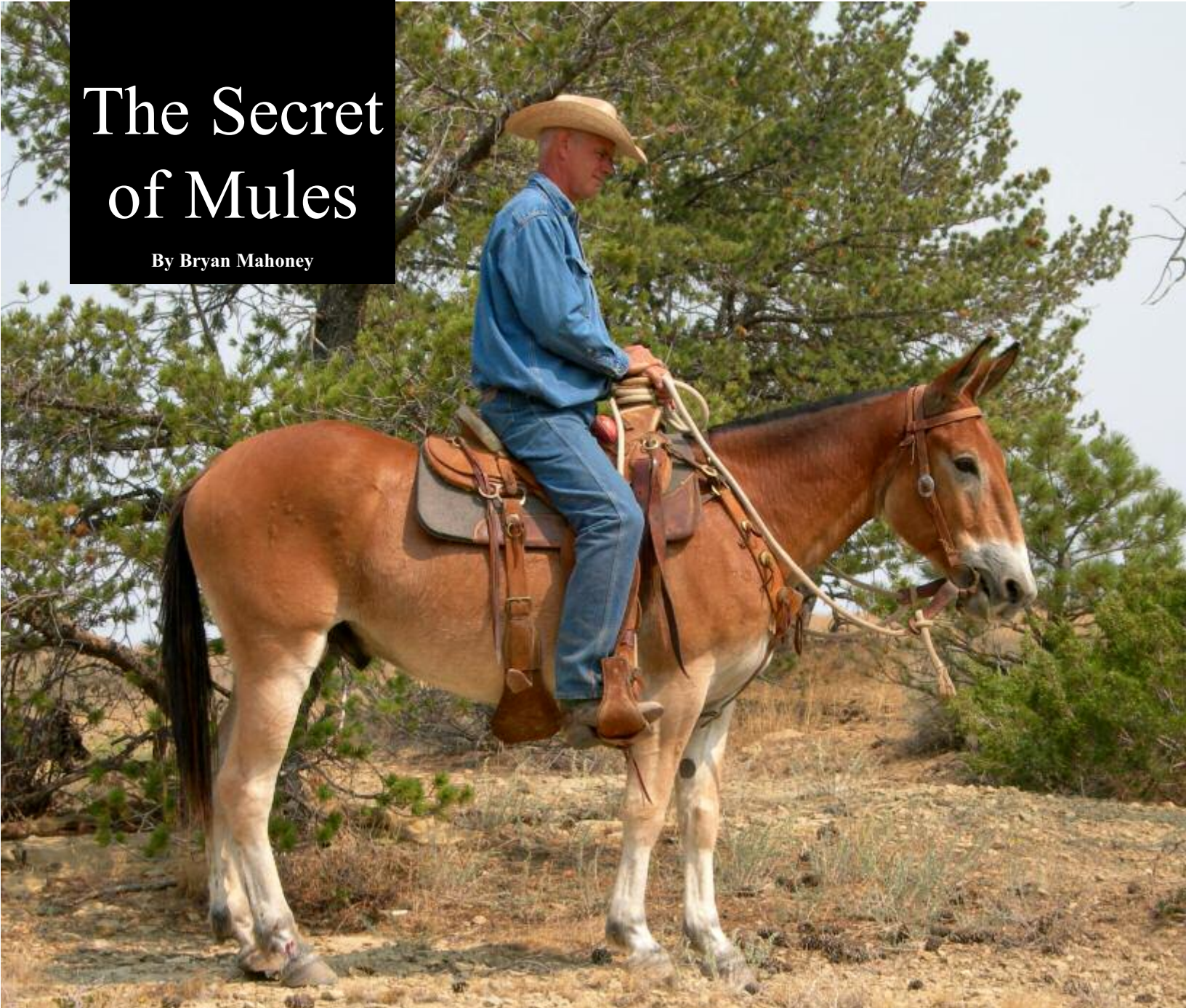


The Secret of Mules

By Bryan Mahoney



Bryan Mahoney and "Eeyore"

To have the ability to solve problems with mules you must first understand how the mule thinks and why he reacts in different situations.

To learn the mule's thought process you must understand what exactly a mule is, which is half donkey and half horse. The donkey lived in rough mountainous rocky terrain that included navigating treacherous ledges. A donkey is a prey animal and when threatened by a predator his reaction is to freeze and fight by striking or kicking. This was necessary because the habitat would not allow him to run. The horse is also a prey animal that lived mostly in plains, his best defense was to hear, see or smell a predator. When

threatened his best defense is flight from fear. He will run quite a distance before stopping to turn around and see his predator. With this combination in a mule you can expect the reaction to be that of both or either of his parents and you can expect it to happen in a fraction of a second. Most times if attacked by a predator a mule's reaction will be to run over, strike or kick to get the predator to release his bite or hold on the mule. Once you understand this you can begin to comprehend why the mule reacts to training the way he does.

When you put a halter on the mule to start the process of ground training, the first reaction you can expect is for the

mule to push on the halter or if tied to pull against any pressure by the halter, this is called opposition reflex. When riding if we ask for lateral flexion he will pull against the pressure once again using his opposition reflex. If your mule doesn't stop when a small amount of pressure is applied to the bit it is because of his DNA which tells him to pull or run through the pressure. The reaction is the same when we apply leg pressure to ask him to yield his hindquarters or side pass. His reactions will always be from his parentage, which the opposite of what we want is. Rather than yielding to pressure he will lean into it.

Release of Pressure

In training we must remember that it is the Release of Pressure that teaches. It is also important to know that pressure motivates the mule to the desired response we are trying to achieve. The mule gives to pressure such as backing out of our space, stopping and yielding his hindquarters. Most importantly the release of pressure teaches. When we apply pressure or a cue to ask him to move or yield a specific part of his body we must ask first with suggestion and escalate the cue with enough pressure to cause him to respond. The training phase of any maneuver must be slow and we need only apply the amount of pressure required to achieve a response. The reward is immediate release of pressure with the slightest try.

As the mule understands our process of pressure and release and knows what we are trying to achieve we can increase our pace. In the teaching phase we should exaggerate the cues at first and refine as the animal understands our expectation. It is not going to look pretty at first but as your feel, timing and balance improve the mule should respond with the slightest suggestion. Soon all your critics will be calling you a mule whisperer!

Pecking order and Hierarchy

If you have ever observed a group of mules at feeding time you can identify the number one mule in the pecking order by his actions. He will lay his ears back, this is phase one. Phase two will be walking toward the other mules, phase three will be to bite or kick whatever or whoever is in his way to the feed. Guess what, when the owner enters the corral he is considered number three. This is why it is important that we establish our position as the hierarchy of the pecking order. We can do this through groundwork and the ability to obtain a response through the movement of his feet. Our goal is a 51%/49% partnership.

The two obstacles in communicating with our mule are disrespect and/or fear. I truly believe all problems fall into one or both of these categories. In correcting behaviors we must help the mule over-

come their fear and gain our trust. Fearful behavior reactions include bucking, kicking and striking. Fearful behavior can be especially dangerous because the mule will also react in a flight mode and the reaction will occur in a split second.

Disrespect includes behaviors such as crowding our space on the ground and pulling on us when leading. While riding, a mule can be equally disrespectful by not responding to bridle pressure or not responding to a leg cue. He may even kick out when leg pressure is applied; this is an indication that he is the hierarchy and still has a 51% role in the relationship. Respect is established on the ground through groundwork exercises. It can be lost on his back if you do not build on your groundwork while riding.

While most people believe their mule has special problems I have found that most any problem can be corrected by improving your relationship with your mule. A positive relationship can be established by addressing the problems of fear and disrespect. By looking at issues from the mule's point of view and becoming a leader, creating a balance of trust with respect, you can change your relationship from negative to positive.

In the coming months I will be writing a series of articles starting with groundwork exercises and work in progression to teaching from the saddle.

About the author: Bryan Mahoney began training horses in 1978. He has trained AQHA youth and open World Champions, Quarter Horse Congress winners and numerous World and National Champion mules. He has given clinics throughout the U.S. including the premier University of Findlay equestrian program. Bryan resides in Bridger, Montana with his wife and two children.

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