UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF CRUPPERS & BREECHING
MEREDITH HODGES - LUCKY THREE RANCH

- Feeding - know what is nutritionally effective for your mules
- Tack & Equipment - mohair - alpaca girths are ideal equipment
- Keep your leather tack CLEAN to prevent rubbing and sores
- Select a crupper made from English bridle leather so it will break under extreme pressure
- Biothane and Nylon do not warm up with elasticity and flexibility like leather does
- Proper use and adjustment of cruppers & breeching
- Weight & ability of the rider will affect the shift of the saddle
- Using a balanced seat with proper hand and leg cues will help your mule maintain his footing on the trail
- Crupper or Breeching? Cruppers stabilize the saddle better with human riders
- Cruppers allow for better range of motion in the equine, especially in the hind legs for uphill climbing
- Breeching can restrict the hind legs too much when ascending and put the equine off balance
- Breeching can be used effectively with inanimate loads
- Breeching has more straps and more risk of chafing than does a crupper.

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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 ho-

And our author, TV personality and world-renowned mule trainer, Meredith Hodges of the Lucky Three Ranch. She's back and she's at the top of her game with more sass and grit from Loveland, Colorado at the Lucky Three Ranch. We are talking with Meredith Hodges. Meredith, welcome back.

Meredith Hodges:

Well, thank you. It's good to be back. We're talking about cruppers and breeching today?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

You bet. Go with it.

Meredith Hodges:

Okay. Well, I had a lot of people tell me, first of all, just in training in general, especially when I was showing that, oh, they didn't need to go to any extent to do anything because, uh, they were only gonna go trail riding. Um, and, and people think, you know, that they only need, you know, what they think they need to use for the moment.

And when they think about c- cruppers and breeching, uh, they think about holding the saddle back. And basically that's about as far as their thinking goes. Uh, but they don't understand, uh, that, you know, for instance, when they, they put a, a cruppers on, they, they say, "Oh, my animal doesn't like it, um, because he's bucking with it," and all of that. Well, they need to be introduced to these, these restraints and stuff. And they, some animals don't like breeching either.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:

But trail, trail riding and jumping are two activities where it's absolutely essential to do core postural training with your equine to solidify the symmetrical balance when he's in motion, or even when he's standing still, because they have a hard time standing still if they're not comfortable that way. And when you've got an animal and you're up on the trail and everything, you're gonna need a whole lot more than just having your saddle held back.

Um, the other thing is, is that they make a lot of comparisons with animals gaits. And they say that a lot of animals have rougher gaits than others. Well, yeah, they actually do because they're in a different posture.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

Nobody is born with good posture and that must be taught. And it's the same for animals as it is for people. And even, even dogs, cats, if you train a cat, if you can get 'em trained.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
Mine are trained, but that's okay. (laughs).

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
I even have a cat that gets adjusted by the chiropractor.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
You know, and he is out.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, boy.

Meredith Hodges:
But I've seen the difference, you know, and the way these guys move and how they handle their bodies is so much better. And, and I've found that it's really important to address their core balance. And that's, we're not talking about just muscle. We're talking about those elements, the, the muscle, the muscles, obviously the tendons, the ligaments, the soft tissue and the cartilage and the joints, um, all has to be developed in a healthy way to support the bones, the skeleton.

And when that is adequately supported and the animals in balance, it's, it's much safer on the trails. It's much safer over jumps. Uh, when I was doing combined training, for instance, you know, people say, "Oh, well, you, you were, you know, just doing fluff stuff, you know, when you were out there doing it and you were riding in an English saddle. And so the cruppers was okay." And, uh, if anything, it was a whole lot more radical than probably anything that anybody-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm.

Meredith Hodges:
... else does up on the trail.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
Because yeah, we were going three miles over 20 jumps at a gallop up and down the hills, jumping off rocks like these guys do with a jump on the bottom of it-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:
... or a jump at the top. And, and yes, I was riding in an English saddle because that was the protocol, and those were the rules of, of the, the whole thing that I was doing. And I had a little trouble being perched on an English saddle doing all of that stuff. So balance became extremely important.

But the other thing that I noticed, uh, was that every element, the animal being in balance, the tack and equipment being right and balanced, and me being balanced all work together to keep all this stuff in place. And so I noticed that, um, my, my animals taught me to make educated decisions with what to use, a crupper or a breech, whatever, according to the not only the anatomy of the person, or not the person, but the animal. But, you know, and I found out that good confirmation was really important.

Um, but the way that I was feeding them was really important because I began to look at the way my animals looked with the feed program I was using. And when I was testing feeds, and believe me, I tested 'em with everything. I lost 11 animals in 10 years because they colicked and foundered and, and had all kinds of problems. Uh, so I was feeding alf- half alfalfa, half grass hay, and everybody said that was the thing to do. And then I was introduced to all these supplements and everything, um, and that was gonna make 'em better and everything.

But I started thinking about that too. And I thought, "You know, I- I'm losing animals and I don't wanna lose my animals anymore. I want 'em to be healthy and I

want 'em to be happy. And I want 'em to have that long life that people keep saying that mules can have." I've seen 52-year-old mules.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

I have seen other people with mules into their, their late 30s and 40s . But I've, I've discovered that those animals were kind of rare. They weren't the norm.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

The norm, according to, to my veterinarian for equines, uh, way back when they were living between 15 and 20. And then with the new gentle breaking techniques and the new feeding, uh, products and all of that, they gained five years. So now it's from 20 to 25 is average. But what I'm seeing on an average at my ranch, now that I've tested all of these feed things, my animals are living well into their 30s. Uh, the average, uh, age for mine, uh, are between the ages of 35, or 33 and 35.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And that's on, yeah, that's on the average. And then we even had a mini mule that lived till he was 41. So I thought, "Wow, we're getting somewhere here." And I started looking at the difference in the bodies of the animals and in the, the frequency of when the vet was coming out here for colic. And I, I noticed that my animals' shape was a whole lot different than it used to be. Most, most equines, they look like they've got a nice spine that kind of sticks up a little bit with a hay belly hanging from it. And if you don't do any exercise, it really looks like a big hay belly.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

But, but mine, when I got 'em on this, this feeding program of crimped oats mixed with Sho-Glo vitamins, and corn oil. And, and I only feed that once a day in the evenings and then I'll feed three times a day on brome and orchard grass.

And when I got 'em all on this program, then they all started looking much more shapely in their bodies. And the most apparent thing was that now the spine didn't stick up off the torso, but it actually, um, melded into the torso. There's no line there. There's usually a groove right alongside of the spine and then the belly begins. But these animals began to having more contour to their torso. So where the spine is tied in and everything, the frequency of the fatty tissue kind of went away. It used to come up in blobs, mostly on the crest and on the croup.

And, and so when they started grazing, of course, they'd start to get fat there and their bodies would start getting outta shape. But, you know, without a lot of exercise, just feeding this feeding program seemed to do them a lot of good. And I realized that the Sho-Glo vi- vitamins they were getting were kind of like the, the One A Day vitamins that humans have. You don't need a lot of supplements 'cause it kind of covers across the board the normal things that they need.

And, and then, um, the Mazola corn oil, that really takes a good, good care of how the fatty tissue is distributed through their bodies. And it really makes a difference in their hoof. There's a lot of hoof conditioners out there that are softening these hooves. And I see it all the time. And these hooves are not holding their shape. It's bad enough that they don't have a, a lot of good long ears farriers that can balance the feet. But if the feet aren't in balance, the rest of the body's not gonna be in balance. And what I'm seeing is these animals are coming up with feet that are kind of caving over. And, and especially in, in the behind, but although it still does it in the front. And you see 'em, they start looking pigeon-toed. And the foot's collapsing. Looks more like a club foot.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

And I think that that is due, you know, people wanna blame it on wet environment and stuff like that, but I think it's more internal.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And this Mazola corn oil has really made a difference with my mules' feet. Uh, they no longer have stress rings on 'em or anything like that. I've got an excellent practitioner that comes out and, and takes care of anything and everything with my animals. He's very familiar with long ears and he does an excellent job. And their feet are staying nice and hard and their bodies are staying in balance. And, and so you do. You have to consider the feed.

Um, now the other thing that's a really big deal, it, well, you gotta realize these feeds are developed in laboratories. And, and my, my testing has be- been done over 43 years with 32 animals of different sizes, types, and breeds and all of that. Horses, donkeys, mules, miniatures, all of that. And, and it all works on all of them. And the only thing that I've had to do differently with the feed is just give them all different amounts.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

It's the same, the same crimped oats mixed with Mazola corn oil and Sho-Glo keeps 'em really good. And, and so that, that works really well. I tried, uh, dehydrated feeds because at one point, uh, we had a bad year and we were short on hay, so we went to hay cubes. Um, and we had some that didn't have, uh, many teeth left 'cause they were getting older. And we had to put 'em in, in, uh, give 'em soaked hay cubes with, uh, the oats mix blended and all of that kind of stuff.

And, uh, we didn't have much, much luck with that. What we did have was we had an incidence of a lot of 'em were choking. And so I talked to my vet about that and he said, "You know, when they started, when they first developed these dehydrated feeds and, and these pellets," he said, "That's when we began to see a lot, an increase in the choking in animals-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

'cause, you know." Yeah. He says-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

... "But the Sho-Glo comes in pellets, but you're only feeding an ounce to the saddle mules, a quarter ounce of them to the miniatures and two ounces to the drafts. You know, so it's not like they're getting a lot of it. So you're not gonna get the choke from that, uh, at that level." You know? I thought about that and I... "Well, that's not very good."

And so what we did too, for the animals that, uh, don't have many teeth is we got a machine that will chop up bales of hay, uh, itself and chop it up into little tiny pieces. And we didn't really have to, to soak it. The other thing that pellets and dehydrated seeds do is they take the fluids out of the digestive tract. And like my vet said, you cannot put enough water on that stuff to replace the fluids in the digestive tract.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, you can give 'em a little bit, but think about it. You've got miles of di- you know, intestines in there.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure. Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

And they're just pouring fluid into that, that feed constantly when they're eating. And that's a lot of fluid. And you can't get that with a hose.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, the other things is with the supplements is if you're gonna feed supplements, you really ought to get a baseline on what they're, what they don't, you know, what they're lacking in their bodies.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And then you gotta realize that taking a baseline on an animal, getting a lab test on a mule is a whole lot different than what you're gonna get on a horse. But they're basing the numbers on what the horses have. And what I have found is my vet, every time he did lab work on him, he'd come back and he'd go, "Well, this mule is anemic." And, and I said, "So you're saying to me that all are, all, all my mules are anemic?" I said, "Do you think that that might just be the numbers for a mule or a donkey?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

Because they are different from horses.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And if that, if that keeps coming up, maybe that's the way they're supposed to be. Because they're not, they're not acting like they're sick. Your, your lab work is telling me that they're anemic and they should be run down, but they're not. So maybe we just need to do more research-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

... you know, at that end.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and so the other thing is, is if that's true, you know, I had one of my mules on Red Cell for a while, and it made no difference at all in his anemia. (laughs) it, it really didn't. We kept giving it to him anyway because he liked it. So we did it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And I... Well, and, and this is another thing. These animals will tell you what they need.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, sure.la

Meredith Hodges:
And I see a lot of discussion about salt and minerals and things like that. And they go, "Oh, you shouldn't feed this," or, "You shouldn't feed that. And you should put these loose salt in their feed," and, "Or feed 'em white salt by itself." And I have to have tremendous success giving them one of those, a red trace mineral salt blocks and making sure that they're right next to the water tanks all the time, all around the property. And they will go to those salt blocks and lick what they need. And if they're not licking it, they probably don't need it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
There you go.

Meredith Hodges:
Because, you know, these animals seem to know what they need instinctually. And they will, if you make it available, they'll do it. You know? Now what I was saying about the Mazola corn oil, it keeps the hair healthy, it keeps the feet ideally lubri- lubricated and hard. And it makes the ideal, keeps the ideal, uh, conditioning of the digestive tract regularity and colic disappears.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Hmm.

Meredith Hodges:
I have not seen my vet in between vaccinations for three years.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:
Nobody out of, out of 17 animals is, is even having a mild colic.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:
So I know, I know this, this stuff is good.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, sure.

Meredith Hodges:
You know? And what I have to say about, hey, we feed the hay three times a day, and then when we turn 'em out, we turn 'em out slowly in the spring, an hour at a time for about two weeks. Then we up it to, up it to... Or for a week, then we up it to two, then we up it to three. But the maximum amount of turnout time my animals have on pasture is five hours a day. And the rest of the time they're kept in dry lots.

The donkeys don't go out on, on pasture at all 'cause they can get obese in a heartbeat, but they do get to graze when I take 'em for a walk, you know, and they like that. But we, they have a dry lot turnout that's big enough so they can run and play. And as long as they've got that to do, they don't seem to get bored. You know, like so many people think they're gonna be.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:
They're not bored.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
They just need something to do.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, and, and if your fences, if you don't have wood fences and wire that they can sit on and bend and tear apart and all of that stuff, if they don't get started on these vices like cribbing and everything, uh, then they don't do it. It's, it's like if you present the opportunity to chew on the fence, then they'll do it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

If you present the opportunity to sit on the wire, then they'll do it. But I have spent years just making my, my, uh, facility equine-proof because (laughs) they all chew on the fence.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

You know, in doing so, my animals are a whole lot more calm that way. And, uh, so yeah, I think stress in them is a big thing just like it is in people. And it's probably creating more maladies than we even realize. And so if you don't set it up to be bad, it won't be. So I try to stay away from any artificially produced hay. Uh, we actually grow our own hay here now 'cause it got increasingly hard to find good grass hay that didn't have mold in it, if it was the right kind of grass hay. Uh, people are not alerted to the fact that fescue grass hay is extremely dangerous.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

It, it has caused abortions, spontaneous abortions in pregnant mares. And if it does that, I don't think I need to go any further, uh, to say that in general, it probably isn't very effectively, uh, healthy-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

... for any equine, pregnant or not. You know, if it's a toxic thing, just don't feed it. It's easier to go the other way and-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

... just feed something that is healthy. And then, uh, I keep all my animals in dry lots and runs, like I said, their turnout is five hours a day, and that's to pre- uh, to prevent obesity. But it also prevents problems like allergies from exposure to flies and other insects that live in these grassy pastures. You know, when you leave them out there, their exposure is, is a lot higher than if you just put 'em out for five hours a day. You know?

And the other thing is, is people, uh, like to, they, "Oh, my animals get hot in the summertime, so I wanna clip 'em." Uh, I found that the only clipping mine ever needed really was when I was showing. And that was because the judges couldn't see their bodies. And, you know, and I didn't really feel very good about doing it, but it was the only way I was gonna win the classes.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Um, so that's more... You know, a lot of these things are done, artificial things are done, uh, to, for our own convenience and our own egos and stuff. And I think that the way the animal was made in the beginning is the way they're supposed to be done. Now, granted, I had to get a lot of extra equipment. I had to put bl- blankets on my animals. I had to, um, put fly masks on and things like that to keep the insects off of them.

But once I stopped showing, I found that it was, it was easy to just work with Mother Nature and what she gave them and, and try to try to just kind of do that so that I only clip bridle pads anymore. And that's just so that the equipment, the tack and equipment doesn't get tangled up on their head.

And, and then the other thing that was a big complaint was what they call jack sores on their legs, on the, particularly on their hocks, but they can get 'em on their knees and stuff like that. But that's where the hair starts rubbing. And, and when they don't have any hair there, then they get bloody sores.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Ah.

Meredith Hodges:
So it's best not to do that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
Um, I found that if you do regular grooming once a week, um, you can really help their health. Uh, and when you see those kinds of sores coming up, a lot of times they're just, you know, especially during shedding, they're gonna start wearing hair, hair off of their hips in strange places. And you go, "Oh, what do they got going on?" And it's really not anything. It's just rubbing, it's chafing. And when we use cruppers and breeching, and a lot of the breeching has a cruppers on it anyway, uh, it can rub underneath the tail and stuff. So I put Johnson's baby oil, uh, in the manes and tails weekly to keep the skin soft, uh, because softer skin is not gonna shave as easy.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Hmm.

Meredith Hodges:
And so when you, when you use that, then the, and adjust your clipper the right way, uh, it's less likely to rub any sores or anything like that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
Um, but see, it's still tied into the eating and what they're eating, because if you don't have that Mazola corn oil in their feed, then their skin is gonna be a lot drier. And it, and the, the baby oil itself is not gonna help, you know.

Uh, the other thing that I do too is I worm with Ivermectin every other month, and a lot of people have told me, "Well, that's overkill. That's, you know, they're gonna build up a resistance to Ivermectin." Uh, Ivermectin is not a drug that does that. It's a perfectly safe drug. It's been a long, around for a very long time.

It has adequately, uh, handled the worm situation by doing it regularly like that. And the reason, and, and we do break the cycle in November with Strongid to take care of any other worms that the Ivermectin does not, uh, address. But, you know, when I've talked about this, people say, "Oh, you've gotta get a fecal sample," and, and this.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And well, I call 'em the fecal people, but-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(Laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
(Laughs)... but what they don't realize is that if you're killing the larvae in the animal, then there is nothing in the manure.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
There you go.

Meredith Hodges:
It's dead. It's, it's not there.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs) Right.

Meredith Hodges:
You know, I, in further research with Ivermectin, I suspect from my experience that the Ivermectin is actually helping during fly season to keep the flies away from my animals.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

And I also use Farnam Tri-Tec 14 Fly spray once a week. And this last summer, it was particularly bad. The flies were really thick for a while. And so I had to spray 'em twice a week. But getting back to, you know, we're talking about their hair coats and everything and helping, those hair coats keep the flies from getting too deep into their bodies and laying eggs, um, because they rub it off. When they go out into the pasture, they rub everything, when they're rolling, they scrape their knees. They, they even turn their heads up upside down and do their faces, you know, in the dirt to try to wipe off the flies or anything that they've left.

And, and so, you know, I think that the Ivermectin is actually contributing to the number of flies that even land on them. Now, I have some of 'em that attract flies like crazy. There's, but just a handful in 17, just about five of them, uh, they, I guess the flies just love them and they gravitate towards them more than the others. And I think that has to do with their body chemistry, the way they smell and, and all of that. Um, it may even be-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Well, what about their, their coat color? Does that have something to do with it?

Meredith Hodges:

I, I think you may be onto something there, because it seems to me that the animals with the lighter coats, uh, do attract more flies than the ones with the darker coats do. However, I've got one... Well, and I, I think it might've been because she was gone for 17 years. She went to Hearts & Horses and worked there. And then when she came back here, uh, oh, man, she was covered with flies. Good.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

They were glad to see her.

Meredith Hodges:

Thick.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

Oh, yeah. All four legs and under the belly.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, no.

Meredith Hodges:
I mean, it, it looked like a, just a black belt of flies on all four of those place- or five of those places. And the only thing I can figure is that she didn't get wormed as regularly there as she did here when she came home.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh.

Meredith Hodges:
And that proved to be a pretty, uh, a pretty good assumption because after about three weeks they weren't attacking her like that anymore. And now she doesn't, she doesn't get 'em either. She's a black mule.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Hmm.

Meredith Hodges:
And so she only has a few of 'em, but the sorrel mules and the palomino, uh, they, they really do attract, attract flies. Um, the paint-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
... the paints do.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yes.

Meredith Hodges:
A little bit more.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Uh, not so much with the black ones though. No, you're, you've got, you're onto something there.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm. Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

So, you know, it's, you, you gotta pay attention to these kinds of things. And, and a lot of these exposures that these animals are, are kind of put in these situations are, we're doing it because of what we heard, because of what's being marketed and advertised and all of that. And so we do these things. And one of the most, uh, uh, frequent thing I hear too is, "Oh, I can't feed my animal grass hay because, or I can't feed the oats because they're, uh, allergic to them."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

What?

Meredith Hodges:

Well, I, it, where do you think these allergies are coming from?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, you, you gotta ask yourself that, is it really the oats?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Is it really the grass hay?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

'Cause with 32 animals that I've had, I've never had one with allergies from this program. Never.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

There you go. Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, and, and that includes all my experience with 100 animals out in California. When I worked for my mother. Uh, none of them got it from the oats mix or anything like that either.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Huh.

Meredith Hodges:

Um, the oats, uh, the oats, the only thing you gotta worry about is make sure that what you're feeding is crimped, cracked, uh, steamed or opened up oats because the other ones just go right through 'em and have no nutritional value at all. And, uh, any irregulars, i- irregularities in the digestive tract can cause gas, which can lead to twists and colic and founder and like I said, even allergies.

Um, but we haven't had any of that problem since we've been on this diet, you know, and, and done this. And there, and even without exercise, their body took a completely different shape. And that's also why I do not condone taking and using other kinds of treats besides crimped oats without the vitamins in them. I just put 'em in a fanny pack and carry 'em around my waist and num- that's their number one go-to anyway. They'll come off a pasture for oats. They love crimped oats. And so they will just turn themselves inside out for you. And, uh, it's a great, great reward for 'em. You just make sure that you're rewarding and not just handing out treats 'cause they know how to tap you for that.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, sure, sure.

Meredith Hodges:

Yeah. So they need to know that they have to be good for that, you know? And so, so that's how I kind of developed the, the food part of this whole thing. The other thing you need to consider too is that a- all the organs in the body are working. Um, and when something in the intestines gets obstructed, it obstructs all the other organs in the body too.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
And-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
... so they need, they need this to keep everything flowing well, and this keeps energy and blood circulation going, which has a lot to do with how they're going to perform. A lot of people think that they're just being lazy. And, you know, "Oh, yeah, this is just a slow mule." But it could be that they're just really uncomfortable in their body.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:
And when they, when the organs are not functioning, those aren't things you can definitely see. Uh, but when they're being fed properly, everything works, they actually feel good, which can often scare people because then they start thinking the way they do, uh, about being a hard animal to handle. I just saw a thing up on Facebook. Somebody wrote a thing about how thoroughbreds are gonna kick you. It was a farrier. That thoroughbreds are more likely to kick you. The Arabs will kick you. Quarter, quarter horses and mules will kick you, but not as, as energetically.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And I thought, I thought, "You know what?"

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, cool.

Meredith Hodges:

"There's a whole lot of generalizations right there."

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
There you go.

Meredith Hodges:
There's a lot of people that are, will chew your head off, man.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
And then there's those that won't.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
And it matters what-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
And that person's an expert too. Right?

Meredith Hodges:
Right. Probably.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
They call themselves an expert.

Meredith Hodges:
Probably. Yeah. Well, he probably thinks so. But a lot of people think that they're experts before they learn.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.la

Meredith Hodges:

You know, and they don't realize that learning is an ongoing experience. And, you know, a lot of those things may be proven-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
There you go.

Meredith Hodges:
... not so true-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
... if you use another approach.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
You know, and, and I mean-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
... generally speaking, any kind of resistance that the animals are giving you, they're just copying in the only way they know how.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
And, and it's up to you to figure where it's running amok.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

Now a lot of people do start talking about, "Oh, well my animal's acting sore, so, you know, my saddle must be rubbing in the wrong place and everything, uh, and I gotta maybe get a new saddle." Well, you know, there's a lot of people out there, marketing saddles and all, all kinds of other-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

... kind of equipment. And boy, there's a load of restraints out there. And I developed the elbow pull because it only presents the animal from raising their head too high and getting in the wrong kind of posture and hollowing their neck and their back. But I do see the value in them be able, being able to move in every other position so that their bodies can stay in good posture and climb in good posture up a hill or move out, you know, if they're in harness or even under saddle on flat ground, so that they can really pull their hindquarters underneath them and arc their spines so that they can slide into a really good reining stop.

Their body has to be free to move like that. And the elbow pull that I have, that's what it does. People look at it and they go, oh, it's like dry reins. It's holding their head down. No. It's just keeping them from holding their head so high that they hollow their neck and their back. But they can, they can go up as high, even past their withers in height. They can put their nose all the way to the ground. They can go 180 degrees plus to s- side to side. And so it gives 'em complete freedom of motion.

And when you're, you're talking about any, if you're talking equipment, that's what you really need to, to look at first. Because if you are up on that trail and you're going up and down hills and jumping off a rock and into a gorge and coming up the other side and, and going into some of these really crazy places in the mountains, that animal needs to be able to balance its body and be strong in that, especially with you on top. And so the equipment needs to fit the animal's body like a glove.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And this is what, this is what I've, I've discovered that when I place my saddle, it needs to be in the middle of the torso. I can't tell you how many people have their

saddles, even if it's just a little bit too far forward. If the saddle is too far forward, you run the risk of rubbing on the top of the shoulder.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:
At the point of the shoulder, your girth will be coming into the sensitive area right behind the forearm where the, the skin is really thin there. But if you put your saddle and say we have a double rig Western saddle, and we put it right in the middle of the torso, then the girth is gonna hang down. And that's where it's gonna hang down, where the body starts to swell and the thin- the skin gets thicker. And so that's where you want it to be. You bring your girth around there. And I use stringers because they, you know, not so much the nylon. I try to stick with the cottons.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:
You know, the cotton stringers, because I found too that artificial, uh, tack and equipment, um, often chafes them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Like neoprene. Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
Like neoprene and like nylon, those things can really rub.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
So when you say-

Meredith Hodges:
And-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
... when you say "string girths," are you talking like mohair and alpaca?

Meredith Hodges:

Well, yeah, those are, those are, okay. The only one that really isn't as the nylon stringers.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

Those will still rub.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh.

Meredith Hodges:

But the rest of them are configured, you know, with those little ropes all together, you know, so they tend to kind of spread when they breathe and, and, and, and just kind of give the animal airflow through there. Um, and the other thing is adjustment is really important. Uh, your front girth does need to be tight to hold the saddle down in the position, but the saddle needs to fit too.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Sure.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and, and so a lot of the saddles that I'm seeing, especially the ones I'm seeing that have what they call mule bars in their mule saddles is the point of pressure is, is, uh, a strip parallel on each side of the animal. Um, and I guess they're trying to follow that groove that's on either side of the spine that, you know, they see the anim- that the animal with the spine sticking up in the hay belly, you know, hanging from it. And, and then they, they wanna fill that space.

But the other thing that I found is when I sat on a horse bareback, uh, right there behind the withers, my legs fell into a groove. And, and on the mules, there's a muscle there, and it makes my, made my legs stick out, like it was trying to be wrapped around a hay belly, but I couldn't get a grip. When the animals started to move, my body rocked really bad and it, it really offset my balance.

And so I figured out that perhaps if my saddle tree didn't have the bulge in it at the gull- gullet fo- for the horse, if it was flatter just there, that the saddles I had from 1972, my Circle Y saddles, my longhorn saddle, my American saddle, um, would

fit better if I just had my saddle maker take 'em apart and shave that area down where that that muscle is on the mule. So it would just lay flat over it instead of having a bulge against it. And it worked on all of my saddles.

Now all of my saddles fit all of my mules. And, uh, the last new saddles I bought, uh, one was a Circle Y, uh, Western saddle and, uh, I bought it in '94. But the other three saddle that I use all the time that fit all the mules are 1972.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

And then I also found that, you know, of course I had to use English saddles and I tried fitting all these English saddles. And the first one I got was a, a British, uh, brand dressage saddle. And it kind of pinched my mule in, in the withers a little bit, um, like those Western saddles did in the beginning before I had 'em shaved down. So I went looking for another, uh, dressage saddle, and I found that the Keeper saddles work pretty well. Um, I just have to use a wedge pad in the front because they're they are kind of unbalanced for a horse who's higher in the withers. Uh, but if I put that wedge pad in there, I brought it up, but at least it was padded enough in the back. The other saddles that I used for my English stuff, uh, were Passier and Courbette used from the '70s-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

... uh, all-purpose saddles.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And I used those cross-country. I used 'em in English classes. I even used them in the combined training dressage, because they have a balanced seat on them.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

But the one thing that I, I discovered is putting a crupper on an English saddle like that, um, in order for it to be really secure, uh, first of all, you need cruppers that are made out of, uh, rolled English bridle leather. You don't want something that's made for a pack saddle.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

It's too stiff.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

It's too wide. And if you don't keep your tack and equipment, uh, conditioned, so it's pliable, elastic, and flexible, it will rub. And wherever it rubs, it's gonna create sores. But even more than that is gonna be aggravating to your equine. And he's gonna pick up any kind of resistive behaviors he can to make it stop. And, and so you gotta make sure that these, these things are comfortable.

Well, with the English saddle, what I found was, um, I saw a lot of other people's English saddles. And they were, you know, telling me about this brand or that brand, but I was, I was noticing that the back part of the saddle where that metal T is supposed to go in to attach your crupper to, they weren't padded enough.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Ah.

Meredith Hodges:

Now I kind of, I kind of attribute that to modern America uses less material, therefore it's cheaper to make, therefore the profit margins are higher. Um, but I noticed the saddles that I have, have plenty of padding back there, because when you put that metal T in there and then you sit on that saddle, the back of the saddle takes the T down, and the part that the crupper is attached to is very stiff, and it can go right into their spine if that padding isn't thick enough to hold it up off their back.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Ouch.

Meredith Hodges:
Does that make sense?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
But that's something a lot of people wouldn't even think about.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Ah.

Meredith Hodges:
You know, so, so you have to, you gotta think about those things then when you're evaluating your tack and equipment. And like I said, you know, you gotta take care of your tack equipment because the other thing is, my saddles, still today, my Western saddles and my English saddles look almost brand new because we do, uh, oil all the tack and lubricate the tack and clean the tack every time we use it. And it, it gets all the tack in my tack room gets done, uh, once a month with the Leather New is what we use on it.

And, uh, that includes, oh my God, I don't know. That's four sets of, four sets of mini harness, draft harness, one single set of draft harness, two sets of saddle mule harness. Um, and that's not even counting the, oh gosh, I think there's like 30 bridles in there, if not more. Um, but even though we're not using them very much anymore, we clean it all the time.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, you bet.

Meredith Hodges:
And, and I just used, uh, my tack saddles that I had in a box for a while. I wasn't even sure I was gonna be able to use it, but we had a shoot in our old Western town and we wanted to do it with people. And then we thought, "Well, we'll just pack the standard donkey and the mini donkey." And so I pulled out my, my standard donkey tack saddle and the mini donkey pack saddle.

And, and this guy made 'em for my mother at her ranch 50 years ago. And that stuff was so stiff. (laughs) But by the time we got done with it, it had been stored good enough so that the leather was stiff, but it was still in good conditioning. No, no, no cracks in it or anything. And when we went over it with the conditioner, it looked brand new in the pictures. I think you've seen the pictures of the donkeys in that tack.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

But everything in my tack room looks brand new. It's all flexible, it's all pliable. And I think the, the reason that it fits so well is because it's been well cared for. And when you put any of my saddles, particularly the Western saddles on 'em, the pressure points underneath, uh, are, you know, when you get on and ride are not just those two strips on either side of your spine.

Um, I u- I have never, I- I tried, but I never really got into these thicker, stiffer pads because they just don't seem to meld to the animal's body. They seem like they're perched on top. And when we're riding, it feels like the saddle's going back and forth, and back and forth, and side to side, and not just melding and, and conforming to their body. And if the animal is not in good posture and condition that way with good core strength, then he also has a body that perpetuates more saddle motion, whether it be back and forth or front to, you know, front to back and sliding.

And, and this can be a problem, but my saddles sit right into my animal's bodies. And when they're moving, you know, like when I'm lunging 'em, I can launch 'em and see that those saddles do not move any other way but the way that the animals are moving. So it's, it's real comfortable, you know, for them. And, and so that tells me, I got two e- two elements that are, you know, for balance and harmony that are fitting together when I've got that all right.

You know, and then I notice too, okay, if I'm putting the saddle over the center of gravity and it's conformed to the animal's body, and the crupper is attached snugly across the croup under the tail, so it doesn't pull the tail up, there's a concern about having the crupper break the tail. Uh, if it's English bridal leather and you're going up, up and down really steep hills or anything that crupper should break before the tail does. The tail-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, sure.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, the, the tail's at that point where that cruppers goes underneath is, is really strong, but they have to be able to hold their tail down in a relaxed position. When you adjust it, it needs to be not too tight that it pulls that tail up even a little bit.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm.

Meredith Hodges:

You need to use your baby oil when you're grooming so that there's no skin being shaved there.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And causing any kind of aggravation to make 'em squish their tail.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

All right.

Meredith Hodges:

The crupper cannot have buckles down by the tail, because that is a risk too. If they're going up and down a hill and the crupper's too tight and there's buckles on it, and they swish their tail up into that crupper and it gets caught, you gotta realize that they balance with their head and their neck, and they also balance with their tail. So when they're going up and down hills, they need to be able to have the tail in line with the neck. And if it's cranked off to the side, it throws 'em off balance. It makes 'em lean too far one way or the other. Then they have an unbalanced rider up there that, you know, complicates the whole thing, throws 'em off balance, they trip, they fall, they roll, they break their tail.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, gosh.

Meredith Hodges:

That is how they can break their tail.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
And not only that, with that all out of alignment, one of the things that I do not like about breech, now breech is really good for an inanimate load. For a fact, you know, that's what it was originally designed for.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
It wasn't designed to go with a, a saddle, you know, necessarily. Um, I mean, you can use one. If you really want to use it, go ahead, fine, use it. You gotta realize what the implications are when you use that. Most breeching does have a crupper attachment to it, guaranteed. But again, you come back to adjustment. If you adjust the crupper too tight, it's going to pull that tail up. And, and you don't wanna do that.

If you have your saddle out of position to start with and you don't put it in the middle of the torso, then when you're going up and down hills, that crupper's gonna become loose. And when it becomes loose, it starts to pull the tail sideways. It doesn't stay in line with the neck, you know. And, and so, and then those straps that come up, you know, the breeching behind the hindquarters and all the straps that come off of that to hold it, to supposedly hold your saddle in position, that's just that many more to go loose and rub.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Sure.

Meredith Hodges:
And ang- aggravate your animal. And, and the, the most, you know, the, the thing that I don't like the most about breeching is that even if you get it tight enough to hold the saddle in place, it might help going downhill. And even if your saddle's in position, it might help going downhill. That breeching that's on there behind their, their, their hindquarters is, is gonna be tight, is gonna hold it back and keep the saddle from going over their withers. But if you turn around and go up the hill, this

is when it gets dangerous. Because if you've got it tight, the breeching tight enough to hold the saddle back, it's restricting the hindquarter joints, the hips from fully extending. They can only extend it as far as that breeching will allow them.

If they're in a crupper, they have full extension motion in their hip joints. It's, they can extend it all the way. And if you can envision this going up a hill and it's a steep hill. And they're trying to find their footing with their hindquarters, they're practically climbing with their front quarters. And that means that they really have to stretch out and get everything in line. And if their hindquarters are restricted, that means that their hip joints can't fully extend, which means it, they cannot, they'll be flat-footed behind and not be able to extend that hind foot far enough to stick a toe in there to push, give a push forward that extra push uphill that they need.

And if they can't do that, it's keeping that hindquarter too far underneath. It's not really underneath the hoo- the the hip. It's out behind it, but not as far as it could be. And what can happen is a misstep, a rollback over the heel, which will tumble you backwards and your animal can land right on top of you.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, my gosh.

Meredith Hodges:

Can, can you visualize that? But this, this is the most dangerous thing that I see with breeching. And it's not-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

... just the animal being sore. You come back with broken arms and broken legs because they fall.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, sure. Oh, right.

Meredith Hodges:

You know, and, and so you, you really wanna set 'em up for success. And, and that is number one with your, your, you know, your tack and equipment, or right now they're saying, "Oh, well, if you wanna keep the saddle back, uh, just take your

back cinch and put it around right in front of the, the flanks," the narrow part there at the, at the end of the bulge through the torso. They don't even think about what that does. I mean, I've got a skeleton here. Rock i- is turning out to be a wonderful teaching tool.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

But you can see, uh, that, you know, when, when we, we put the saddle over his skeleton, that where the back girth falls is, is straight down perpendicular to the ground.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Okay.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and that's where it needs to be snug, but not tight. The only job that back girth has is to hold the back of the saddle down and in place, which helps for the compression and conformity of the Western saddle and distributes the weight across the whole saddle. And when you use pads like I do that, the Navajo pads that aren't stiff like those other pads, um, it will meld into their bodies.

And, and the more, the more connection that it has with their body over a longer, uh, more of a surface, the less the chance of shifting and, and, and moving, uh, will, that whole thing is gonna be lessened. The front girth is tight, the back girth holds the saddle down against their bodies and melds to it, uh, so that there's compression throughout the whole thing. And gives a whole lot more stability to the whole rigging, you know, there.

But the other thing that's really important too, is when you take those, those girths and you take 'em up in front of the flanks, now you've got more pull, uh, from that girth, uh, away when you're going downhill and you're gonna be putting pressure on those tiny, tiny undercarriage rib bones. And they're just, they're really kind of, kind of narrow up in that spot. But where the back cinch naturally hangs at a perpendicular angle, those bones are a whole lot thicker and can take a whole lot more pressure. So, you know, I mean, if you broke a rib, how the heck do you think you'd feel?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, my gosh.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and, and these guys, I mean, here they are putting the girths on these guys and they say, "Oh, it doesn't hurt." Well, how do you know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

That one of those tiny little toothpick width bones hasn't fractured.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Uh-huh. Wow.

Meredith Hodges:

You, you don't know unless you go take an X-ray. But I, I felt my, my animals are all happy to go wherever, you know. And we do tests, you know, to make sure that the tacking equipment works. And, and I, I often say that you should really go ahead and get it all adjusted in the beginning. Put the saddle in the middle and, and tighten your girths. You know, the way I say it, tighter in front, but not too tight. If it's too tight, it's gonna rub. It's gonna make the saddle go back and forth and back and forth from side to side. And that's gonna create rubbing.

If it's, if it's snug, it'll just simply hold that saddle in position, as will the back finch as will with the help of the crupper. And like we were talking, those artificial, uh, materials that they often make, uh, you know, cruppers and girths and breeching and everything from, uh, like biothane and nylon and those kinds of things, they don't breathe like leather does.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Leather, you know, if it's not meant to be a hard saddle leather, and even good quality saddle leather, if it's, if it's cured properly, will, uh, stay flexible and elastic and will be able to meld to the animal's body. But there's a lot of Mexican leather that is cured in urine. And that gets hard and stiff, and it, it doesn't, it doesn't, uh, really get elastic or anything. But when you have a really good leather, then what

you wanna do is you get everything in position and get it all adjusted. And then go ahead and ride for about 15 minutes or so and get off and do it again. Because the heat of the animal's body will warm up the leather, and when the leather gets warmed up, it will stretch a little.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
It won't stretch a lot unless it's really cheap leather.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:
But it will stretch a little, and then you just readjust it and, and then you're pretty good to go. If the animal's heated up, the leather's heated up and everything is stretched where it's gonna go, and you've got it adjusted, then you're good to go. The other thing that I really like to do too, is to make sure that that front girth is in the right place. Um, I go ahead and tighten it up a little bit, and I will tighten up that girth three or four times.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:
Uh, during, you know, my adjustment period after 15 minutes... Well, actually when I'm saddling I'll do two, two adjustments of that, that girth, uh, before I even get on.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
And one of the things that I like to do is I taught my animals to stretch their front legs forward. And when I do that, it pulls all the hair out from underneath in the skin, out from underneath that, that girth so nothing is bunched up under there-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Mm-hmm.

Meredith Hodges:

... to get pinched or anything. But you gotta be careful when you're asking them to stretch that you don't pull on their legs. You lift the front leg and put it in the palm of your hand, and you tell them, "Okay, now stretch." And, oh, just hold it. Just hold it until he stretches it. And, and if he's not trying to stretch it, probably he doesn't have a very good elasticity in his tendons, although he will get more elasticity with the core strength. And you might have to just tap him on the knee to encourage him to straighten that knee and stretch.

But that's all you need to do. Do not pull, just put the, the hoof in your hand and tap on that knee. And he'll get what you're saying. He'll go, "Oh, okay." And he'll go, he'll just unlock, you know, lock up. It's not really locking the knee, but he'll stretch it straight. And then he'll have to pull it back because the tendon is not elastic to hold it there yet.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

Not until you've done it quite a bit. But what that does is, like I said, is it pulls all that skin out straight underneath that girth. And then you, you know, after you've done that, then you just go around and tighten that girth one more time. And then go on and ride for a while and then tighten it another one more time after it heats up. But see, this is the way that you can, can go ahead and get your animal comfortable in his equipment. And then in order for him to stay that way, sorry, folks, you can't just plop yourself up on top of the saddle and expect it to carry you.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:

You have to learn to move with the movement of the equipment of the mule, which you've now got in harmony.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

Now it's just a matter of you getting your body in harmony. And this is why that hourglass pattern, walking through it and leading them is so important. Because when you are doing this, you are going to be, there is a specific way to lead them. You do not grab the lead rope under their nose because if you do that while you're walking, you're gonna be taking 'em off balance with every step you take, because you ever so slightly pull the head from side to side to side. And you don't notice, but they do.

And what you wanna do is get their head at the shoulder, take the lead rope if you're tacking left in the, in, in your left hand, and have a loop across your body so that they can be responsible for their own self-carriage. And then you wanna walk straight lines and gradual arcs, no abrupt things happening. And so when you start to walk on in this hourglass pattern, you go ahead and you say their name, you go, "Walk on." And then you look down at their front feet and see what foot they're leading with, and you match them, left to left, right to right, left, right, left, right, left, right.

And then when you're gonna stop, yeah, what the other thing you're gonna do is you're gonna look where you're going and you're gonna point in direction of travel, which will keep them in pos- in position and discourage them from crossing over in front of you because you're pointing where you're going. And so they will follow that. And then when you wanna come to a halt, you give them a heads up. You go, "And whoa." And then you stop with your feet together.

Then you turn to their shoulder. In between these cones, there's four cones in four corners of your arena that are far apart. There's two in the middle, and you're gonna be doing, if you were drawing it on the ground, an hourglass shape. And you're gonna stop in between those cones and you're gonna square 'em up, then you're gonna give 'em their oats reward from their fanny pack. And you're gonna stand still there, and you're gonna wait until they're completely finished chewing before you go on.

Now when you change, uh, when you stop, you're gonna be changing direction. And you always want yourself on the inside of the arc. So what you're gonna have to do is change leading sides. And when you do that, see there's an internal pendulum that goes on with inside of these animals. And when you're going on the left arc, for instance, around to the, to the middle gait cones from the short end.

Then when you stop, you're gonna have to get on the other side because now you're gonna go on an arc the other direction and the inner pendulum, every time you stop from a certain direction, while you're moving, it's going back and forth and back and forth. And when you slow to stop. It stops going back and forth slowly. And when you stop, it comes to rest. When you set 'em up, it rests, uh, in perfect

balance. And that's when the muscles are warmed up, the core muscles are starting to develop and they are allowed to develop symmetrically around the bones.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Wow.

Meredith Hodges:
This is how you do it. You can't ride 'em into this.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
This has to be done completely independent carriage for the animal. But what it subtly does for you is that you're forced to be in good posture too. You know, you, you keep your chin up, you're in sync with their front legs. You're walking straight lines. You're doing general curves with, with equal weight over your feet while they're having equal weight over their four feet, and you're walking in sync. You've got the same rhythm, the same cat- cadence as you're walking and everything. You're following the front legs.

And, and when you do that, you don't realize it, but your hips, your seat bones are following that motion. Your legs are following that motion. Your hands are following that motion. And you're preparing them to get lunged in the round pen. And, and the second stage of, of the hourglass is to go ahead and add obstacles to it because you've got, you've got core strength and balance from doing that, you know, for a period of time, three months say.

And then you add, uh, obstacles to it and that adds coordination to it. So by the time six months is over with, you're prepared to go in the round pen and start doing the tasks in the round pen that will get you even more in sync because now your animal will lunge with equal weight over all four feet and not lean like a motorcycle. So he is really getting prepared to carry your body on top.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
And when, and when you're walking with him, your body is getting used to his motion. So when you finally do get on top, it's not gonna be as awkward as, as it

would be if you just climbed on. And, and in the round pen, once we do the lunging and everything too, to shorten this whole thing up, you'll do lunging for a while. And you'll put cues to, to him with the lunge line in the round pen so that when get in the open, he knows he had the cue to stay on the circle and not bolt and run off.

Um, then the other thing is, is you'll start your ground driving on the inside of a confined ground pen in a smaller area, so you've got more control. And when you start ground driving him, now you're gonna follow his hind legs. And his hind legs will reinforce that, that cadence, that rhythm of the way he moves and everything. And your hands will learn to go forward with your legs as they're walking. And give to his head out front so that when you finally get on, you've had more practice with his body movement than you even realized.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And when you get on your, your hips and legs will move with him. He has learned his rein cues, so he's not pulling against you. He will be right light in the bridle. And the only thing left for him to learn is the pressure come in from your legs when you pull right, pressure from the left leg to go right. And, and vice versa. And, and he, they can pick that up really fast.

But the thing you have to remember when you get on is don't ride with your heels jammed into the stirrups. What you need to do is you need to learn to ride in a relaxed position that puts most of the weight on your seat bones. And, and when you do that, you keep your legs wrapped around his torso, lightly like a hug. And then when you give him the pressure to move one way or the other, it doesn't come out of nowhere. You just put more pressure on one side to go the o- opposite direction. And he'll learn that and it won't come out of nowhere. And it won't be abrupt and it won't spook him, and it won't cause any tension that way.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Right.

Meredith Hodges:

And so, and so the way that you get yourself balanced like this is not to go out and ride, ride, ride, but to use your round pen again and go ahead and ride him with no stirrups and no reins. And, and learn to just go around. You can do it with an

assistant, without his assistant. And, and just, he's used to his verbal commands and everything. He's, he, and, and all you need to do is to stay relaxed. And when you want him to slow down, you just sink your weight into the stirrups.

But the way to do that is know where your core is. Your core is behind your belly button. So you send energy down through your legs and just let them relax around his body and just go straight down. You don't, you, you don't, if you push forward and you don't have any stirrups, you're gonna go over backwards. And, and so-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

(Laughs) We won't have any of that now.

Meredith Hodges:

No, we won't wanna do that. But if you also think up from your belly button right up through the top of your head while you're moving, then you put yourself on your seat bones. And his motion will move those seat bones the way that he moves. And that's what you want is your animal moving your seat bones and you just staying relaxed all the way from the belly button down, all the way from the belly button up.

And then while you're doing that, you do it at walk for a while. And you can put your hands out in front of you, off to the sides, put 'em behind your back, put 'em straight up over your head. And when you feel like you're pretty competent with that, close your eyes and do it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

Oh, yeah.

Meredith Hodges:

And, and you become more connected with your animal's movement. And after a while, then you start going, "Wow, now I have all three elements connected. I've got my body, my saddle and equipment is comfortable. It's all moving together over a postural foundation that is moving symmetrically, smoothly, with fluid." And there's no such thing as an animal in good posture that has rugged gaits. They're all smooth.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):

That is so neat to learn about all of this.

Meredith Hodges:

Oh, yeah.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Back to the crupper, you say the buckles should not be near the tail structure of the crupper, but I haven't found any that, that weren't like that.

Meredith Hodges:
Uh, Driving Essentials has one.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay, that's good to know.

Meredith Hodges:
And, and actually I think theirs might even have a tiny buckle that's only on one side for convenience.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
Uh, I think that that might be okay 'cause it's, it, it's not a buckle that they're gonna get their tail caught up in.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay. All right. Good to know.

Meredith Hodges:
You know, most of these, most of these cruppers are made for people's convenience. Oh, gee, I can just put the crupper back there, unbuckle it, wrap it around the tail, and you know-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right. Right.

Meredith Hodges:
... do it back up because the really nice cruppers have kind of a, a, oh, I forget what kind of buckle they've got up there. And they're not even a, a straight belt buckle. Uh, they're more of a, an adjustment, oh, I can't remember the name of the thing,

but it's got the, you know, the buckle part with the thing's sticking up in the middle. And you have to kind of take everything through, loosen it up, and then pull-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm.

Meredith Hodges:
... everything back tight again.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
But it, it's a little inconvenience, but it, it, it's best for a proper fit.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
But it works. Right.

Meredith Hodges:
It works. Uh, the thing is too, that you could, with all of this that I do with my animals, you can go out and see that there are no chafed spots on any of my animals except during shedding season. And that's because they're rubbing it-

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Mm.

Meredith Hodges:
... out in the, you know, out in the pen.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Okay.

Meredith Hodges:
But you see so many animals with white spots all over. And, and there's so many pack mules because of those Sawbuck saddles or, you know, pack saddles that they use. And the pressure points on those things and all the, all the rigging that they've got on 'em, and they rub. And then, and then they also have people that are putting loads on that don't know how to balance loads.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right. Right. Yeah.

Meredith Hodges:
So if your animals have any white spots on them or any, any sore spots on 'em anywhere, uh, it's time to start, start checking what you're doing. Because 17 animals that I have and I use, uh, do not have one speck of anything on their body. Occasionally somebody will nip somebody else.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.la

Meredith Hodges:
But even that is minimized with their good manners.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Yeah. Oh, well, that's good. (laughs)

Meredith Hodges:
Yeah. Yeah. When I insist, I mean, when they start picking on each other, I yell at 'em.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs) I bet you do.

Meredith Hodges:
Just, they're a bunch little kids.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
I bet you do.

Meredith Hodges:
They're just like six-year-old children.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:

They're gonna do what they think they can do.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
(laughs).

Meredith Hodges:
And, and the other thing is, is that six-year-old children also really like to please their parents. You know?

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
If you give an incentive to do it, they'll do it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Right.

Meredith Hodges:
If you make it easy for 'em to do it, they'll do it.

Cindy Roberts (Interviewer):
Very good. 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.
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BOOKS/VIDEOS IN THE STORE:

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