

Training on the Trail

(Part One)

Water Crossing

By *Monica Erman*

There is no way we can foresee all the factors that can be involved on a trail ride. These articles are meant to offer suggestions for some of the situations that may arise.

The creek on the trail is often a source of struggle for mules and their riders. Why? There are lots of possible reasons but contemplating those seldom helps us so it is usually best to focus more on the solution.

Defining Moments and Goals.

Even when we are on a trail ride, we are training our mule. He is either learning to ignore us or to respond better to our cues. When we run into an obstacle or place of difficulty, view it as an opportunity to get the mule better trained. If we consistently tackle problems in this manner, there will soon be less problems.

Our goal should always be to go through the obstacle in a way that makes any and all future crossings much easier. If the technique we use doesn't produce lasting improvement, we want to try to find another way. The mule should learn a barrier in the road such as a creek, log or tarp is not a cause to get upset. Many mules become more afraid of creeks the longer they ride because the discomfort and pressure the rider applies gets added to the fear of the creek. We need a way to cross an obstacle that builds the mule's confidence as well as increases the amount of control we have.

Approaching the creek. As the mule



Monica and Luke at the creek.

sees the creek, keep his nose pointed straight to it. If he stops twenty feet from the edge, let him stop. The longer he stands still looking toward the water, the better. Don't ask him to walk forward at this point. Doing so would probably produce movement but chances are very slim that he would walk forward and we don't want to give a cue he probably would refuse to fol-

low. If he stands looking at the water, pet him and let him know this is an okay place to be.

Only ask him to move when you believe there is a greater chance he

Keep his nose pointed across the obstacle, wherever his body may go.

would go forward than any other way. We only want one step. Don't ask for more than that. Recognize that if he puts his nose down to look at the water, that is a forward thought. Reward the inclination by releasing the pressure from the bit and your legs.

Every time he moves closer to the water or thinks about going forward, give him a pet. Petting does at least a couple things. It calms the rider which helps clearer thinking and planning, and it lets the mule know he is on the right track. Remember, pet or stroke - don't slap.

Small steps taken one at a time are better than trying to rush at the creek. The more we try to pressure and force the mule into the creek, the greater the chances for the mule to feel trapped

and confused which definitely doesn't lend toward a happier crossing for next time - if you do get across the first time.

At the Water's Edge. Let the mule put his nose down to the water as much as he wants. Allow him to play in it or paw at the water. The more time we spend here, the less chance he will make a big leap over the water. Of course, the narrower the creek, the harder it is to have the mule walk across. A small creek is easier to jump across than step quietly through. The first crossing might include a jump so be ready. Try not to pull on the reins as he is crossing. Give him rein and make the trip as comfortable as possible.

On the other side. If done correctly, the second crossing is easier than the first. Remember, our goal is to make the next trail ride even better. The way we crossed the creek the first time probably wasn't ideal so as soon as we're across the creek for the first time, we would do well to turn around and go over it again. And again! Picture this time as investment to safe guard against future delays and strained emotions.

Practice at home. The best way to train for the trail is not on the trail but at home. Soldiers don't jump to live combat situations without lots of class room study, controlled field exercises and hectic drills. A trail ride can produce lots of scenarios that require a great amount of control to be handled safely.

Use various obstacles at home to practice control on the trail. The more objects you cross, the better. This training is for the rider as well as the mule. We learn how to position the mule for the best job, how much pressure a given situation will allow or need, what we need to practice more with our mule, etc.

Training, even in difficult places is still training which is all about improvement - improving the control, abilities and relationship we have with our mule.



Monica and Luke crossing the creek.