

Performance, Part Three:

Neck Reining by Monica Erman



We are continuing a series of articles designed for intermediate to upper level performance mules. All mules will benefit from these lessons, whether they be used for trail or show. We'll discuss the common mistakes and ways of travel that we look to avoid as well as means to develop the smooth and willing partner we all look for.

The whole point of reining is to be able to change the mule's direction with a soft rein cue. In the previous two training articles, we've been working on moving the mule's shoulders left and right. Those lessons are imperative for this next one to go smoothly. Before we delve into the lesson, let's cover some of the physics of our new cue.

There are two types of reining: direct or indirect. Each title is given to the way we pick up the rein. When a rider picks up the left rein and brings his hand back to his left hip, he's using a direct rein. If the rider picks up the left rein and brings it across the mule's neck and toward his right hip, he's using an indirect rein.

An indirect rein puts more rein pressure on the mule's neck, whereas it's easy for the rein to never touch the mule's neck with a direct rein. 'Neck reining' is when the rider puts the left rein against the mule's neck and expects the mule to turn left. The down side of this practice is that it's very easy to put too much pressure on the mule's left rein and if the mule hasn't been taught to move away from rein pressure, he will tip his nose to the left and walk forward instead of stepping to the right.

Neck reining should really be called "shoulder reining." When we put pressure on the mule's neck we want his front feet to step away from the rein, making a small or complete pivot on his hindquarters. Think of the feeling we get when we steer a car in a tight turn. The front wheels point and move in the direction we want. That's what we're looking for from our mule.

Putting past lessons to work. During the past two lessons, we've been teaching the mule that when we pick up the right rein, we want his shoulders to move to the left. During the lessons, we've had to bring his nose to his right in order to move the shoulders left. (Confused yet? Stay with me.) Now we're going to teach him that the placement of his nose does not matter. If his nose is pointed to the left we still want him to move his right shoulder away from the right rein.

Putting the pieces together. Start riding a large circle to the right. Use the right rein to point the mule's nose toward the right. There should be no pressure from the left rein at this point. Walk at a quiet and willing pace. Staying on the arc of the circle, gradually put pressure against the mule's neck with the left rein.

If he goes two steps without making an effort to turn deeper into the circle, pick up more of the left rein, bringing his nose to the left and move his shoulders to the right like you practiced for the previous lessons. The moment he moves right, drop the reins for a good reward. Pick up a circle to the right again and start the sequence over.

As we work this exercise, watch his withers or shoulders. Don't worry about anything but steering those front feet away from the rein. Through repetitions he will learn that when the right rein is put against his neck, he will need to turn left.

Anytime we ask our mule to step away from the rein, we must have a way to require that movement if we are to be consistent. Give him the opportunity to move in response to only the weight of the rein against his neck and if he neglects to move away, reinforce the cue by bringing his nose to the side and moving the shoulders over. Don't think of reinforcing a cue as punishing him for not listening. Simply show him what the previous signal was asking for.

A common problem when teaching our mule to neck rein is pulling too hard on the reins which causes the mule to stop moving forward. If the mule is not walking forward but still seems to change directions, what is happening is that his hindquarters are turning but the shoulders are not getting involved in the turn. (Somewhat similar to how a boat turns with a rudder. For neck reining, we want the type of turn a care would make.) Have a friend watch your progress if you think you are having trouble. Ask him or her to watch the mule's front feet and tell you when they step to the right or left. The ideal turn-around or spin, has lots of forward movement.

The right time to reward. Let's go back to a basic principle: release the rein when the mule does the right thing. We have been taught to reward the mule when he makes the right step or movement. Anytime we have problems getting a mule to retain the lesson we can usually fall back to reinforcing this principle in our teaching. But what if we could help the mule understand what we want faster? Meaning it would take less repetitions for him to understand what we wanted. Here's one way we can do that.

If we release the rein while the mule is making the step away from the rein, he would understand that stepping to the right or left is what gives him free rein. If we let the rein loose as he moves in the right direction, he is getting a reward during the movement and not just afterwards. Now, doing the correct step, speeding up or side-passing faster becomes something he looks for because there is zero pressure on his mouth. There is hardly a better way to build a willing partner.