounting. And if there's a lot of sand, it makes it harder for them to move, that they might be more calm, but I've found that that's not necessarily true. Uh, more sand in there that makes it harder for them to move just aggravates them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Ah.

Meredith Hodges:
You see?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm-hmm, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
So if, if you're making friends with 'em and everything, (laughs) you don't really wanna make it hard for 'em.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
You wanna make it easy and continue that really nice relationship that you have with them. So, you know, the sand is the last thing that you put in there.

And so when you're, you know, you're doing all this prep, you gotta make sure the circle's actually round. Because when you put those rails up and everything, he's gonna learn to bend his body properly through the ca- through the, through the cir- the ribcage while he's traveling on the circle, and that keeps equal weight over all four feet while he's lunging. And, and it keeps his body comfortable while he's doing that, because he's learning to, to do it the right way. He's stretching the muscles on the outside. He's contracting the muscles on the inside. But because he's erect and upright, he's maintaining his good posture, and good posture feels good.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
And so it's, it's super important. Um, for the sake of, of, you know, evenness of the fence around the circle, when you prep this whole thing, you gotta dig post holes at eight-foot centers on, on the circle and 23 feet from the center of the round pen to give you your 45-foot diameter. Um, you need to have eight-foot posts that are sunk three feet in the ground, 'cause you don't want your fence to start sagging. Because if it does, you know, if the posts aren't, aren't secure in those holes, then

it's, it's going to start sagging, the fence is gonna start moving. If the fence starts moving, it's not gonna do what it's supposed to to aid your, your equine on the circle. It's gonna start getting flatter in some spots and not round, and, and, and it, it just makes kind of a mess as the ground shifts, as the boards slip, and all of that.

So we decided, you know, after having to replace boards that they were chewing on and watching these boards warp and everything, that it might be cheaper to, when we're building this new round pen, to have steel posts with wings on them to attach the boards to with bolts. Because then we, you know, the boards, we wanted to keep them, uh, keep them wood, uh, 'cause steel would be too rigid, and then we'd be doing a paint job on the, on the whole round pen every time one board was bad. So this way, we could atta- uh, attach and unattach individual boards and replace them as they, they got worn.

The other thing that we did was we put angle iron on the tops of the first two boards so that the ones they could reach easily, uh, they would be discouraged from chewing on them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Ah.

Meredith Hodges:

Uh, when we did the boards, we, first of all, we put the post holes in, like I said. We ha- made the posts all steel. They went three feet in the ground, and then we poured cement in there. Before we put any boards on it at all, uh, we stuck the, the, the b- uh, the posts into the holes and put in a little bit of concrete to hold 'em upright. Then we measured everything. And then we, then we put the top and bottom boards in there to hold the posts in place. And then we poured more concrete in it, when it was standing up straight.

Now, these boards, like I said, were attached to the wings with bolts, so that when these boards got worn, like I said, we could replace one board outta here, okay, no sweat, you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And then the other, other thing that we did, too, in order to save money and minimize maintenance, when we bought the original 2x12's, uh, for the round pen, uh, we knew we were getting steel posts, and we got those wings welded on the

steel posts and everything. So those were good. Didn't need to do any of, a- any extra ones. Uh, we had to buy a lot of extra posts when I was doing it all in wood. Um, this is what taught us that we really needed to do something with those posts so we didn't have to keep maintaining them.

And, and so now, when we built, we bought the boards for the round pen, we bought extras. We bought about 20, 25 extra boards to replace the boards that we knew were eventually going to get, uh, damaged along the way. We painted all the boards right up front before we hung them. And, and that was, that was really... and when I say all of them, I mean all of them, even the extras. We painted everything extra. Then we, we went ahead and, and stored the extra boards so that... And we stored them standing up, not laying down, so they would n- you know, not start growing mold or anything like that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

They could be aerated in proper storage.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

A- And that way, uh, when we had to replace a board, we'd have 'em right there on the spot. You know, drill the holes for the bolts. We had extra bolts, in case the bolts on the, on the fence got worn. Um, and then the, the most important thing is, when we bought them, they were reasonably priced. (laughs) And so this is why we went ahead and bought 'em then, because the price on materials only goes up.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, sure.

Meredith Hodges:

It never goes down. And so, so that way, uh, we just waited, and everything was working great. You know, we built the gate, framed the gate in steel and mounted it on steel posts, and that was really good too. And again, the boards on the gate were the same boards. And I might say at this point, too, that having these 2x12's, and they're spaced about three inches between the boards, um, so that, unlike a

round pen that's built with panels, these boards will not catch your toes when you're riding. They, they create a flat surface.

And this is what's really important, too. When you build the gate, you build the gate so the gate opens into the round pen, so that that same configuration of 2x12, uh, boards continues across the gate. If the gate was to swing both ways, uh, it would be uneven by the ga- by the gate as the animals go through. This way, uh, when the gate only opens to the inside, uh, the inside of the round pen looks the same all the way around. And, and the, the three, two and a half, three-inch spaces between the, the 2x12's is pretty small space. So when you're riding, unless you're sticking your toes out to the side, which you shouldn't be, um, it's, you're, you're not gonna get your feet caught, you're not, you know, like you could with a big open square, like what's on panels. Panels are actually pretty dangerous.

Uh, they do okay, you know, for a round pen in the beginning, just to get you through for a while, but it's better not to use them as a permanent structure, as your, you know, your regular thing to use.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

It, it should only be temporary while you're building your other one.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

Because I found that when we built that round pen the way we did, it's been five years and we still have... Er, or no, it's been more than that, probably eight years, uh, since we built this new round pen, and we have yet to replace a board on it. But the boards are there in case we need 'em. Eight years ago, these boards were really cheap compared to what they are now.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, sure.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and talking about how much it costs to replace a steel post, same kind of thing. You know, our maintenance costs on the round pen went to zero. And, and

this is what's happening to all the fencing on my property. It used to be, uh, top rails and, and wire, horse wire, and, you know, that kind of stuff.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm, right.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and, uh, uh, even with the electric wires on top, (laughs) they still managed to short 'em out and chew on the boards. So, (laughs) it's kind of funny, but, uh, we went to vinyl fencing, uh, when that first came out. And that was a very expensive, uh, venture in that two-and-a-half acre r- uh, dirt pen that we first put it on. Let's see, I had 12 animals, I think, in that pen. And I was so excited the first night after they got the fence up and everything. I thought, Oh good, this is great. They're not gonna chew on the fence. And, uh, (laughs) put 'em in there, we got up the next morning and was horrified.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

They thought I gave 'em a set of Tinkertoys, and they pulled all the boards out of the fence all the way around the two acres.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

It must have taken 'em all night.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

But they were all standing in a little group when I went out there, and their ears were all perked up and their eyes were really bright.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
"Oh, mommy, thanks for the Tinkertoys."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
(laughs) I went, "Oh, I forgot how, how creative they can be." But they didn't leave the pen.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, (laughs) no.

Meredith Hodges:
They did not leave the pen.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
They were waiting for more toys.

Meredith Hodges:
They were waiting for more toys, exactly.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
So I thought, okay, how can I fix this? So we drilled holes around the tops of the posts and strung a hot wire in there, and that discouraged them from chewing on it, and, and they finally thought, "Well, you know, we get to go out five hours a day anyway. I guess that we don't have to be busy all night," you know? (laughs)

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

And so they respected it, but they eventually wanted to show me that they didn't really have to respect it if they didn't want to.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

And, (laughs) I went out there to get 'em one day, and I, I, I was, you know, always watching across the gate where the hot wire went, you know, and making sure my arm didn't get zapped. And I went out there one day, (laughs) and I went, grabbed it, and I hit the hot wire with my arm, and I kind of jerked back because, uh, you know, I was kinda preconditioned that I was gonna get zapped. So every so often, we fix it and, and, you know, get it so it's ungrounded again, or it's grounded, and it works. And, uh, so that every... They don't know when I'm gonna do that, so they short it out, and then we randomly turn it back on. And we have come to a ne- nego- a negotiation about that, so they stay off the fence.

Um, but this is how, how they kinda tell you how to build the fences that are gonna contain them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

And they have really just through steering me through all this stuff, they steered me through the bi- building of this round pen, and so now I get to spend more money on nice things for them, new bridles, you know. Not so much new saddles, because I figured out how, how to fix those saddles, too.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure, sure.

Meredith Hodges:

You know? Um, but the way we do this round pen is so good, and it really is something that you want to, uh, you wanna address with your equine. And you wanna do it properly. Because when you do, it does nothing but enhance the way that they're being trained. You need this round pen and you need it done correctly.

And the other thing you can do, if you like to do group lessons, since everybody's doing it, eh, learning everything the same way, because of your consistency, your

patience, your way of dealing with all these training issues, uh, you can lunge multiple animals in the round pen. And they all know what you're saying, your verbal commands, your body language. They all learned the same thing. If you wanna work one at a time, you maybe wanna lunge twelve at a time, like I do, and, and you go ahead and, uh, go ahead and lunge 'em. But then let's just say you wanna ride some. But of course, you're not gonna ride twelve, so you might wanna hold three of 'em there to ride in addition to the ground driving and everything else that they've learned, so you put away some of 'em. But say you wanna put some on the outside and tie 'em out there while you ride the other one inside, you can do that.

They learn to ground drive in a confined area. In a round pen, you can do that one at a time, you can do it two at a time, four at a time. Because in the smaller contained area, they're less likel- well, they can't run very far from you, so they don't even really try.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

They just try to figure out what it is you wanna do. So there's, there's a lot of value to having the con- confined space of the round pen and teaching turns, and, and reverses, and all of that, you know, and even putting the cues to a lunge line. Keeps 'em on a circle so that there's minimal resistance to work with when you're doing all of these different kinds of training things, so that by the time you get through with their training, um, they, they really know how to do absolutely everything.

Um, and when you first mount them in a round pen, then, then they don't, they know they don't have very far to go, so they don't bolt with you. They might scoot with you a few steps, you know.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm. Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

But you can also have a little mounting block in th- there and get 'em introduced to that. And then, really, the only training issue that they need to learn after everything else they've learned in the, in the round pen, once that you're mounted on them, then they learn the leg cues,. And they learn to do it in an appropriate way. Because as you're going around and you're doing slight, you know, pressure

on the inside rein, you're giving them slight pressure on the outside leg, but you're still hugging them with your legs, and they get used to that too.

So you get rid of all these abrupt reactions that cause resistance. And if you can do that, uh, then that makes for a very, very calm, calm animal, and, and they get broke. And, and they can go out after all this training in the round pen, and they can, uh, uh, apply all the things they learned, and you don't have all those bucking issues, bolting issues, and all of those things. Because basically, they're afraid of b- abrupt motions, abrupt movements, abrupt noises, abrupt reactions to things.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

But when you approach [inaudible 00:42:01] and sequential manner, and introduce 'em like this, and be patient while you're doing it, and you set them up for success, then all of that goes away. You know? And, and you find yourself with a really, really good relationship with the animal, whether it's on the ground or whether you're riding them. You know? Doesn't really matter. They, they have been introduced to all the different things that could unhinge them, and, and so they don't have those kinds of behaviors. They're, they're senior animals by the time they get, get through with a round pen.

And, and so, you know, by, by show standards, they would be green. So you c- you, then you just look at it like, okay, now I can go in- into the snaffle bit classes and introduce them to shows with a lot of other things that they haven't encountered, you know, that come with showing, all the noises at a show, all the people running around, and all of that sort of thing. So you're not throwing too much at 'em at once. You've given 'em a good base to work from, so when you get to the show, they're just looking, they've got their ears perked, they're looking around, and then they look at you and they go, "What's all this, Mom?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

You know? (laughs) And, and, and you...

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Something new.

Meredith Hodges:
You just go, "Oh, it's nothing, really, to worry about."
"Well, I don't know about that."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
You know, and you have that discussion with them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right, right.

Meredith Hodges:
You know, but, but you are still consistent. You are still something that they can count on that's always gonna be predictable, always gonna be solid. You know? And, and so even graduating to a show or anything like that is not a big deal. You have reduced the anxiety. You, eh, you lower their stress levels remarkably, which is, is, uh, really healthy for them.
And, oh, I might say at this point, too, you should not use your round pen as a holding pen for sh- you know, as a permanent place for them to be. There's a lot of people that build a round pen and they put water in there and they feed their hay in there, but that's not good for 'em.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm, oh. No.

Meredith Hodges:
You gotta realize, that thing's got sand in it, and they can get sand colic.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
And they get colic, they can founder, um, they can get clogged up. They could, you know, cause twists, all kinds of physical problems.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:
So a round pen should not be used as a holding pen, a permanent holding pen, uh, because it's just not healthy for them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
And, and, uh, if there's, if they are in there as a holding pen for a more permanent thing, after a while, they'll put forth more energy into getting out of it if they're not co- comfortable.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
So they'll trash it, if they have to, to get out of it. They need a, an appropriate place for them to be. And as a holding pen or a dry lot, I say 40, 45 by 50-foot, uh, by 50-foot pen, uh, dirt pen, is, is good enough. When you're turning them out five hours a day, then they get kind of a balance that way, so they don't get that anxiety, they don't get that stress that they have to escape, because they know that they're gonna be turned out.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Hmm. Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
And, and the 50x50-foot, uh, holding pen is enough room for them to play, if they so desire. And I use those for multiple animals, but most of my animals are in stalls and runs, and the runs are 12x36 at the max, and 12x24.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, okay. Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And they, they don't, they don't care. And when it's not appropriate for them to get out on the hay fields, like we're on the pat- turnout fields while they're growing from March to June, uh, we just turn 'em out into those larger dry lot pens, just so they got enough room so they can run around and play. And then we put 'em back into their stalls and runs, where they've got 12x36 feet.

And again, they don't, if they think they're gonna get out into an area where they got a little bit of room to stretch and play, then they don't, they don't get bored. They don't hang in the corners, you know, or anything. And they don't have to have round bales in front of 'em all the time or anything, 'cause that's not really healthy for 'em.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and I really discourage the use of hay nets or anything else, uh, that slows down their feeding. They'll decide how fast they want to eat. And if they're fed three times a day, they're not going to get all anxious about it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

You know? And, and a lot of those things are built with nylon webbing, and that's not good, because that stuff can get, be ingested.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

It can be chewed up and ingested, and then cause impactions.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

So that's not healthy eith- either. So really what it boils down to is, what kind of routine have you made for them yourself, you know? And, and not only this. When

you have a re- a predictable routine, and you have to go away and have somebody else care of 'em for you, you can write it all down on a piece of paper, and they can build their own schedules around it because it's so predictable, you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

When you feed at 7:00, at noon, and at 5:00, that's when your substitute feeds. What you feed is right there, you know, two flakes of hay morning, two flakes of hay, or maybe not a whole flake of hay at midday, maybe only one, or even a half a flake, or even a quarter with the minis. It always depends on the animal. But if it's something you can write down, it's something that's consistent, it's something that the animals can depend on. So as long as these people can replace the things that you do for your animals, they're not gonna miss you that much. They will be glad to see you when you get back because, granted, the people that, that you have replacing you are not ever gonna be you.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

But then, they're not gonna be doing the important things, like training, either.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah. (laughs) You know, I really like your approach to this round pen training because it really simplifies things and it's very logical. It lays it out as to what its purpose is, and there really shouldn't be any stress or anxiety when you put the animal in there. So, uh-

Meredith Hodges:

Not for you or the animal.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. So-

Meredith Hodges:

And if things aren't working out, if, say, you wanna reverse, then maybe you need to practice your body language.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Because there are very certain things they learn, you know, how to do that are not happening during the leading training, like where your body needs to d- to be to make them go ahead and go around the round pen. But the first thing is, you know, a lot of people will say that their animals are lazy.

"Thi- Oh, this one just likes to go slow," or, "This one likes to go fast."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

The one thing that is consistent through all my personalities out there is that, when they're in good postural condition, they all can go fast, and they can all slow down, and they're all happy to do it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

I don't have any lazy ones out there. Although, you, you know, when you're going through the barn, you've gone through my barn, and you, you, you've seen my thoroughbreds that are much more animated when we go to the stall door.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And then there's Angel, the quarter-horse mule that will not move a muscle, that just stands there looking like, "Oh, well, yeah, maybe I'll just walk off."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs) There you go.

(laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
But you go out there and ride her or lunge her or ground drive her, or even walking through the hourglass pattern, she is animated, using every joint, and can do it, and she's 29 years old.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, you bet. You bet.

Meredith Hodges:
You know? And, and it's because she's in good condition and able to do those things, and she's not sore anywhere, even though, when she was younger, she fractured a pastern on her hind leg.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, my goodness.

Meredith Hodges:
And it, it healed correctly, and we kept up the good po- We had just discovered the, the postural training.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Uh-huh.

Meredith Hodges:
So, uh, she was rehabilitated in good posture, and that, that hind leg has never given her an issue. She doesn't even have ar- arthritis in it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
We've X-rayed it. We know.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Well, Meredith, you've been really generous with your time and, and you've given us so much thought about the round pen training. I wanna thank you for coming back on. And of course, you have a website.

Meredith Hodges:

Yes, I do. My website is at www.luckythreeranch.com. And if you look under Training, there's a lot of free information under there about all the stuff we're talking about. And if you have any more questions about details, you're welcome to email me at Meredith, M-E-R-E-D-I-T-H, @luckythreeranch.com. I have a Facebook page at Meredith Hodges, Public Figure, where a lot of these things are posted as well. Or if you just wanna talk, I do answer the phone. Please leave a message if you don't get me straight up, because I do answer everyone that communicates with me. My phone number is (800) 816-7566.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Awesome. And you also have a children's website. Tell me about that.

Meredith Hodges:

Yes, we, we do have a children's website, and we've got all kinds of information and games for kids, uh, as well as music videos and coloring pages, at jasperthemule.com.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Awesome. All right. Thanks again, Meredith, and we will talk soon.

Meredith Hodges:

Sounds perfect.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Gotta go. My mule is looking for me.

Speaker 3:

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