

My Journey to the Perfect Mule...and Bit (Myler, Anybody?)

By Karan Godwin-Corey

I can't remember ever, not being absolutely horse crazy as a child. Unfortunately, I was a severe asthmatic and even the act of going on a hay ride or petting a horse would set my allergies and asthma off to the point of needing hospital care, and ultimately I was not allowed to be around hay or horses. This was very hard for a young girl to understand, since my identical twin sister did not have the health issues I had. She was just as horse crazy as me, but was able to indulge and foster her love of all things equine and ultimately became quite a good rider and trainer of her own ponies.

I remember my fascination only increased, not lessened with being banned from being around equines, and as a small girl, I can remember that there was something different about certain "horses." There was something... "big" about certain animals that always riveted my eyes to their heads, and specifically the top of their heads...and if you are a long ears lover, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Long ears were always the first thing I noticed in an equine, and the longer, the better!

If I was really good and had good grades my parents would take me to watch all different breeds being shown at rodeos, parades, and the A to Z Horse show in Phoenix, Arizona, where I grew up. Having said that, I remember being fixated and obsessed by the donkeys and mules, with their great flopping ears and in some cases, their extreme independence in either doing what was being asked of them in the arena...or not. I knew nothing at my tender age of the intelligence, soundness, kindness, willingness, strength and capability of a great long ear. I only knew that I wanted to pet those long appendages and I dreamed of the day when I would have my own mule ears to love.

Dreams die hard, and with my health issues, I was only allowed to love long ears from afar. Eeyore was my dream long ear, and I was a hardcore racing fan (yes, even as a small child!) who lived to watch the Triple Crown of racing, since those were the only horse races shown on TV at that time. I lived for reading *National Velvet*, *Smoky*, *Black Beauty*, or any other book



that was about horses. I lived my love through books, westerns and whatever media coverage there was about anything horsey.

Fast forward twenty-four years: I finally got the courage to begin a life of my own after the untimely death of my mother who died of an asthma attack. I spent some time in California and ultimately ended my journey in Colorado. I met a wonderful man who I ended up married to and living a life I had only dreamed of as a child. He had...HORSES! Not only did he have horses, but he gave me one of his horses to ride – I was in horse heaven.

I paid no attention to the asthma and allergies that constantly plagued me while feeding, brushing and riding. So what if I was constantly sick with severe eye, nose, throat and breathing problems – I had a horse.

Jack was an appendix quarter horse gelding that had been cut late in life and had many issues that as a new horse owner, I just didn't know how to fix. He was a very nervous, scared, unhappy horse, and honestly, I never bonded with him. Something in my heart just never responded to him and opened up to learning what he had to teach me. I owned him for seventeen years, and finally, he got very ill at twenty and had to be put down. I was devastated. Even though we hadn't bonded, I loved him for his beauty and what he was and also for what he wasn't. I cried over the loss of this animal for months. I cried for the understanding of him that I never had, I cried for the poten-

tial in him that was never realized, and I cried because I missed his deep, throaty whinny.

My husband finally said one of the few things to me that actually made sense in our marriage. He said, "Why don't you get a mule? You two would understand each other!" As much as we laughed at that comment, my husband was right! As mule-headed as I can be, maybe a mule could help pull me out of my depression. Even though I had told my husband that my heart could not take having another equine and losing it, the search was on.

I called my vet and spoke with the receptionist. I asked her if she knew of anyone who was looking to find a good home for a mule. The Lord God speaks in mysterious ways, as it turned out. She did know of someone with health issues who was trying to find a home for a mule. The minute she gave me his number, I called the gentleman and we talked. He had two eleven-year-old john mule brothers. He wanted them to go together because they had never been separated. While I was disappointed, as a twin myself, I completely understood the bond these two johns had. He then mentioned that his son-in-law had a single mule that he might be selling – would I like to call him and see if the mule was for sale?

The next day, my husband and I were on a long, arduous journey...right up the street from where we live! I had called and spoke with the nicest man – he had a molly mule that he really didn't want to get rid of, but he had two little boys, a new baby girl and a new job that had quite a bit of drive time attached to it, and very little time for this mule. He said she deserved better than the little time he had to spend with her. She was a really good mule; she trailered well and was very calm. He had pictures of his little boys on her. When I saw the photos, it looked like she had fallen asleep with the little ones on her back, and he mainly used her for hunting each fall. He just didn't have time for her.

When my husband and I pulled into the mule owner's driveway, I told my husband I wanted him to look at the mule first before I saw her. I love all animals and I

have the tendency to fall in love with every single animal I see. I wanted Kenny to check her attitude, conformation and health before I had the chance to fall in love. After I told him this, and we knocked on the door and met the mule owner and his wife, my husband insisted I accompany him to look at her. Even though I didn't want to see her yet, my husband practically dragged me to the corral with him.

When I first saw Jackie, I was both impressed and disappointed with how hairy she was! It was February in Colorado, and animals here put a lot of fuzz on, but this mule was hairier than most. It was really hard to tell what she looked like because she appeared to be one big, fat, hairy black beach ball. Besides that, she wouldn't come near me – I now know that as sensitive as Jackie is, she knew that her owner was trying to find a home for her. She was scared.

While she trotted and bucked (it was cold outside!) around me in the corral, I watched the one eye that I could see. She kept her eye on me, and even as she moved away from me when I tried to get closer to her, her eye never deviated from looking at me. She didn't look at my husband, she didn't look at her owner; she looked at me. I now believe she was sizing me up to see if I was worthy of her respect. As we mule owners know, our mules must respect us or all the training in the world is worthless. With no respect, a mule is just waiting for that one "gotcha" moment when it will bolt or try to unseat the rider. Jackie was trying to figure out, in her own way, if she wanted to form a partnership with me.

Something inside told me that even though she was the first mule I had looked at, this was the mule I wanted. I had no basis for saying this, except that God brought us together. I had never owned a mule, had no idea what they were like, wasn't concerned about her level of training (or lack thereof), couldn't tell anything about her conformation - I just knew that she was the mule I wanted. And did I mention those huge...EARS?!!!

Her owner and I struck a deal. I had her vet checked, paid for her and then made plans for my husband to get her the next day since I had to work.

The next day my husband, Kenny took



Karan riding Jackie.

our two-horse trailer to pick Jackie up. When Jack, my appendix Quarter horse was alive, we had major trailering issues with him and finally, after elk hunting one year, and trying to load him for four hours into the trailer in a major Rocky Mountain snow storm, we never tailored him again. It was too much of a hassle and loading him wore all of us out. Kenny tried to walk Jackie into our trailer, and she would not load. He and the former owner tried and tried, but they couldn't get her to load! My husband called me in a rage and said to get my money back because she wouldn't load! "Oh, no," I thought." Please don't let her have this issue after all we went through with my other horse!"

Finally, the former owner and Kenny agreed to use the sixteen-foot trailer Jackie was used to being loaded in – it was familiar to her. It was still quite an effort to get her to load, but finally they got her loaded. In hindsight, I still believe she knew she was leaving an environment that was safe and secure to her for the adventure of the great unknown, and she was scared to death.

When my husband brought her home, she sauntered out of that trailer like a queen – she was calm, cool and collected. Who knows – she may have been showing off for her new companion, Tecate, my husband's huge, beautiful Quarter horse gelding. She walked up to him with all the grace, dignity and confidence of high royalty going to tea. Alas, that first impression at her new home lasted about ten seconds. Her true colors came out - she brayed...and any thought we had of royalty vanished, along with a severely traumatized Tecate (who had never been anywhere near a mule) as he turned and galloped away like a bat out of the prover-

bial Hades.

I didn't ride her for a month. She was in a new home, and very standoffish. I spent each day putting a halter on her and just loving on her and letting her know I would never hurt her. I groomed her, petted her, touched her ears, picked her feet up and cleaned them, walked her on her halter around the property and basically worked on bonding with her. Once I started to see that she was relaxing around me and trusted I would not hurt her, I knew it was time to saddle up and ride.

Bits, Bits and More Bits

Kenny, who is really good at starting green equines, wanted to try an O-ring snaffle on Jackie, since the previous owner had ridden her in a hackamore because he basically used her for hunting. She really didn't have a lot of experience with a bit in her mouth and we wanted to try something on her that was fairly gentle. (By the way, if you aren't aware of this, a snaffle in the wrong hands, i.e. rough, hard, untrained, un-patient hands can be the most severe bit you could ever put in an equine's mouth.) We bought a fairly heavy snaffle so that Jackie could feel the bit, saddled her up and rode her on the dirt road behind our house. She ran through that bit like a freight train! I would try to stop her and she kept going, and going, and going...that bit was out.

We then went with a shanked bit with a broken mouthpiece and a copper roller. This bit was marginally better. She still would run through the bit, but not with the "joie de vivre" she ran through the O-ring snaffle with. She moved better laterally, too, but I still wasn't getting the stop or response out of her that I wanted. We were on the right path, but not quite there yet.

The next bit was definitely overkill. I went to a mule clinic and was sold a 7 1/2" shank bit with a correction mouthpiece with a 1 7/8" port. Yes, this bit stopped her. Yes, this bit got her to respond to my cues, - sort of, but my riding instructors/trainers, Charlie and Linda Geist, told me that this bit was too much. Linda had taken Jackie for training for two weeks while I was working a lot of hours for a sick co-worker. Charlie and Linda noticed that Jackie was extremely worried in this bit and very nervous with it in her

mouth. She didn't seem to be able to concentrate on what was being asked of her when this particular bit was in her mouth. Being the great trainers that the Geists are, they started trying different bits on Jackie when they worked with her each day. The last bit that they tried on her turned out to be "the perfect bit."

The Perfect Bit...Myler Anyone?

I have seen Myler bits advertised in many horse magazines and in *Western Mule* for years. I had always thought they were a gimmick bit and no different than any other bit – a bit is a bit, right? That philosophy was proved by my trainers and my mule to be so WRONG, WRONG, and more WRONG that I am ashamed to admit I felt that way! Linda and Charlie had been working with Jackie for less than a week when I got this call from Linda on a Sunday afternoon. She excitedly told me that she had been trying different bits on Jackie and then training and riding her in these bits to see how she responded to each one. She had not had any bit that really communicated cues well to Jackie until she tried this one bit.

She had put a Myler, flat shanked, 33 mouthpiece into Jackie's mouth, and the change in Jackie was instantaneous! Linda said it was like she was working with a completely different animal! Jackie was calm, not fidgety, not mouthy with the bit, and she was eager to follow cues and learn in the arena, not worried, nervous and scared like she had been about the correction bit. In short, Linda and Charlie had found the perfect bit for Jackie – and it was a Myler.

The change in this mule is nothing less than phenomenal! Linda and I had been trying to teach Jackie to side pass and we had done a lot of groundwork during lessons and I had done a lot of groundwork with her at home. Jackie did very well when we had her on the ground – with no bit in her mouth. With all the groundwork we did, it should have been an easy, natural transition from groundside passing to side passing in the saddle. IT WAS NOT! Even my husband noted during our training sessions at home that for some reason, Jackie was not understanding my cues when I used the correction bit I had been using. He noticed that she was not

"understanding" my cues and seemed confused and quite agitated while I was working with her at side passing.

Once Linda started using the Myler bit on Jackie, there was no confusion at all! Jackie would go into the arena eager to learn, wanting to learn, and when she made a mistake, she wanted to try again because she knew she could do it better! Linda taught her to start collecting (Linda calls it "softening the face") within two days... TWO DAYS! That is how communicative this bit is!

Linda and I had been trying to get Jackie to side pass with me in the saddle for quite a while using the correction bit with no success. With the Myler bit, it took two one hour sessions to get her to start side passing on each side. I worked with her on side passing at home when I was out pleasure riding two or three times. I am not kidding when I say this, but Jackie is now side passing like the proverbial "Olympic dressage horse!"

To give a better picture of how well my beautiful little molly is doing with her Myler bit, I entered her in the Novice Walk/Trot class at the 2010 Larimer County, Colorado Fair. I was scared to death, because not only had I never ridden in the saddle in a show, but Jackie had never been under saddle in a show. My dear friend and riding instructor, Linda Geist, had worked with me on my seat, proper placement of legs and hands, proper cues for Jackie, in short, any of the things I needed not to embarrass my mule

in the arena. I don't care if I'm embarrassed, but I do care that my mule is not embarrassed! There were quite a few mules in the Novice Walk/Trot class. I was so nervous and was concentrating so hard on making it "look easy" in the arena for the judge that can't remember how many were in my class, but I think there were between eight and twelve other entries. Jackie and I WON the class!

She responded so beautifully to my cues to collect at the walk and trot, she backed up calmly and straight when the judge asked me to back her up. She really responded well to her Myler bit.

Understand, I do not work for Myler and I am not a bit expert in any way, shape or form. I just know from all the bits I've used on Jackie in the past, and the way she did not respond to them, compared to the way she responds now and the success Linda Geist and I have had with this particular Myler bit, it is a GREAT bit. I don't know the mechanics of the bit, and I don't care. The designing of the bit is way beyond me since I just don't know how a bit communicates with an equine other than bar, palate, mouth or poll pressure. All I know is that this Myler bit has worked WONDERS for my mule and I feel that we communicate truly as a team now. Whereas in the past there was very bad communication between the two of us.

I can't WAIT for the next step – teaching her to change leads.





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