

# Teaching A Mule To Pick-Up A Lead

By *Tim Doud*

*Diamond Creek Mules*

*Cody, Wyo.*

Getting the correct lead at the lope or canter can be a difficult or frustrating task to teach your mule. How can we teach a mule to lope off on a left or right lead? How do we know if the mule is on the correct lead?

When a mule is on the correct lead, the mule is leading that gait with his inside front leg. If we are loping to the left, the left front foot will be the last foot hitting the ground in stride, but reaches the farthest forward to lead your mule.

The entire process of the canter or lope lead actually begins with the outside hind leg. That is the leg that pushes off and causes the mule to lead with the inside front and hind legs. So the canter or lope goes like this: Outside hind, inside hind and outside front, inside front – it is, in fact, a three-beat gait.

When the mule “strikes off” into the canter or lope, the mule will push off the outside hind and at the same time, pick up the inside “leading” shoulder to pick up the correct lead. For all of this to happen, you must have a light and supple mule that is willing to bend around your inside leg by being soft in the hips and shoulders.

The desired position of your mule to strike off correctly is having your mule’s hips-in and shoulders elevated. Below are some ways to help you achieve this maneuver with your mule to help you teach the correct leads.

Keep in mind, there are many ways to teach a mule to pick up a lead. That is great news for the mule owner. If we are having problems teaching a mule to pick up a lead, we can experiment with different lessons to teach the mule. I will cover just some of the lessons you can use. These are by no means complete lesson plans. Instead, I hope to give you the idea behind each approach and give you the opportunity to experiment to help your mule find the right answer. After all, training is just that, helping your mule with information you have learned.

**Haunches In** – This is the best lesson to teach your mule. Ask the mule to move his haunches, hind quarters, inside the circle we would like to lope. Do this by using your outside leg behind the cinch or girth and outside rein towards the hip to move the hip inside. If we ask the mule to pick up his left lead while moving his haunches inside to the left, the mule will lope off in a left lead. Remember, he must be soft and supple to achieve success.

**Shoulder In** – Use your outside leg in front of the cinch or girth to move the inside shoulder in as we ask for the lead. Trot the mule off; apply pressure with your outside leg (right leg). When the mule moves his inside shoulder (left shoulder) to the left, immediately ask the mule to lope off into the left lead. Moving the inside shoulder in is the first step of

**(top to bottom) TIM asks Angel for a Reverse Arch Circle to strike off on the correct lead**

**Haunches In is the best way to teach your mule to pick up the correct lead**

**Ride your mule along the fence to start your rollback. Finish your rollback by turning your mule into the fence and asking for the lope**



the lead. In this instance, you are actually asking your mule to “fall into” the lead. Over time, you will have to go back to haunches-in to get the correct collection for a proper lead departure.

**Rollbacks** – This is the easiest of all the lessons to teach the mule. Ride the mule in a straight line along a fence or wall. Ask the mule to rollback turning into the fence or wall. Just as you are coming out of the rollback, drive your mule forward into a lope or canter with both legs. The mule will pick up the lead. If you ask your mule to lope and they do not, immediately turn your mule again and ask for the lope in the other direction. When your mule is loping, allow him to lope for several strides, then walk, take a break and try again.

**Haunches In On Rail** – This lesson is the same lesson as haunches in, but we will use a fence to help the mule. The difference is if we ask the mule for haunches in and the mule disengages his hind quarters instead of moving his haunches in, we will move to the fence. The fence will keep the mule from moving his shoulder to the outside. This will keep the mule walking or trotting straight, but still moving his haunches to the inside. The mule will pick up the same lead as the direction the haunches move.

**Small Circles** – Trot small circles with the mule in one direction. After several circles, ask the mule to pick up speed with both legs. Eventually, your mule will lope off into the lead of the direction you are circling. The mule will pick up the lead you are making your circles in. Make sure to make tight circles, but not too tight or you will slow the mule down or make him stop his forward progress.

**Ride into the Fence** – Ride the mule straight towards a fence. As you approach the fence, make a 90 degree turn. As the mule finishes the 90 degree turn, use your outside leg, and drive your mule into the lope. Your mule will pick up the lead for the direction you are turning. If you turn to the left, use your right, outside leg, and the mule will take a left lead.

**Ride over Poles** – Place six poles in a circle spaced about nine to 11 feet apart. Trot in circles outside of poles working you way into poles. Just before you reach any pole, ask your mule to lope over the pole. If they pick up the correct lead, lope away from the poles. If they do not pick up the correct lead, immediately stop your mule and try again.

**Reverse Arch Circles** - A reverse arch circle is when a mule has his head turned one direction, let’s say left, and is moving his body the other direction, right. With a mule performing a reverse arch circle to the left, you are putting the hip to the right and therefore will have an easy time of getting the right lead. Perform the reverse arch to the left, then drive your mule into the lope to the right with your left leg.

**Serpentines** – Serpentine are a figure eight pattern. Ride three-to-four serpentines at the trot, then ask the mule to lope off at the direction change in a serpentine. If your mule gets the correct lead, lope away from the serpentine. If not, immediately stop your mule and start your serpentines again.

A fun way to work through the exercise is to first, pick a

lesson you feel comfortable with. Next, let’s say you want to get five correct lead departures today. We will start at five and subtract one point each time the mule picks up the correct lead. Add two points for an incorrect lead until you reach zero. But remember, when you first begin teaching this, you must be patient and understand that your mule has no idea what it is you are about to teach. Give your mule the opportunity to “get the idea” before putting the stress of consecutive correct leads into play.

Remember, these are just a few of the many ways to teach a mule to pick up a lead. Pick a lesson that is fun for you and fun for your mule and with practice you will have a mule that will calmly lope off in the correct lead when you ask.

*You can reach Tim Doud at [www.diamondcreekmules.com](http://www.diamondcreekmules.com), by phone at 307-899-1089 or by e mail at [bliss@wave-com.net](mailto:bliss@wave-com.net). You can also “Like” Tim Doud on Facebook. Tim’s past training articles can be found on his web site.*



**ART PERKINS** sent in these pictures of his grandchildren, who live in Littleton, Colo., and come out every summer to stay and ride with them. “The first picture is **NICK LARSON**, 10, on his donkey **Paco** who we purchased from **MAX HARSHA**. I am on **Moose**, a mammoth from **BILL GARRETT**. Both donkeys are 8 years old. The other picture is **ELIZABETH LARSON**, 13, on her mule, **Blondie**, who is 18 years old. They would be thrilled to have their pictures in their favorite magazine!”

