

"Them Mules"

Mule & Donkey Breeders Edition

Preschool thru Kindergarten What to do with a mule colt before the saddle

By Tennison



There's not anything much cuter than a baby mule colt. Those long legs that you swear they'll never grow into and those ears that look the very longest on those long legged mule colts. In those long legged, long eared mule colts lives plenty of life. There's been more than one person raising a mule colt for the first time mention to me, "Them mules have got way more energy than any horse colts we've raised." Playful, cute, intelligent and full of life describes a mule colt well and all that intelligence can't wait to absorb all the information that will come his way in his lifetime.

The mule colt starts learning as soon as he hits the ground. Dr. Robert Miller wrote the book on this very thing called, "Imprint Training". When man is not considered prey by a mule colt and is considered part of the herd, you can't believe how much that colt wants to be with you.

The first time I witnessed the impact imprint training had on a mule colt, I could hardly believe what I was seeing. In a twenty-acre pasture were eight to ten mares all with mule colts along side. Neta and I along with the colt's owners stepped from the yard into that pasture where the mares and colts were all the way at the other end. The lady of the house hollered for the colts and every colt's head popped up or turned around or got up and left their mummies and came running to us. I had never seen such a thing in my life. Colts were all around us wanting petted.

I'll never forget while stroking a mule colt in front of me. I looked to my left and there stood a little bay colt with ears laid flat back on his neck. Even though I'm not into any mule laying its ears back at me, this was the cutest thing I had ever seen. The lady said, "He wants petted." It only looks cute on colt's, folks. I'm positive rewarding him with a pet wasn't the right thing to do, but Lord he was so cute.

I grew up in the day when the colt wasn't handled much until he was old enough to start riding or working. If he was a male he was castrated and the saddle went on the next day, hoping soreness might

keep him from getting too high if he wanted to buck. It's not done much like that these days, thank God! If it were I would likely have started my last colt years ago. There are still many mule owners today living in the past believing there just isn't much you can do with a mule colt until he's old enough to start riding. Well, that's just not so.

Monica Erman wrote an article for this "Mule and Donkey Breeders Issue" titled, "About Face On A Cue." Read it on page? Monica is teaching us how to teach a weanling mule colt to face up. Monica is preparing the colt for many of the things he'll have to know on the road to become a good riding mule. Monica knows properly teaching these steps today to a young mule will make all training sessions easier down that road to good mule citizenship.

I've been on my share of bucking mules and bucking horses in the starting pen or snubbed to another mule or horse. Some I got rode, some I didn't. Some I could describe as having fun, some I couldn't. The word fun hasn't been mentioned much in the stories told of broncs since the age of forty. Today it's easier, just the mention of the word "easier" will get anyone's attention that's over fifty.

Having a mule giving to the bit (laterally and vertically) before you step on makes it easier on everybody, you and the mule. You will be weeks ahead of the program if your mule is familiar with bit pressure and is giving to it. When we have a mule that will give laterally (give his nose to us) he then can be taught to disengage the hindquarters. We then have a possible way of stopping him. I never leave the training pen until we've got this down solid.

Teaching a mule to give laterally is something that can be introduced way before the mule is physically and mentally old enough to ride. It's something that will put us weeks ahead when a riding program is implemented far ahead of a mule that does not know laterals. Here's something you can do with a colt from weaning age on. Something else besides teaching him to lead, to face up or lunging.

In a controlled environment in the halter, snap a set of reins into the halter where it will put nose pressure on the halter when you pick up on the reins. Step to the left side of the mule about where the stirrup might lie. With your hand out to

the side ask for his nose. When he gives ever so slightly release. If he does not give, hold until he does. The timing of the release is important, it must be immediate. Ask until you've gotten half a dozen gives. It doesn't matter how much give at this point.

Switch to the right side and repeat. It won't go as slick on the right side. Unconsciously we have applied a lot more nose pressure with the halter to little mule while leading him in his short life. Even though the clinicians mention over and over that we must spend as much time on one side as you do the other. Here you will find out you have not. Because the right side generally needs more attention if it's going good, spend a little more time asking for the nose on the right. Working both sides will take ten minutes, give or take a few minutes.

Hopefully you can do this daily asking for his nose to come around farther each day being sure to hold pressure if he doesn't give and sure to release just as soon as he does. If he wants to walk when asked, we need to walk with him, hold until he stops and gives, releasing immediately. You won't believe where his nose will come to in just a couple of weeks. Eventually the colt will nearly be touching his side with his nose.

In a few weeks after he is giving his nose well (after these bending lesson), step to the left side standing where the stirrup might be with your right arm over the back, ask the mule to take a step forward. Here is where you need to pay attention. If he were to run past you, he could place a hind foot in your face. Because we have him giving to pressure on the nose from the halter, if he were to try and run past us, we can ask for his nose moving his hindquarters away from us having a chance to keep a hind foot out of our face.

If you have taught the little fellow by now to lunge and if clucking is how you get him to move his feet, clucking will likely get him moving here. If not, bumping him with your hand that is over his back might start him. If all you get is a step or two, that's great. When you do, move to the left side placing your arm over the back asking him to step forward. If he were to lunge forward and you had to snatch his nose don't consider that an accomplishment. Ask until he gives one. Ask until he gives one or two quiet steps. When he does we are done for the day. We



Using a rope halter, snap reins on nose band of the halter in front of the knot.



The slightest give is rewarded with a release.



Little mule gets better ever day!



Eventually touching his belly, and mine

build on this daily. Again, I warn if you are not much of a hand, don't do this. You could get hurt. And I'll mention to you who are a hand, don't ever let your guard down. About the time you are the proudest of this little guy's accomplishments, he's going to be feeling good some morning and his confidence will be at a high. He will want to play instead of go to school. When it happens, ask for the nose moving his hindquarters away. Don't do that fast enough or lose his rein, you could be visiting the dentist that morning.

What we are simulating here is when we will be on his back and asking his feet to move. Eventually put him on the rail at a walk with your arm over his back. You are on the inside, ask him to stop with the rein. If he doesn't bring his nose around, go with him and hold until he stops (one rein stop), then ask him to move forward again. Eventually start rubbing him where the leg might lie on the opposite side if you were on him. Do this with your hand. Rub where the cinch will go. That area will bother some of them. We are desensitizing where the fender of the saddle will be and where the cinch will be.

When all of your work with the colt is going well, start asking for circles off the rail keeping him moving his feet, you won't believe how well he will give his nose to do a circle. Start each session with bending, put him on the rail to block the other side. Walk him around the pen. Do four, five or six circles rubbing all over the opposite side with your hand and arm. If you know he's got a sensitive spot, spend a lot of time there. If he's not as good on one side as he is on the other spend more time over there. This all takes twenty minutes per session, tops.

When all this is going the best, you can ask for the trot. If he trots for only a couple of strides that's great, we'll build on it. The colt will become playful here I guarantee and he'll become playful quick. This is great exercise for you and the mule, but it is a good place to get hurt if you don't know what you're doing. Keeping it at a walk is ok. I believe that more the older I get.

When you ask for the circle at the trot, make it plenty big, no tight circle here. It's important to make sure when you get this far that the mule is handling this ok. It is not the physical I'm worried about, it's the mental. If he's getting plenty excited when we ask for the trot, we could be asking this mule for too much. If that is



With arm over the colt's back, ask the mule to walk forward. One or two steps is great.



With arm over the back, and on the rail walk the young mule around the pen. Ask for the stop, then ask him to walk off. Bring his nose around to the left while keeping his feet moving and do a circle off the rail and right back on the rail. Be sure to work both sides.



Ask for the trot. I will admit the trot is tough. Many mules will become playful at the trot keeping you very much on your toes. The young mule needs to know truly how to give the nose here, you'll use it, I guarantee.

Here you see this mule in the Myler Combination Bit.

Read on where you'll get an explanation on how the Combination works. Mylers do things in biting that no one else in the world can do. Mylers owns the patton on things in biting that many bit makers would love to have.

Look for breaking news in the future as a great clinician has joined with Mylers to bring this new and wonderful concept to the masses, worldwide.

happening, keeping it at a walk is just fine. We can come back and ask in a week or so. I'm not asking for the trot until he's fourteen or eighteen months old.

Physically we're not asking for much. Mentally for some young mules this could be more than they might need. At the walk, look at what we've accomplished. We have little mule moving his feet when we ask. We have him giving to nose pressure. We have him stopping and we have him doing circles. Trotting is an awful lot of icing on an awful good cake. The trot can come later if necessary or even later when we get on his back.

Thirty days, sixty days, ninety days before the saddle goes on I'm going to introduce this mule to the bit. Not just any ol' bit. I'm going to introduce the mule to something he's familiar with, The Myler Combination Bit. I could write several articles (a book) on this subject alone, I won't do that (can't do that today) so please pay attention, you're getting the short version.

In a surcingle, loose in the round pen, set the head to where the mule can raise the nose plenty. Watching for him to raise his nose enough to bump the noseband. When you see him touch it and he gives to it a few times (moves his head down from that pressure), step in, unhook from the surcingle and start working laterals in the Myler Combination. We might pull from the side at first to get him giving his nose but in a few days we need to be pulling



Loose in the pen let the mule find the noseband. When you see him give to it unhook from the surcingle and work on laterals.

with hands above the wither approximately where the hand might be if we were in the saddle asking for the nose. We're getting him ready for the day we will be sitting up there. Putting pressure on the bit from where your hand will be in the saddle will keep the signal familiar to him when he feels that signal coming from the combination pulled on from the saddle.

How the Myler Combination works is that nose pressure and curb pressure are felt first. That pressure is felt on the nose and curb at the same time. Mylers do things in biting that no other bit maker can do. Standing on the left side of your mule when you pick up on the left rein, that pressure is being felt only on the left side of the noseband and the left side of the curb. That's some patented stuff I can't explain but you can feel it on your hands when the combination is held in position like it will be positioned on the mule's nose.

Nose pressure is not new to the young mule. It's what he has been feeling and giving to in the halter. The only difference now is he will be feeling it on the side you are asking from every time. Mylers calls it Precise Communication. If there was some guess work from the mule when pressure was being applied to the nose in the halter because it was being felt all the way across the nose when applied for the left side or right, that signal now will be felt on the left side of the nose EVERY TIME leaving no confusion to the mule as to what you are asking.

Now listen to this, because the noseband and the curb are applying pressure in a precise spot on the nose and curb area and because those areas are absorbing pressure applied by your hands, when pressure does come to the mouth from the

mouth piece to capture the tongue and applying pressure to the bars, there will not be 100% of that pressure you are applying with your hands felt in the mouth. We don't know how much less pressure but here's a hypothetical. Say thirty percent of the pressure is felt on the nose, thirty percent of the pressure is felt on the curb and thirty percent is being felt in the mouth, ten percent is felt at the top of the bridle at the poll. If those percentages were right, and I don't know for a fact they are but I am in the ballpark, we are applying seventy percent less pressure in the mouth than the traditional snaffle. Nose pressure, curb pressure and other signals are felt buy the mule telling him what we want. Less pressure in any one place could explain why the mule colt will not fight with the combination like he does in other bits. Less can be a lot more when it comes to mules.



On the rail just like we did in the halter, working circles, and the stop.

With the Myler Combination we have given the mule five signals as to what it is we want him to do. A signal came to the nose, that's one. A signal came to the curb, (to the left side of the curb if we're pulling on the left rein), that's two. Then pressure came to the tongue, that's three. Pressure came to the bar, that's four. Then pressure was felt at the poll at the top of the bridle, that's five. We're not putting all of the pressure on any one spot. It's a kinder biting system, more precise. It's forgiving allowing us to make mistakes and not turn the apple cart upside down. It allows us to be more consistent because the combination is consistent. You now have the short version of why I promote the Myler concept.

We now work the young mule on laterals just like we did in the halter only now our hands are in a different position, asking for the nose over the wither. We can now also begin asking for vertical

flex, asking for the break at the poll.

On day three when putting him in the surcingle, shorten the reins a little more which will begin to flatten his face. We're looking for him to bump the noseband and give to it. Don't leave him in the surcingle for more than ten minutes in the beginning here. The reason for this is if he is carrying his face flatter than he naturally carries it, it could cause him to cramp in the neck or back. Because we will leave him a few minutes longer each day, we are conditioning him to carry himself broke at the poll. When we ask for vertical flexion in a few days, because he is learning to move his nose away for the nose pressure, he will begin to break at the poll when he feels nose pressure given by both reins (giving vertically).

When time is up in the surcingle each day, work on the laterals. Walk or trot circles and call it a day. Each day if he is taking this well we can ask for more. More bend, more vertical. These sessions now may be lasting for forty-five minutes or so.

He is now conditioned to carry his head where we like. He is giving to the bit (The Myler Combination). He moves his feet when asked. He stops when asked...It's now time to put the saddle on.

We work him the same way with the saddle on from the ground, only now we can pull on the saddle, make noise with our hand slapping on the saddle and put pressure on the stirrup with our hand. Eventually we can step in and out of the stirrup on both sides to laying in the saddle. Then comes the day you're sitting in the saddle.

Spend this kind of time with your colt and it won't be difficult at all to know when the time is right to swing the leg over. He knows you, you know him, and you both will know exactly when that time is right. It is quite a thrill when you pick up on those reins and he breaks at the poll like you had been riding him for months. And when you ask for the nose, it comes and touches your foot.

When we start riding him those sessions should be lasting thirty to forty-five minutes. Do you know what we're doing? We're bending, working on breaking at the poll, walking the rail, doing circles off the rail both ways, stopping, asking him to walk off and eventually trotting and doing circles at a trot. Sound familiar? Yes, it's everything we've been doing from the ground only now it's being done

from the saddle.

Something to do with the colt before the saddle goes on. It'll knock you out how much this kindergarten graduate will know when the saddle does come. There will be a lot more school in his future. Not only does he know his ABC's, we have established a study habit in this young mule that will make all school sessions easier in his future.



Notice the eye is calm. Little mule has learned his leasson well. This calmness will transfer to the saddle when that day comes. Deacon will see the saddle come spring, he'll do great, he already knows his ABC's.