

Handling Mules and Hinnies

Our topics for this week are:

- **Behavior of mules**
- **Comparison of mules to hinnies**
- **Work ability of mules**

Mules are hybrids of the breeding of horses and donkeys. As a beast of burden (packing and pulling wagons and carts), mules have been preferred to horses since ancient times despite the more muscular hindquarters and pulling power of the horse. Mules can thrive on poorer food than horses, eat less per pound of bodyweight, drink less water (they sweat much less than horses), have thicker skin than horses and are less susceptible to saddle sores, and have much harder hooves, rarely requiring shoes to work. Their durability for work lasts more years than in horses. Donkeys and mules also excel at surefootedness for travel in rocky, mountainous areas. Mules were used by the Carthaginian military commander, Hannibal, to cross the Alps to invade Rome in 218 BC and by Napoleon to cross the Alps in 1800 to attack Austrian forces.

Mules were the most desirable draft animals during the western migration in the U.S. Mules were trained to move forward by the command “get up” to turn left by “haw”, right by “gee” in the northern U.S. (“yee” in southern states), and stop by “whoa.” “Come up” meant start. “Easy” was the signal for slowing down. Large mules from the southeastern U.S. were used to pull wagons across the plain states. Smaller mules from the southwestern U.S. were preferred as pack animals in mountainous passages.

Natural Behavior of Donkeys and Mules

Donkeys evolved in rocky, arid, semi-desert conditions which required the ability to defend themselves from predators since they were unlikely to out run them. Food was scarce and large groups could not find enough food in one location. Their social structure became based on family units rather than herds. Hence, their social structure and reaction to danger is much different than with horses. .

Their ability to flee from danger is less than that of horses, so they are less flighty (less likely to easily startle and run) and more fighty (they are more likely to attack if threatened). They will bray loudly to either communicate with scattered members of the family unit foraging for food or to deter a predator. Mules retain most of these donkey characteristics..

A male donkey is called a jack (also called an ass), and a female is a jenny. A mule is an offspring of a jack and mare. A male mule is a john and a female mule is a molly. A hinny is an offspring of a stallion and a jenny.

Mules

Mules have longer ears than hinnies. Hinnies have a more horse-looking head and their overall size is slightly smaller than a mule. They do not have a true forelock. The size of the dam affects the size of the offspring. Mules have more donkey-like color and hinnies have more horse-like colors. Mules are more common than hinnies because mules are larger and have more pulling power. It is also easier to breed a jack to a mare than a stallion to a jenny.

Mules are bigger and more independent than horses, but like donkeys, they will not entrust as much leadership to humans as horses do. Mules will defer to human dominance, but they are less submissive than horses. They are less herd bound and less inclined to spook and bolt. Mules have exceptional strength and endurance and, from their donkey mother, relatively small hard feet designed for rocks and desert conditions. The manes of mules are roached (cut short) because the mane is stiff and sticks up getting in the way of a pulling collar. They are less athletic in turning and running than horses. Therefore, mules are superior to horses in some tasks and inferior in others.

Hinnies have more horse-like appearance than a mule. However, they tend to have more behavioral characteristics of a donkey since they are imprinted by their jenny mother, compared to mules being raised by their mare mother.

Mule Handling

Mules and hinnies are handled similarly to horses. Horses do not forget rough handling but may forgive it to a certain extent with gentle handling later. Mules are less prone to forgive. Difficulty in handling mules may be from bad experiences the mule had in earlier life. A mule will remember specific individuals who have been unkind to them and wait for opportunity at a later time to retaliate.

Adult, conditioned pack mules carry their load on rigid or soft pack (aparejos) saddles made for mules. A saddle pad or blanket is used under a rigid saddle. Thick pads are needed for pack saddles. Riding saddle blankets are too thin to be used as a pad for pack riding. Rigid saddles are made of wood (Sawbuck) or aluminum or fiberglass (Decker) and held in place by cinches, breechings, and breast collars. Sawbuck saddles have two cinches; Deckers have one. Rigid saddles are designed to allow the weight to be carried evenly on both sides of the upper chest without pressure on the top of the spine. Heavier loads can be carried more comfortably with the Decker saddle.

Panniers are the detachable bag or box packs that are attached to saddles to carry the load. Manties are canvas tarps that are wrapped around the cargo. Sawbuck saddles are made

for panniers and Deckers will carry either manties or panniers. Sawbuck saddles and panniers are preferred for the southwestern U.S. because packing is easier without picking up burrs, thorns, and insects that handling manties on the ground tend to adhere to. Decker saddles and manties are more common in the Northwest U.S. because when crossing streams and rivers, panniers can fill with water and prevent a pack animal from getting up if it slips while crossing. Soft pack saddles also distribute the load weight on both sides of the upper chest. Horses and mules can be used for packing but require a different shaped pack side bars than burros. The average pack weight for a horse is 175 lb., for a mule 225 lb., and for a burro 200 lb.

When leading a pack animal, the lead rope should not be tied. It should be loosely wrapped around the saddle horn and maintained on the downhill side in case the pack animal falls and the lead rope must be quickly released. If leading multiple pack animals, a breakaway string should be used on each animal's lead rope. The end of the lead ropes should not dangle closer than 18 inches from the ground. The most inexperienced pack animal should be the first after the rider's horse. Whenever resting on a slope, pack animals should be trained to face the downhill side. Otherwise if falling rocks startles them, they could jump backward and down the slope or off a ledge.

Mules can also be used for riding. Mules have thicker withers than horses which cause saddles slide forward easily, requiring the use of breeching or a crupper, and a breast collar. Army mules had their tail hairs trimmed into the shape of bells around the tail. If the tail was completely shaved, the mule was called a shavetail. This meant the mule was untrained. One bell meant it was trained only to pack. Two bells indicated it could pack and be driven to pull loads. Three bells, the highest rank, meant it could also be ridden.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Mules are more tolerant of adverse environments than horses.**
- 2. Mules are less graceful and slower than horses.**
- 3. Mules can be trained for pulling, carrying packs, and riding.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 300 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.