

Why I Prefer Mules

By Lee Robinson

Donkeys have many qualities, which by themselves, are not nearly as valuable as when they are combined with qualities from the horse. In my experience, a kindly treated, well-bred and well trained mule can be the best and most enjoyable trail equine companion ever. I have categorized my reasons into five practical areas.

Life Expectancy/Longevity

1. A mule's life (and especially its work life) is much longer than that of a horse. This consideration gives me a greater incentive to continue training and refining a buddy who will be with me for many years. If you are working with a young mule, you will most likely see continued mental, emotional and physical improvement for years to come.

2. If you're in your 50's and beyond, and your mule is young, he/she will likely outlive you and will likely continue to get better as he/she ages. An old mule skinner has said: "If there are going to be mules in Heaven, I pray that they will be born at age ten."

Ride and Safety

3. A mule's shortened stride (especially when climbing and descending the steeper sections of trail) provides additional power, balance and smoothness.

4. A mule's natural footwork talent shows amazing overall balance and sure-footedness.

5. I don't get saddle sore or stiff joints on my gaited mule. Nearly all mules walk out very well (even if not considered "gaited"), because the donkey is naturally gaited with a short stepping fast walk.

6. A mule seems to be always thinking about self-preservation. This tendency makes teaching them to overcome some obstacles a different way, but makes for a safer mount.

7. A donkey naturally turns to face danger (or perceived danger) before deciding what to do. He may continue to freeze, to attack with teeth and front feet, or, lastly, to flee. This trait passed on to the mule makes him more likely to avoid becoming panicked and encourages the natural hesitation, which will give the rider time to promote confidence and effectively give direction.

8. A mule has a great sense of direction, keeps its bearings and remembers trail points and landmarks with uncanny accuracy.

9. A mule's senses are impressively acute.



Health and Economics

10. The mule is a browser as well as a grazer and he/she seems to get more nutrition out of poorer quality and a wider variety of feed than horses typically do. For example: They love cockleburs, briars, thistles, stems, weeds and leaves of many kinds.

11. Most mules require fewer trips to the vet.

12. Trail/saddle mules usually require less hoof trimming and shoeing (see #17).

13. It is often said that "Mules won't hurt themselves". They'll rarely, if ever, over-eat, over-drink or over-heat.

Relationship

14. A mule notices, appreciates and remembers acts of kindness (just as they remember abuse). Gently caring for a wound, dismounting/granting a rest for a very heavy/difficult section of trail, or a timely treat are appreciated and remembered. I've found that mules love to be talked to up close while caressing their eyes. Note: Be thoughtful through your handling and training. Your mule is always thinking. Don't underestimate what a mule perceives. Show respect for them and also demand their respect for you. Occasionally, with some mules, you may need to reprimand

sharply (and then make sure you finish the session/lesson by showing additional appreciation.) Reward acceptable/successful training behavior often.

15. A mule is affectionate. They usually run/hurry to meet you at the gate. Note: Express affection often.

Note: A mule can be very jealous, so it pays to be conscious of it and have ways to minimize it. Some consistent attention may be needed. I like putting an expressive young mule in a wash rack or in a 3-way hobble for an extended period of time to teach patience. A young mule may express displeasure/jealously/impatience by running back and forth, banging on a fence, bucking and kicking in the air and displaying other antics, which, if not understood, could frighten people and also could be dangerous (even though it is usually only expression, not meanness).

Strength and Endurance

16. Pound for pound, mules are stronger than horses. When that strength is coupled with great footwork and balance, the mule is a superior trail animal.

Note: You don't have to have a large saddle or pack mule to do typical trail work.

17. Mule hoofs are tough. The hoofs have straighter walls and are usually very durable. Many mules don't ever require shoeing if they occasionally spend some time on road base or other rocky terrain.

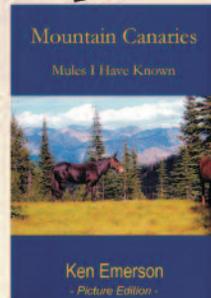
18. A mule doesn't sweat as much as a horse and can go much longer without water.

19. Mules have "hybrid vigor." They are heartier and more durable. They can go on extended trips (which can wear horses down) and not show any ill effects.

Note: In our country's history, the wars and western migrations allowed mules to distinguish themselves for their strength, endurance and heartiness.

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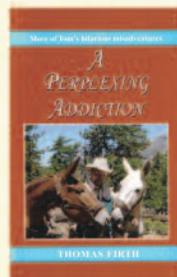
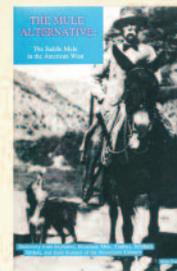
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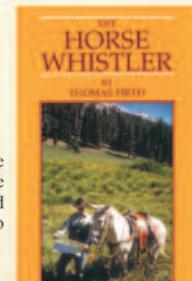
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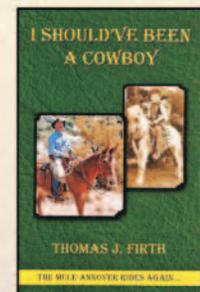
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