

Them Mules

Why Do Bomb Proof Mules Blow Up?

By Tennison

A good friend called awhile back telling me his sweetheart of a mule, "Josie" had pile-drove him into the dirt. He said, "I just saddled her up for a quick trip around the pasture and when I came back from the short ride and through the gate she blew-sky-high. He asked, "Why Do Bomb Proof Mules Blow Up?"

I know this mule Josie, she's a real sweetheart and I was trying my darnedest to figure out what HE had done to cause this. During my questioning, and there were many questions, the NO'S and I DON'T THINK SO'S were in the majority.

Now my friend, Dr. Bill Lance, is smart and he's very highly educated. Dr. Bill has a Doctorate degree in Veterinarian Medicine along with a Masters degree in Wildlife Biology, he holds a P.H.D. in Pathology and Wildlife Diseases. Dr. Lance is a diplomat in the American College of Zoological Medicine and is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Wildlife Pharmaceuticals in Fort Collins, Colorado. I'm telling you this is the guy you need to be talking to if you want to tranquilize a water buffalo, a hippo or an elephant.

Bill is a very smart man when it comes to animals and he will tell you without reservation, "Mules Fascinate Me, They Are The Most Fascinating Animal I Know". And he knows lots of animals. Josie, his favorite mule had him stumped and had him making comments like this...and I quote, "Just because I'm highly educated don't mean that I'm smart when it comes to these mules."

We went over the possibilities, which has promoted this article and there were many possibilities. I want to share them with you hoping you'll get something out of it.

Because Bill had mentioned his mule had blown-up at the gate my thoughts were electric fence. But in our discussion I learned there was no electric fence so it was ruled out. I remember Dickey Wallace, who used to own the company Tuff Enuff telling of a mule he would have bet the farm on wouldn't buck, when one evening she turned into a potential world champion bucking mule. After the fact, they discovered a faulty electrical wire bared underground was causing the ground to just tingle. Equine can't take much electricity of any kind. Mules may be more sensitive to electricity than oth-

Bill Lance and "Josie"
photo by
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ers, which leads to the number one reason why mules pull away from you after going through a gate. Most that do have been zapped after someone has thrown down an electric fence or gap on the ground and it ran through the ground, the ground was probably wet or damp and zapped the mule. This can be a problem that is very hard to get a mule over. I had just been talking with another friend a few days ago about his mule that had started pulling away when he went to let him loose in the pasture. I mentioned that this problem normally starts when they've been zapped. He then recalled it started last year on a camping trip to Colorado with a portable electric corral. The mule will lead on a loose lead but when it comes to the gate, it's not waiting around to get zapped again.

Bill and I went on to decide if "Josie" might be sore somewhere. He hadn't been riding because of the cold weather so it wouldn't be from riding hard. Being sore could also come from simply rolling and popping something out or rolling on a rock or by popping something out creating a pinched nerve. I told Bill a story that was told to me by Sam Powell, who is a clinician for Purina. Sam lives in Shelbyville, Tennessee. Sam said, "A large percentage of the troubled horses he gets, those that were once good gentle horses, now bucking, could be helped greatly by chiropractic help, the bucking, likely a result of something out of place in the back or a nerve being pinched. It's one of the reasons why I never step on a mule without lunging before I step on. That kind of problem is what I'm looking for or a saddling problem, I'm getting too old for surprises.

We all read in Western Mule (November 2008 Issue) "*Bad Behavior or Bad Hormones*" by Dr. Owen Henderson, on the heat cycle of a mare mule possibly changing the mules behavior. "Dolly" a mule I've hauled all over this United States would come into season anytime a jack was present. She was always a handful when she was around a jack, she even cow kicked at me once at a show. What a surprise from a mule that had never offered to kick, ever. But her heat cycles at home were hardly noticeable. Sure enough, bad behavior burns in those raging hormones.

We also recall reading in Western Mule of a mule that had a brain tumor and would go off the deep-end, explode and

then get over it as quick as it started. The article was by Mark Schmidt, "*Jasper*", (April 2007 Issue). The tumor was learned of after an autopsy upon the mule's death.

Of course there are yellow jackets and hornets that can cause those bombproof mules to blow up, (December 2008 Issue). But in Bills case, it was winter, couldn't possibly be stingers.

Bill and I got to talking about equipment. A britchen that finds it's way up under the tail can cause a heck of a wreck. Bill didn't have any britchen on that day so that was ruled out. The late Ben Freeman always rode his britchen with quarter straps attached to the britchen then snapped into the center cinch ring to keep the britchen from ever possibly traveling up under the tail. Ben had had a bad experience once on a real steep down hill, I was told by Ben. I never have, I think it to be a fluke that this could happen. Ben wasn't taking any chances. I know of a fellow that was packing out an elk and the packsaddle britchen made its way up under the tail. I guess there was no need for the meat to go through the tenderizer at the butcher shop.

Mules can be startled just like we can. I was riding a mule that the grandkids ride and I wouldn't put my grandkids on just anything, this mule can be trusted. Neta and I had rode into the woods and were riding along a creek when a wood duck came up right beside me, this mule jumped ten-foot side ways. She had never jumped at anything. If I would consider a mule being bomb proof, she is one. She simply was startled as I was when the duck came up.

Just this morning I was talking to a lady who had a mule take off with her when a baby calf jumped up out of the grass and came toward them. This mule is a five years old and broke well. She was looking for a bigger hammer (bit). Here's the conversation. I told her when the calf jumped up it startled the mule. We can't get the mule over that, we can help, but it lives in them, it's a survival reaction, what we can help is what happens next. She had a snaffle bit on the mule, I asked, "Did you pull on both reins at the same time trying to stop him." She said, she did. Here's why I don't like snaffle bits on mules. Snaffles are made to be pulled on one rein at a time, made to get laterals and to stop with one-rein-stops. But when both reins are hauled on at the same time it has a nut

cracking effect on the bars, which can deliver very sever pain on the still tender bars. This is the knee jerk reaction we humans have when things happen quickly. The mule will always tilt his nose into the air, he does this to relieve the pressure and the pressure is relieved when he lifts his nose. You would have as much luck throwing your steering wheel out the window of your pick-up truck, stomping on the gas and trying to stay between the ditches. When that nose goes into the air trying to find relief from the pain, the steering wheel has been tossed. If one rein is used the snaffle is not a nutcracker.

It is human nature to think if I had more bit (a bigger hammer) I could have stopped that mule. Not so, let me explain as I explained to this lady. You have to understand what the mule's thoughts were. When the calf jumped up it startled the mule just like it might startle you or me, but here's where the big difference comes in. Out of our head and likely out of our mouth it might have gone like this, "Grab you heart and say something like, dang you scared me." If it was coming toward us we might say. Oh ain't you such a pretty baby calf", we would now be petting it if it would let us and talking baby talk to it like it understood every word we said.

When the mule was startled it went into survival mode which is flight or fight, it did not think cute baby calf, it thought this thing is coming at me and it's going to take me down and eat my guts out.

What happens next is what I could help the lady with. When the mule did the 180 to run for it's life, along with that decision came pain from the bit collapsing around the bars when the two-rein stop was attempted, confirming the mule's fear. These mules are smart but the mule did not know the lady and the bit caused the discomfort or pain, it thought the mule eating baby calf did that in a move to take it down and eat his guts out. The wreck didn't get better when she pulled on both reins, it got worse. Even though she tried the one rein stop after she had nutcracked the bars it was too late. The mule was in full-blown flight response trying to save its life. We humans know to pump the brakes when we hit a patch of ice but our temperament and knee jerk reaction in some of us is both feet on the brake pushing as hard as you can, by the time we get our head on straight and think to pump the brakes we might already be half way in

the ditch. This is why I'm high on Myler Bits. They are built so we cannot purposely or accidentally nutcracker the bars and another big part of the combination is that the pressure applied is distributed on the nose, the curb and the mouth (tongue and bars) even when pulled on too hard, not all the pressure is felt in any one spot. If we are NOT applying pain we give the mule a chance to think about what's coming at him, allowing him to figure out not everything is going to take him down and eat his guts out like he thinks and maybe, just maybe, he will think after seeing enough baby calves coming at him he might think, "Oh look, it's a cute baby calf."

"There is no such thing as a bomb proof Mule." If you think you have one I say they haven't seen it yet, smelled it yet, tasted it yet, felt it or heard it yet or experienced it yet. Our mules have a thinking mind, a live heartbeat, unlike the pick-up truck. They have blood pressure, feelings, they feel good, they feel bad, and they have a God given will to survive. They have all the five senses many times more so than we and when something doesn't look, smell, feel or act right they will react. They all react differently and tomorrow they may react different still.

Dr. Bill called me sometime later and said I know what happened to Josie. When I saddled her for that short ride, I didn't put my britchen on, she's never been ridden without a britchen and my saddle must have slid forward. I did it again the other day and she started to panic again and I got it stopped. It's something she had never felt, that's why my bombproof mule blew up.

I KNEW IT WAS SOMETHING HE DID!