

Tips For Easy Mounting

By Monica Erman

In the April article we talked briefly about why laying a mule down or asking him to kneel to make climbing aboard easier may not be safe for the mule's muscles and joints. In this article I'll give some tips and ideas for making mounting easier and less of a strain for the mule and rider. Incorporate them one at a time, practicing until each one feels easy. Few things are easy at first; strength and proficiency take practice, practice, practice.

Get in shape! Some simple stretching and strengthening drills can go a long way toward getting in the saddle smoothly and easily. Use the rail of a pipe fence, not quite as high as your stirrup, to practice raising your foot up onto the rail and then lifting yourself up to stand with both feet on the rail of the fence. Steady yourself with one hand on the rail like you would do with the saddle.

Evaluate inefficiencies. Just as with training, when we ask ourselves "What would we like the mule to be doing better?" ask yourself specifically what stage of getting in the saddle is the most difficult. Is lifting your left foot to the stirrup the hardest, or is it swinging your right leg over the saddle? Some riders place their right hand on the cantle or even on the seat of the saddle and when their leg swings over, they forget to take their hand out of the way and end up in an awkward and difficult situation. Mount and dismount a few times to get a system in mind. Don't plan on getting on any ol' way every time. Practice a consistent, methodical mount that will get easier every time.

Train the mule to stand. If our mule is even slowly walking forward or bent out of position while we're trying to mount, the result is added strain and risk. The mule should understand his job of standing balanced, firm and quiet no matter how long it takes his rider to climb into the saddle and become settled there. He should not move until he is given the cue to walk.

Keep your weight close. The amount of



twist and pull on the mule's back when we step up into the saddle can be tremendous. A well fitting saddle is a must, along with a quality pad. But staying as balanced as possible is much easier on the mule. Try to keep your body close to his while getting in the saddle. If your weight is an arms length away from his center of gravity, which is a few inches behind his withers, it is more likely the saddle will slip to the side or the mule's back will be pulled.

Use a mounting block! Many riders, no matter how small or tall, never mount without using a mounting block and that is to be commended. It is easier on the mule and rider, and when the mule is taught to stand where we put him, the entire exercise can add to the partnership we're working to build. A simple, sturdy mounting block can be made of 4" x 4" posts screwed together. I use the scrap pieces taken off fence posts.

Learn to see the mounting blocks around you. If you are not around a "mounting block" there can still be lots of "boosts" in the form of hills, dips, logs or even tail gates. By placing your mule on the downhill side or positioning him in slight hollow in the ground you may be surprised how much closer the stirrup becomes! But do keep safety in mind. Don't use such an extreme hill that your

or the mule's balance is in jeopardy. We wouldn't want our foot to slip at an inopportune time, or for him to stumble down the hill just as our weight gets above his.

Mount from both sides. The original reason for mounting on the left came from soldiers or knights who had a sword strapped to their left hip. Having to swing that leg *and* sword over the saddle would have been difficult. Since mules don't transfer what they learn on one side to knowledge for the other it's become a safe practice to virtually always mount from the left. But it is a good idea to train our mules to accept mounting from both sides. If we had a hill on one side or a sore left leg, etc., having the option to mount from the right would be a valuable option. After practicing from the left predominantly, you may see that it seems your mule is inches taller on his right side! This, of course, is only because we are not used to reaching for the right stirrup and swinging our left leg over his back. Practice and strengthening will make mounting from either side just another step toward becoming a proficient equestrian.

Monica welcomes your comments or questions. To contact her e-mail: Monica_Erman@yahoo.com

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