

# PARELLI, SCHMARELLI

*By Thomas Firth*

I have come to the realization one can never really learn to cuss until you own a mule. Oh sure, you may think you can swear with the best of 'em, but believe you me, it takes a long ear to get the creative juices flowing and bring out the tongue blistering vocabulary you never imagined you had within.

Every year at the end of May, my wife Cathy and I load up the truck and make our annual pilgrimage to Bishop, California, in the eastern Sierras for the Mule Days Celebration. It allows us a week to fish, relax, fish, get together with old friends, fish and even on occasion, learn something new. Oh, and did I mention fish?

A couple of years ago, world famous Pat Parelli was featured several times throughout the weekend demonstrating some of his training techniques in the arena on a brideless, halterless, green broke mule he'd only been atop seven times prior. As he walked, loped, trotted and ran the arena performing countless mind boggling maneuvers and explaining each one before he did it, only a five-foot whip with a flag attached to its end aided him. To turn left Pat simply put the flag out to the right, gave a little right leg pressure and presto, the mule turned to the left. He did the same on the opposite side to turn to the right. And to stop he simply jiggled the flag out in front of the mule's head and as he so eloquently phrased it, "SMILED" with the cheeks of his fanny, and voila, the mule would come to a stop.

Needless to say, I was impressed. After all, this is the same guy who took a mule to the National Reining Horse Finals in Texas some years ago and did so well on a brideless long-ear that mules have been banned from the competition since. (Guess the embarrassed Quarter horses all got together and took a vote.)

Anyway, upon returning home and finding myself with an abundance of renewed inspiration, I decided to transpire to my mule renewed inspiration as well with my newly acquired training

techniques learned in Bishop.

I could tell by the look in his eye, Zane (my mule's Christian name and the one used in the presence of women and children) knew I was up to something as I entered his pen whistling.

Upon saddling and bridling my trusty long-ear and having already strategically placed a whip and flag on the top rail of the round pen, I marched my somewhat apprehensive prodigy to the pen for his first lesson.

I mounted Zane and walked him around the inside of the pen several times before coming to a stop alongside the wood rail and the flag. I reached over with my right hand and gently picked up the flag while having a firm grasp of the reins and the "oh crap handle" with my left hand just in case the mule might entertain any thoughts of some sort of circus routine.

"Wow, this is terrific," I thought. "No buckin', no boltin', no going over, under or thru the fence. In fact, I think he could have cared less about the flag."

I gave him a SQUEEZE AND A CLUCK and Zane moved out smoothly as he began walking around the pen. "Here goes," I thought to myself as I offered a slight bit of leg pressure to his right flank and qualmishly held the flag out next to his head.

Folks, it was truly a magical moment. Transcendental might better describe the event, one where mule and rider merge as one. Just as if he'd seen the same Pat Parelli demonstration I had in Bishop, Zane calmly turned to the left and continued doing so until I removed the flag. I then moved the flag to his left side and, as if guided by remote control, he gently turned to the right.

Woo-Whoo! I thought. This Parelli feller might just be on to something. Why this was easier than shootin' fish on a dry lake!

Next I held the flag out in front of his face and "SMILED" with the cheeks of my fanny as Pat Parelli had done. Just as if a construction crew had placed and

eight foot cement wall directly in our path (which usually doesn't mean much to this mule) he stopped on a dollar, left change for a beer and quietly stood there awaiting further instruction.

I tell you it was truly a miracle. For the next twenty minutes, this mule performed to perfection as I guided him about the round pen with just my leg cues and the flag, not once having to touch the reins. In fact, I was so pleased with myself I couldn't wait for Cathy to come home from work to inform her of my new found mulemanship. Why heck, I thought to myself, I could even quit my job in town and become a world-class mule trainer!

Later that afternoon when Cathy came home I could hardly keep from getting the drizzlin' squirts as I told and retold her of my remarkable training session with the mule.

"Gee, that's great honey," she exclaimed several times as I boasted of my accomplishments of that day. Not wanting to overload her senses with too much good news all at once, I decided to wait until tomorrow's demonstration to gently break the surprise of my impending career change.

The next day eager to showcase my new approach to training in front of my sweetheart, I once again dragged the mule out for a repeat performance. This time, after saddling, I decided to forego the bridling formality and led my metamorphosized mule over to the round pen, as Cathy was busy tending to her roses.

Just as before, my flag was again strategically placed on the top rail and just as before I mounted. And just as before Zane stood there patiently awaiting my command.

I reached over and retrieved the flag, squeezed and Zane began to walk out to the left. I yelled for Cat to come and observe. "Just a minute, dear," she shouted back.

It was at this point yet another one of those flashes of genius I'm so often prone to began to materialize. If Cathy was

impressed with my accomplishments of yesterday at the walk, I reasoned, she'd be simply speechless (a feat not yet seen by me) were she to witness this done at the lope!

I looked over to observe my sweetheart begin the fifty or so yard walk from her rose garden to the round pen. I asked the mule to pick up the pace a bit and he accommodated by breaking gently into a lazy mule lope.

I nonchalantly gazed Cathy's direction with one of my patented movie star, ain't I hot schtuff glitter-grins expecting her to burst out in a giddy, "Gee honey, that's wonderful," "My hero," or "You turn me on, handsome, wanna fool around?" Instead, her response was, "You know Honey, you really should have a bridle on him, I don't think that's very wise at all."

"Tsk, tsk ye unbeliever," I quipped. "Watch this!" as I hoisted the flag out in front of Zane's face and jiggled it to signal one of those impressive sliding stops like Pat Parelli had done in Bishop. I sat back, "SMILED" with my fanny cheeks and prepared for an eye-popping set of elevens. The mule, however (apparently confused) pinned his size fourteen ears forward and began to speed up. Hummmm, I thought, maybe I didn't "SMILE" enough or possibly he hadn't noticed my flag.

Once again I jiggled the flag, this time with a bit more vigor and once again I "SMILED" even tighter. Now, the mule broke into a dead run like he had three handfuls of something he didn't want.

"I really don't think that's a good idea, Thomas," I heard Cathy offer about forty yards away. I was beginning to accept the notion at this point I was hip-high in ca-ca without a pair of waders. Not only was I atop a runaway Equus-Assanineus with no brakes, no steering and no place to go, but she called me Thomas!

"I'm about finished here, you can give me a hand if you like, dear?" I mustered meekly. Now I'm shaking the flag like it's the hand of the state controller giving me a twelve state Power Ball check, I've got a death grip on the "oh crap handle," and my "SMILE" is locked up tight enough to crack walnuts as this anvil-head takes off like a castrated cat.

Just then I noticed out of the corner of my eye, reinforcements had arrived as I observed my son Brandon and his goofy sidekick Gas Can Robert race up the dirt

road and pull into the drive.

"You can hurry every chance you get, dear," I trumpeted with a certain amount of desperation in my voice as Cat (now about twenty yards away) calmly strolled my direction, shaking her head and muttering something about "dumb butt" under her breath.

"Calling the mule names isn't exactly helping, dear," I chirped as things began to get rapid.

As if the situation weren't desperate enough, now my saddle began slipping and the centrifugal force of my whirl-a-wind death ride on this doodle-donkey is pulling me toward the round pen fence that's racing by me at 300 mph!

Feeling an awful lot like the little white ball on a roulette wheel, I now began cussing at every passing blur, pleading for divine intervention and for someone, ANYONE, to please get the heck in here and stop this renegade bangtail as I mentally reviewed my last will and testicle.

Now goofy Robert leaped up on the round pen, locked one leg over the top rail, leaned out as far as he could stretch and flailed his arms around like he was hailing a New York cab and hollered, "Stop, stop" as the mule approached.

By this time, the blood supply to my hemorrhoids had been cut off due to my "SMILING," I'm leaning nearly perpendicular off the inside of this runaway hard tail to keep my saddle in place and my futile flag waving has only managed to encourage this bone yard outlaw to increase velocity.

Every time goofy Gas Can Robert leaned over and threw his arms out, CATHY'S half-baked, pig-headed mule viewed him as some sort of hee-haw carnivore and performed a dodge maneuver that would make even the finest cutting horse trainer green with envy. Son Brandon was rolling on the ground with the spastic giggles, shouting words of encouragement like, "Ride 'm cowboy," "More spur, Dad," and "Hey Pop, can I have yer deer rifle?" Cathy is over behind the gate hollering, "Drop the flag, drop the flag, you dummy!"

It was at this point I came to the final realization that my career change to mule trainer extraordinaire was now but a distant memory and must be put on hold. As I tossed the flag behind me, Zane made one more lap and upon arriving at the spot where the flag peacefully rested, he

sat down and came to a perfectly executed, not to mention unexpected, sudden sliding stop!

As I sat there on the ground atop the flag looking up at that hybrid hammer-head, I couldn't help but imagine what mule must taste like. It was painfully clear to me my mulemanship needed a bit more refinement but at least I walked away having learned one very valuable lesson you may want to remember. A mule will never, never, NEVER make you look foolish or embarrass you...**UNLESS SOMEONE ELSE IS WATCHING.**