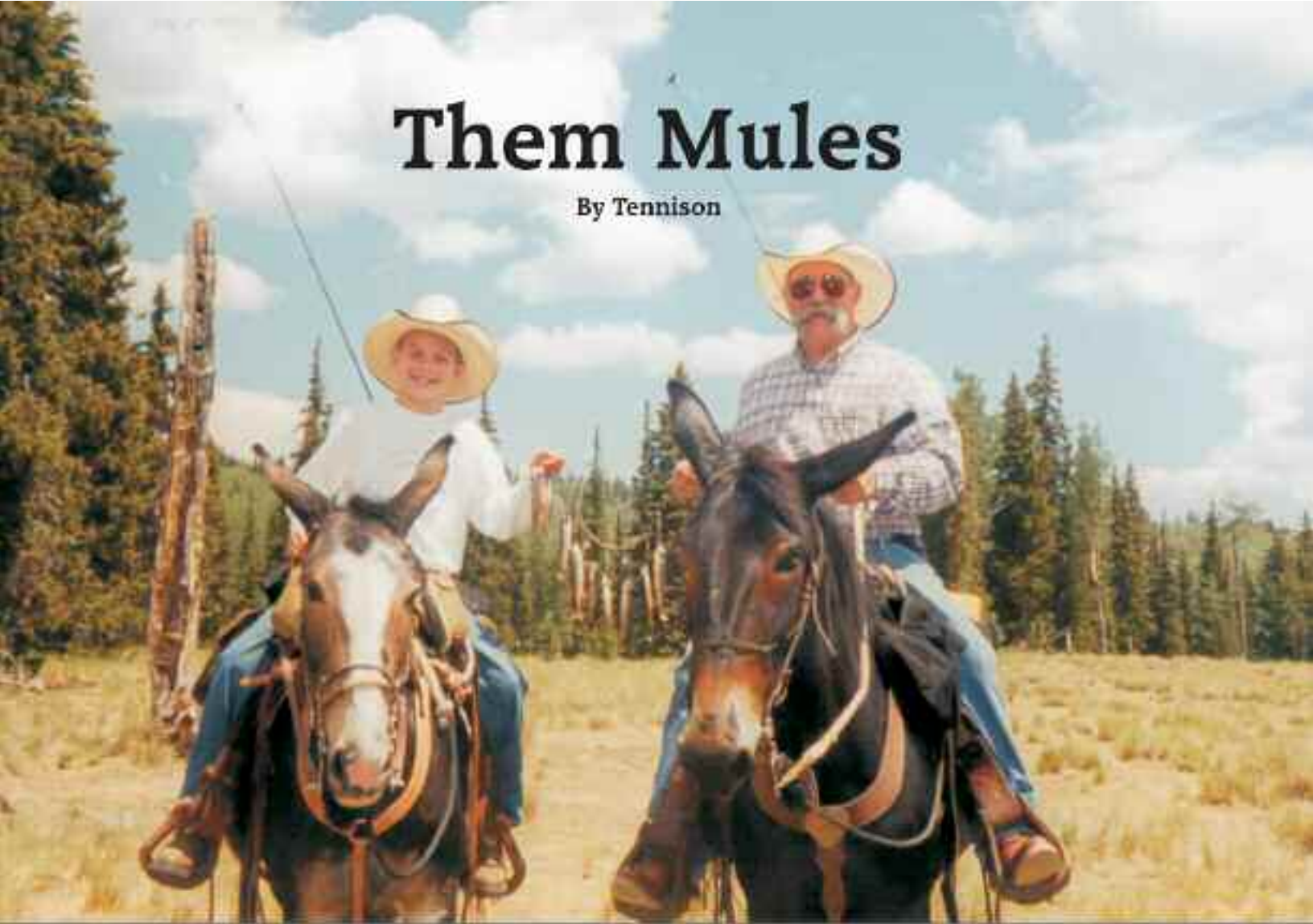


Them Mules

By Tennison



“LEARN TO FISH AND ENJOY IT!”

Give you a fish and you eat for a day. Teach you to fish and you eat for a lifetime.

The number one thing we try to do with them mules, is communicate. Communicate our will to the mule and reward Mr. Mule when he does it. Sounds simple don't it? The very essence of training is this concept: communicate to the mule what, where, when, in what direction and how fast you want him to do anything. Just for example” *What* could be moving your feet. *Where* could be in a circle around me. *When* could be when I cluck or point my arm in any direction. *In What Direction* could be in the direction I just pointed or am facing. *How fast* could be at a walk, trot, or lope. I believe the majority of us know this concept; the only thing is, problems pop-up in our method of communicating our will.

I've been around them mules for a long

time and I've seen lots of different personalities in mules. I, as most people do, try to relate that personality to people I know like, friends and family, but other personalities too, like Mother Teresa or Bernie Madoff.

I've had mules with personalities like my youngest brother David. He's a give-you-the-shirt-off-his-back kind of guy and would do without himself, to give you what you needed. I've had mules like that. If I could only communicate to them what I wanted, they would do it. The only time they didn't was when I failed in my communication and they were confused.

I've had mules with personalities like a fella I know, who would do anything you asked as long as it didn't cost him too much in time or money. These mules would do

what was asked if it was convenient.

I've had mules like my sister Kate, who would do anything for you, but would love the opportunity to hit you with a hotshot the minute you were exposed under the dash of the truck while trying to change out a blown fuse. She would hotshot you and laugh so hard she nearly wet her pants and even try and justify such actions by stating, “Brand new battery, needed to see if it worked.” (TRUE STORY!) I've had mules that tried to do anything possible you asked of them, and the minute you had your guard down (found you under the dash) would do something mischievous or devious, and in some, I believe I detected a smirk.

We have to communicate to these different personalities. Some can take more pres-

sure than others; some *need* more pressure than others. It's our job to know just how much pressure needs to be applied to get the desired response. It comes natural to some; others have to learn it, some struggle to learn it; and I'm sorry to say, some just can't get it.

As an example, if we told our mule *What* (move your feet) and our motivator was a lunge whip. Using it properly, we would tap the ground to see if the mule would start moving its feet. If he did, we would stop using the motivator (the whip). If not, we would tap the ground even harder. If he moved his feet, we would stop. If he didn't move, we would slap the ground harder than before. Of course we would stop if he moved his feet. By now you know where I'm going, some mules require a tap on the ground; others require two or three taps on the ground, while still others require a swat on the fanny. We need to always be looking to apply less pressure to move the feet when we ask again. Problems pop-up when a hard tap on the ground (to a sensitive mule) is given as too much stimulus by over using our motivator, when only a tap would do. With over use we create a mule dreading *WHAT* we want it to do and the mule starts looking for a way to avoid that over use of pressure.

I want you to stop and wrap your head around what you just read. I have said nothing new, but if you don't get it, go back and read it again. You have to understand the above to understand what I'm about to get into next, in depth. Some of what you read next could be new, to some, but it maintains the same concept.

BITS

Bits are a communication tool between you and your mule. Pick up the phone; talk to your neighbor...Pick up the reins; talk to your mule!

We established *What*, meaning to move your feet above and how we might stimulate a mule to move its feet. The bit is a *Want*, I want you 'mule,' when you move your feet, to move your feet in this direction. We ask through the bit, when we apply the proper amount of pressure to the side we want to communicate to and in what direction to move the feet. When we get the feet moving in the right direction we release the pressure. The release is the reward for doing what we *Want*. At this moment *Want* parallels *Where* from above. And when we do this correctly by not ap-

plying too much pressure (just enough to get the response and release promptly) we have a mule learning to respond to our *Wants* correctly and we don't have a mule dreading what we *Want*. The mule has nothing to avoid.

If we *Want* the mule to lower its head, we communicate with our hand through the rein, connected to the bit. Where do we *Want* the mule to put his head? Below the withers? How far below the withers? *Want* again parallels *Where*. Of course this also applies to laterals, giving the head to the left or right. I *Want* you to give your head to the left, or I *Want* you to give your head to the right. We apply only the amount of pressure to make that happen. If while communicating our *Want*, and we have a bit that applies too much pressure on the tongue, the bars, or the lips: If we have a bit that pinches; or a bit that hits the pallet or hits on a sore spot in the mouth or lips, or a bad tooth we will very soon (the very next pull with most mules) have a mule dreading your next *Want* and he has already begun looking for a way to avoid it when it comes again.

This deep-rooted self-preservation that mules have and the ability most mules have to avoid too much pressure is a gift to mules and can be a gifted pain in the keester to his owner. It's not that horses don't have the ability to avoid pressure, they do. But normally the horse isn't as dramatic about it as the mule and in most instances, a horse doesn't learn as quickly as the mule, how to release that pressure.

The mule's uncanny ability to avoid too much pressure, and we need to call it what it really is in most instances, "down right pain in the mouth," is exhibited by the mule lifting his nose and gapping his mouth. When the mule does this, he has just released that pressure, that discomfort, that pain, that the bit has caused at any one or more than one point in the mouth.

The mule is smart; he proves it right here in how quickly he can learn to avoid pressure. But he also is one big weenie. I've written that statement many times on just how big a weenie the mule is. The mule can't and won't tolerate pain. By using a mouthpiece that by design delivers too much pressure or is misused, we create a worried, up-tight mule that dreads what we *Want* next. If the mule experiences discomfort or pain, we will never find a supple, flexible mule, only a stiff necked, stiff rib-caged, stiff bodied mule that has much dif-

ficulty learning *Want* 101 let alone learning anything advanced we might *Want*.

The mouthpiece in any bit either works on the tongue and lips, or the bars and lips, or all three. Yes, there is one that works on the pallet; this bit will not be in our discussion.

Mules, for the most part, have thicker tongues and lower pallets than horses. And mules are very sensitive about their tongue and their bars. A bit that is designed to apply tongue pressure, captures the tongue when engaged and stays engaged by your hands until your *Want* is achieved. Following it with a quick release allows the mule to quickly learn when your *Want* is responded to correctly. That action will be rewarded by the release of the tongue.

The snaffle bit is a bit that works on the tongue and corners of the lips. I am in no way opposed to the snaffle; I used them for years, successfully. What I am opposed to is how easily they can be misused and there are those folks who stay in them way too long. There does come a time that the tongue needs to be released. Let me give an example of when the tongue needs released. Johnny sits in a classroom in the first grade and learns arithmetic. "What's one plus one Johnny?" Johnny has learned the answer over many days, and weeks and months and Johnny blurts an enthusiastic TWO! He's tickled he knows the answer, his teacher is so proud of him after all she taught it to him.

Now, Johnny is eighteen years old and he's in a high school math class preparing for college. The question to Johnny is, "What's one plus one?" Just the way it was asked in the first grade, second grade all through grade school and now all through high school. Johnny has grown bored with all of this. Of course he knows the answer, but he's sick and tired of the same old question, asked the same old way and he becomes vocal about it.

"Why do you ask the same ol' question, the same ol' way? I know the answer. I want to be asked questions in a different way; I want to learn something new," and Johnny begins to display his displeasure by pounding on the desk, and by this age, he's well versed in obscene language and starts letting that fly. Johnny needed to move on a long time ago. If he had he wouldn't be acting like this.

A mule learns when you hold his tongue down. When we capture his tongue and pull on the right rein, he learns to turn to

the right. Later when he has more learning and experience, he knows when he feels pressure on the right side of the lips that if he turns he won't feel tongue pressure. If he turns fast enough, you will have rightfully applied no more pressure than it takes to get a response. Then he learns when you pick up on the right rein he won't feel anything if he comes quickly. But, if by accident or unknowingly, you engage the tongue too much, someday the mule will have a Johnny fit, asking, "Why are you asking like this? You don't have to hold down my tongue; I already know what the answer is."

I mentioned using a snaffle wrong. Yes, keeping a mule in a snaffle too long can be wrong, but there is a more common way a snaffle is used wrong and the mule reveals it better than any equine I know. The snaffle is made to be used as a direct reining tool, one rein at a time. When both reins are engaged at the same time, it has a nutcracking effect on the bars. The mule is famous for letting you know you've applied too much pressure by raising his nose and gapping his mouth, trying to relieve that nutcracker effect. Many people put a cavison on here to keep the mouth closed. The mule is better served if the owner were to take the time to figure out why this is happening, instead of putting a Band-aid (a cavison) on a very painful occurrence. It could even be a bad tooth. The pain doesn't go away with the cavison on, the mule simply can't display such a reaction. Out of sight works for some, I guess.

I have my hand raised as I tell this story. When Mr. Mule does a 180-degree turn as a deer jumps up in surprise, Casey Tibbs himself will pull back on both reins creating the nutcracker effect. It's the knee jerk reaction. Many times things don't get better when that mistake is made. Most of the time, in my experience, things got more western. Here's the result of such. The mule doesn't know you inflicted that pain, he believes the deer did it. The mule is now looking for the next deer that might do that to his mouth and can never get better with the sight or smell of deer, if the pain keeps coming when he sees or smells one. The mule can't reason out how a deer does it and now he doesn't care. He just knows it hurts like heck and he knows the big slam to the bars is coming, he just doesn't know when. Putting some distance between the sight and smell of a deer is not out of the mule's realm of thinking here. Staying did-

n't work for him, sooner or later he will get the idea running could work.

Because most mules have a thicker tongue, a loose mouth snaffle that has more tongue relief than the traditional snaffle is offered through the *Western Mule Magazine*. The mule packs it better, and it has a stop on it that will not let it collapse on the bars creating a nutcracking effect. Yes, I, Ben Tennison, am known to pump the brakes when I hit a slick spot on the road. But, my initial knee jerk reaction will likely be both feet on the break until I get my head on straight. The same goes with the 180-degree mules; I know better, but I can't help it. Casey Tibbs and I have the same problem. I accept foolproof anytime I can get it, and the non-clasping bit is foolproof.

The number one phone call I got for years pertaining to bits was, "He's busy in the mouth or he's getting his tongue over the bit." With more tongue relief it never failed to correct the tongue going over the bit problem. It corrected 90 percent of the busy mouth mules. The ones it didn't correct, it helped greatly. The mules were busy mouthed, venting frustration from tongue pressure, spur pressure, crupper pressure, saddle fit, hanging on to the mouth, teeth, joint soreness and things that never were figured out. And then there's the mule this had simply become a habit with, much like a teenage kid chewing on a soda straw (which is a training issue). You can train that habit out of them.

If releasing the tongue is good why not release the tongue completely? To release the tongue more or completely is our goal. Let me give you a quick refresher. We capture the tongue to teach the mule what we *Want* him to do. When he does what we *Want*, we release the rein immediately. Thus the pressure on the tongue is released and the mule perceives this action as reward for doing the right thing. The mule is learning here. How often you repetitiously practice this action, and how accurately you practice it, depends on how much the mule knows.

Now here's something I want you to understand. The majority of the mule riders and horse riders never get past capturing the tongue to get the right response. Eighty percent, I'm sure, never get beyond capturing the tongue and I really think it's even higher.

Most mules aren't ridden enough that the mule has absolute understanding of what

you *Want* them to do. The mule hasn't reached Johnny's year of being asked the same questions the same way to the point of being flustered by that. If the mule isn't flustered and responds well to tongue pressure, why, I ask, would you want to change it? Don't! Smell some roses.



The 04-mouth piece we offer by Myler Bits, releases the tongue more than the traditional snaffle. That's why we have found that a mule packs it better, responds better and can be ridden in it a lot longer than most snaffle type bits. It's not by chance that we offer this. I've been around it for many years now, ridden with Bob Myler on mules for years using the 04- mouthpiece and thousands of folks nationwide and in foreign countries have proven the Myler 04 mouthpiece is the way to go.

When would we want to release the tongue completely? When the mule has enough training, enough repetitious asking and when the mule absolutely knows what it is you're asking, we can and should release the tongue more or completely.



With a ported bit we are no longer asking or are asking less at the tongue. What is happening is we are asking at the very tender bars. Again I want to mention, a large percentage of mules never get this far. It's not because they can't, but because they aren't ridden enough. When we do ask with the ported bit, there will be a signal on the lips and a mild signal to the tongue. If the mule does not respond to this, we pull until the mouthpiece goes to the bars. That pressure is applied to a very sensitive spot. If the mule has been trained properly prior to this, he should respond to the mild tongue pressure and lip pressure. If he is trained to the point I described and he's not coming when that pressure is applied, the mule is likely being defiant and by going to the bars, we are now punishing him for being defiant. The mule learns there is a consequence for being defiant. He will accept

this consequence providing (*this is important*) he has learned very well what it is he should be doing. If he receives all this pressure on the bars and he doesn't understand what you're asking (you haven't taught it enough or properly), the mule will begin to dread what it is you *Want*.

I hope you get this. When you do, the confusion in regard to tongue pressure and bar pressure becomes understandable and why your mule is acting like he does becomes understandable. When you know many things about training and the mule's reaction to training, and his other actions,

such as lack of willingness, being up tight and even being violent can become less of a burden to the trainer and corrected through understanding. You need to know or you need to learn the difference between a mule being defiant and a mule not understanding. The two responses can be perceived to look alike but they are handled much differently as I've described. Different mouthpieces and how they are designed work different on these problems. When you know the difference, the mule's world becomes simpler. I'm into simpler and I'm into helping cover my mistakes, with a

more foolproof system.

If you have questions call me. I truly want you to know how a bit works, how shanks work, how a noseband, mouthpieces and curbs will help. It would be simple to hand you a bit and tell you it'll work. I believe this, "Give a person a fish and they will eat for a day. Teach a person to fish and they'll eat for a lifetime and really begin to enjoy fishing."

I want to teach you to fish and I don't want you to be flustered as you try to catch a fish (train mules)!

