

Training From The Ground Up

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Young or unbroke mules are a clean slate. Taking your time training will benefit you and your mule



Training a mule, or any equine for that matter, is no small feat. As I've stated before, it takes a lot of time and a lot of patience. However, I hear too often from people that we should be riding any un-broke mule within a few days. "Forget the ground-work, it can be fixed from the saddle."

First of all, when working with a mule, whether broke or unbroke, it is never a good idea to go at your own pace. The only one that should be setting the speed of training is your mule. He or she is the only one that can tell us how fast we ought to go. Why? The concept is as simple as driving a car.

You try to start your car or truck, but it doesn't seem to want to run... there could be a number of reasons why, but the most common place to look first is in the gas tank. Do you have any gas; if not, problem solved. You fill up the car with gas so now it runs. But once it runs, how do you make it move. Well, the driver has to understand how to use the gas peddle. If you push it too hard, it will speed out of control and probably end up hurting you and wrecking your car. If you don't push it enough, you won't go anywhere. So, the driver has to learn to put the right pressure on the peddle that will make the car go just the right speed.

Now, you know how to start it and how to go forward, but we can not forget another very important aspect - how do you stop? Do you know how? If not, then you probably can't or shouldn't be going forward. Well, then again, if you want to wreck your car and potentially hurt yourself in the process... by all means... go forward!

If not, let's learn how to stop and understand what you

need to do to be safe, not hurt yourself or wreck your car. You figure out that the peddle to the left of your gas peddle is your brake. That is how you stop your car, no matter how fast you are going. But, just like with your gas peddle, if you push the brake too fast, you could hurt yourself and damage your car's wheels or braking system. Too slow and you may not stop soon enough. So again, you have to learn how to regulate the pressure on the brake peddle.

So, thus far we can start the car, make it go forward, make it stop, but how do we turn or steer? Wow... this driving a car thing is not quite as easy as we thought!

So, we learn that the wheel in front of us helps us direct the car. It can turn the car right or left as we move forward. Again, if you turn the wheel too much or too little, you could cause damage to your car or yourself. So, again regulating the speed at which we turn the wheel and how much we turn it will determine the smoothness of our turn.

Wow... and there's more. We have gears to help us go faster and to even help us back up our car... Do you get the idea?

Something as simple as driving our car is not such an easy task. And to think, we had to learn this as teenagers! How on earth did we do it? It probably took some of us months and months or even a year to be able to drive safely. Some of us were probably pretty good and learned in a few months. But, do you remember all the accidents we had as youngsters? That is because we were learning and trying to figure it all out.

So, imagine that your mule was you in that situation. Now our mule doesn't look so stubborn. In actuality, our mules are probably pretty smart for telling us that they are not really sure of what we are asking and that we have to teach them some more before they are comfortable. Fortunately our mules don't care about being cool or ahead of the crowd, they just want to learn and be safe.

Most issues or problems that mules have derive from how they were started. Too many mules are rushed or "cowboy'd" and not given the opportunity to learn about being light in the bridle, how to move forward, accepting the saddle calmly – from the ground first.

The newest craze has become, how fast can we get on our unbroken mule; a few hours, two days, three days? In my opinion, none are appropriate. Mule-starting clinics and colt-starting competitions are really unfair to our mule. We are expecting our mule to "drive the car" perfectly in just a few days.

That is not to say that all trainers that do mule-starting clinics are not good trainers. A good trainer will always tell you that you must go back and practice your ground work and complete each of those lessons before you move on to the next lesson. Essentially, a mule-starting clinic should be looked at as a place to learn the steps required to properly start your mule at home. A good clinician will also not allow you to ride your mule during a mule-starting clinic if the mule is not ready.

So, let's get to common sense. Ground work and a solid foundation are essential to a well-started and well-trained mule. Without them, we, yes we the people, create problems. When we have a young mule or even an older unbroken mule, they are basically a clean slate. Nothing that we are teaching them is natural, nor do they wake up every morning dreaming about being ridden. They dream about green grass and calm days.

The biggest problems come from a lack of a solid foundation by the person teaching the mule. Almost any issue that a mule develops is derived from a lack of training or rushed training. In almost any case, it can be traced back to how they were started.

Mules, like horses, want to learn and want to be around people. They also want to please and put forth a good effort for us. However, unlike horses, if a mule develops a bad habit it is much harder and takes twice as long to fix because they are smarter than a horse. So, why not take the time at the beginning of training and teach the mule so the mule does not develop any bad habits in the first place. Foundation is the key.

I have never seen a mule wake up and say, "today you are going to start sacking me out so, I think it would be fun to start a bad habit like running." In reality, your mule doesn't want to go anywhere. Running is too much work. The person in that situation has to throw time tables and deadlines out the window and realized that something is not working. We



(top) TIM works with Key Largo ground driving him to continue teaching lightness on the bridle. This adds to Key Largo's foundation of training

(bottom) Groundwork and sacking out helps create the solid foundation needed when training a mule

don't set the deadlines or time tables for the mule, they set it for us!

Yes, training a mule takes a lot of time and can cost a lot of money, but we get out of training our mule what we put into it. A well trained mule is always priceless, but a mule with an issue can't be given away.

If we take our time with our mule, we will have a better trained, safer mule with no bad habits – one that is worth his weight in gold and a lifetime partner that anyone can enjoy. If we rush and push our mule and skip the foundation, the holes in your training will become obvious fairly quickly. Most mules that run away, buck or have other major issues have those problems because of how they were trained. It is either poor training or a lack of training that causes these problems.

When we start teaching them what we hope to have them learn, we have to understand that our expectations on them, from day one, are 100 times greater than they ever imagined. Taking your time is essential to your mule's positive progress. Remember, you ride the mule you lead. 🐾

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