

# Putting in the Hours

By Monica Erman

**B**uilding a strong foundation is perhaps one of the most important aspects of mule training. Whether we're working with a weanling, three year old or ten year old mule, we should want to make that mule's life easier because of what we taught him. We're making an investment with the goal of establishing a respectful, confident and willing mule. But in this day, it's generally easier for us to lay out the dollars than it is the time, effort and perseverance that it takes to lead a mule to that final destination. Though if we are really determined, there is no final destination. The prize of a "finished mule" is always ahead.

How much time does it take to give a mule a solid foundation? There is no firm answer to that question. The factors of the mule's disposition, the trainer's experience or lesson plans, environment and a host of other variables make the answer completely variable. Our focus shouldn't be on how long it takes rather how determined we are going to be on accomplishing one goal at a time.

A few years ago, I worked with a molly mule I'll call Chloe. Chloe came to the ranch extremely fearful of anybody. If I stood at her paddock fence she glued herself to the opposite fence. I was employed to start her under saddle. My first step was to have her stand comfortably while I approached her and rubbed her with my hands. That took more than a week of daily hourly sessions. The next step was to begin sacking her out with all sorts of objects like feed sacks, ropes and tarps. This phase took considerably longer. She was fearful and if nervous enough would spring forward into a bolt. That was not the kind of reaction I wanted to experience during a ride or ask anyone else to ride. So I spent hours rubbing her with the tarp, teaching her she didn't have to be afraid of objects flying over her back or following at her heels as she walked.

Barely accomplishing a goal is not a good enough reason to move onto the next phase. If our mule responds correctly to our sidepass cue for a couple steps, we wouldn't step into the trail class and expect to navigate the L. A mule that is known to pull away from his handler needs hours of uninterrupted practice at responding correctly to the lead rope. Getting our mule to the point where he is comfortable and happy with what we're asking sometimes takes double or triple the time we would like it to take.



Another example was something I learned with a john mule. I was having a terrible time trying to get him to lope circles. After only a couple laps, I was sweating more than he was! I was working hard to keep him in a lope. I asked a trainer friend from visiting from North Carolina and showed him our hang-up. He provided the answer which I kicked myself for not finding myself of more firmly establishing the cue I needed. I needed my mule to understand that when I squeezed his sides, he needed to move his legs faster. So instead of making loping my goal, I changed my goal to giving more knowledge to my mule. We then spent hours simply speeding up and slowing down and speeding up again. Each correct response required me to instantly release pressure from my mule's sides. After plenty of practice he willingly sped up when I softly touched his sides. By the end of a week, we were loping circle upon circle and finally the one with four legs was doing all the work!

The answer is clearer to the teacher than the student. The teacher may think the student understands the lesson and has the answer memorized, but in reality there can still be uncertainty in the student. Another way of viewing uncertainty is lack of confidence.

The rewards of taking a mule beyond the point of guessing, believing in his ability to change from spooking to confident, from awkward performance to instant and smooth is its own reward. And along the way, the practice in consistency and perseverance may be teaching us as much as it is our mule.

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