This year’s ride finds the Colorado Mule Riders in Durango, Colorado, at the beautiful Colorado Trails Ranch. The main lodge sits majestically on a hill overlooking the Barns, Rodeo Arena and the grazing horses. Add in a large flock of turkeys cleaning up the horse grain and that’s where you’ll find me, on the back porch taking it all in. It’s Wednesday, games day is in full swing with a cloud of dust rising from the arena, the announcer’s voice bellowing out of the PA and occasional cheering from the crowd.

I find myself having mixed emotions; we have four “mavericks” this year (new riders) which is very exciting. This is a great opportunity for new riders to “catch the spirit” of the Colorado Mule Riders. It’s more than a ride; it’s a fellowship and a bond we have for each other. We laugh and cry together, share stories and lies. Most importantly, we look forward to this time each year when we reconnect and ride together during the peak of the fall colors here in beautiful Colorado. With thirty-four riders, we are representing fifteen states and this year an average age of 65.5. This is where my emotions get mixed… Instead of being the youngest, I’m getting closer to that average and drawing very close to joining the honored men on the twenty-five year rider list.

Missing from the ride are our older riders who created this great group. These men who rode well...
into their 80’s and some into their 90’s are a great inspiration to all of us. Yesterday was our Maverick Ceremony. A long day’s ride starting out on a crisp, Rocky Mountain fall morning. This ride headed out the back of the ranch into the Missionary Ridge fire of 2002. The regeneration of the forest is amazing. It reinforces God’s creation and how he has a bigger plan for all of us. “A shadow on my page and I look up to see a Hummingbird drinking the last nectar from the hanging flowers on the back deck. A wink and a nod and he’s off to Panama for the winter.” Back to yesterday’s ride.

We arrived at noon atop an overlook called “Horse Thief Park” at an elevation of about 10,000’. It was a great ride up from the 7200’ the ranch sits at and close to five miles of creek crossings and beautiful views. The Views from here looking south are majestic. We’re looking south over Bayfield, Colorado, into New Mexico. Ship Rock is prominent to the southwest, (a landmark in the Navaho reservation and referred to often in the Tony Hillerman books).

As you can see from the photo, this location has a burned tree in the background with new Aspens returning to life and reviving the mountain. This, we are a part of. The Maverick ceremony honors our God, our country, our flag and what it represents, our new riders and our riders who have passed on to rest in God’s hands. This is always an emotional time for me as well as others as we remember those good friends. The newer riders don’t feel it yet, but being one who has ridden with most of these men, I feel their presence and I’m honored. Some of these men I feel their “peace”, others I think, have left too soon, I shed a tear and exchange a hug with a good friend. Here let me mention our President. This year should have been Van Ricketts. He is one who was taken too soon. In his honor and memory, Jake Skobel is fulfilling his duties in Van’s name. This again represents the type of members we
have. This year we say goodbye to Senior Member Dan Neu, a member for over twenty years who rode with us sixteen times. We leave his spirit atop that mountain where we all know a piece of us will forever rest.

With Games Day still in progress below and another day’s ride still to come, the “exciting events” have been minor. A double boot soaker as Gene’s mule slipped into a deep hole during a river crossing. He rode it out but had to empty his boots and maybe his shorts a little. A bruised leg from when Orlando’s mule did a pirouette on a smooth, slippery river crossing ending in a belly flop scoring only a 4.7 from the judges. His mule just laid there and didn’t struggle letting him slither out. Then on the return trip from our maverick ceremony, a short gust of wind blew off Torry’s hat and he watched as it slowly swirled down to the bottom of the canyon to rest in peace forever more. Lastly, during the “Pony Express Race” in Games Day, Chuc’s mule decided he wasn’t ready to run the track and proceeded to see if old Chuc could hold on for a long eight seconds. He landed in a cloud of dust and scored very high points for form. Luckily, he escaped injury and all is well.

A closing thought and reflection from yesterday’s ride: As I was riding my mule up the valley, thinking about this article and experiencing a page full of emotions and senses, I watched a jet fly over leaving a beautiful contrail at 650mph... here I am going a mere 3mph. The plane passenger sees colorful Colorado looking down on the majestic peaks and vast forests full of fall foliage. And we’re experiencing colorful Colorado from the inside out, smelling the forests and feeling the breeze and enjoying the majesty. Our mules and riders are one. We as a group are one. This is why we ride every year together, experiencing Colorado from within, with our mules and with our brothers. It couldn’t be, or have been a better day.

Author Dean May has been a member of the Colorado Mule Riders for 22 years. He serves as Secretary and Treasurer.

(from left) Colorado Mule Riders and 2017 photographers Bob Doolittle, Chuc Heil and Colleen Cahill, wrangler at the Colorado Trails Ranch and photographer.
Randy Gibbs and “Squirrel Tooth Betty” winner of the 2017 Games Day Traveling Trophy.

For more information and your opportunity to ride with the Colorado Mule Riders visit www.coloradomuleriders.com.