

# Finding the Right Trainer for the Job

by Monica Erman

Many mules will turn three this spring. Where is the best place for him to get his first days under saddle? In this article, we'll cover a few legitimate reasons for sending your mule to a trainer, whether your mule receives his instruction while you watch and learn, or you do the actual training. If you do determine that taking your mule to a trainer's facility is the route for you, we'll go over some trainer qualities to seek. No trainer is perfect and it should be noted that they, like everyone else, are human and make mistakes. But being able to recognize signs of potential problems can help us choose and maintain a good relationship with a professional trainer.

## To send him away or not to send him away...

Whether or not you send your mule to a trainer depends on a few things. Should you take your mule to a trainer or train him at home?

Do you have the time and motivation to work with him faithfully? The ideal scenario is for your young mule to have six months to a year of consistent training to get him familiar with a day-to-day routine of work. Consecutive days of lessons, even if for short half hour sessions, goes a long way toward creating a willing and respectful mule. Remember the hectic pace of the first day of school after summer break? Everyone is wondering where to go, nerves are tight, there are new social pecking orders to establish, etc. Imagine that after every week or two, you got another month off. There would be hardly any chance for settling into a productive schedule.



Are your training abilities ready for the challenge of starting him under saddle? Starting a young mule under saddle is usually not for the beginner equestrian. There are a thousand things that can go wrong in as many different ways. An experienced rider can identify the signs of a mule's apprehension, frustration or hints of being out of control. The more quickly unwanted tendencies like a raised stiff neck, tail swishing or hesitant steps are diagnosed, the less likely the mule's frustration will escalate to something like bucking or bolting.

Starting a young mule under saddle is like flying a plane. You need a solid basis of ground school instruction before you are even allowed in the plane. You're evaluated with tests and quizzes and exposed to many practical and hypothetical scenarios before taking the controls. Honestly ask yourself how much you've studied equine training through articles, videos, observing, asking questions, hands on experience or participation in clinics. Just because

you gave a childhood pony his first ride, does not necessarily mean you are ready to step into the saddle of a three year old, 15 hand mule.

How much do you want to have a quality partnership with this mule? The more involved you are with your mule's training, the better you will understand each other and build an effective communication system. If you send him to a trainer for three months and simply take him home, don't expect everything to go smoothly. It is very important that you know the cue system the trainer 'installed' as well as how the trainer corrected or rewarded behavior. You spent a lot of money for the trainer to essentially teach your mule a language. If you don't know the specifics of that language, the poor mule is going to get confused and frustrated which, in turn, can lead to you, the owner, becoming angry or disappointed.

This is one of my pet peeves, so please bear with me while I expound

some more on why owners need to be involved in every phase of their mule's training. Actually, it isn't just the mule's training we're talking about. Having control and respect is not a virtue your mule will simply hand over to you after he's spent time at the trainer's facility, even if he spent a lot of time there. The mule will always match the level of consistency of the handler. How quickly he changes depends on the mule's characteristics. This is why mules improve with a professional or knowledgeable trainer. The leader of the mule/rider relationship should be the rider! If the rider doesn't know how to be the director, things will naturally slide toward the mule's confusion and poor performance. Mules aren't boats, they can't be expected to behave the same way for any driver. Mules recognize and respond to differences in manner, consistency of signals and quickness of reward and sense of purpose. If you aren't focused, consistent and determined, the results will tell the tale.

The benefits of having a knowledgeable trainer's help are innumerable. You can get access to years of learning and skip over countless mistakes sometimes learned the hard way. Having an expert periodically monitor your progress is also a great motivator for constant improvement. Let's face it, self-motivation is sometimes hard to come by. An advanced trainer can also show you more skills to work toward, giving you exciting new goals you might not have thought of on your own.

**Finding good help.** Having the title of "professional trainer" does not guarantee safe, quality expertise. On the flip side, a 'back yard trainer' can have much more ability, knowledge and experience than some professional trainers. Whether you employ the help of a friend or full time professional, the same basic evaluation system provided below can apply.

*Go visit the trainer at his or her facility.* Before you even think about

taking your mule to a trainer or having that trainer come to give you a lesson, visit the trainer at his or her facility if possible. Don't expect everything to be in meticulous condition, but fences should be secure, arena and paddocks clear of debris, tack safe and strong. If the aisle isn't perfectly swept or there are cobwebs in the corners of the barn, it's hardly something that should make or break a deal.

The atmosphere is far more important. Are the horses and mules happy and respectful? Does the trainer exhibit kindness toward them, while constantly improving performance? Is there a predominant focus on safety and control as the basis for the training?

*Is the trainer willing to answer all your questions? Ask lots of questions!* The trainer should want to have you around, knowing that the more interested and involved you are in the mule's training, the better client you will turn out to be. If you get the feeling that he or she would like you to drop the mule and leave well enough alone for three months, that should be a warning. The trainer doesn't need to be the most eloquent or outspoken talker, but the general content should make sense to you, and willingness to teach should be obvious.

*Watch the trainer work with his or her mules and/or human students.* Does the trainer reward or punish more? A good trainer can correct an unwanted behavior without anyone knowing the mule did something wrong.

Rewarding the mule with prompt generous rein slack, release of leg or whip pressure should be the primary mode of influence. The trainer should try to build a want-to-please attitude in the mule. This is just as important with human students. There should be lots of constructive praise and some correction or "criticism," but no demeaning scolding. Don't interrupt the trainer if it's obvious there's a lot of concentration going on, but afterwards ask about the session and how the trainer felt about the lesson.

*Ask the trainer if you can watch or even get coaching during your mule's saddle training.* When I took mules in for training I strongly requested the owner to come watch and learn as often as possible. If you live a distance away, it can pose a challenge, but so will getting your mule home and not knowing how he was trained. The more you know about the specific lessons and drills your mule goes through, the better chance you will have in getting a solid start with him when he gets home.

*Have a good relationship with your trainer.* Again, the trainer should want you to be involved in your mule's training but a little consideration on your part is due, too. Try to arrange a schedule that works for both of you and be on time if you expect to catch the lesson. Unless you see something that troubles you, stay out of the trainer's way. Of course if you're invited into the training you should jump at the chance. Don't hang around the barn just for the sake of hanging around. Remember the facility is a work place. Be a non-distracting, focused observer or if invited, an appreciative, thoughtful participant.

If you decide to have a trainer coach you through the process of training, have you and your mule ready to go at the scheduled time. You might even warm up before he or she gets into the arena. Let your trainer know if you have questions or concerns. If you show your trainer you are serious about your mulemanship, he or she is likely to respond by providing more detailed, generous instruction.

Whether we seek a trainer for our mule's foundation days under saddle or additional, advanced training after years of partnership, we, the owners, need to be eager, receptive, hard-working riders if we really hope for a mount of excellent skill and responsiveness.