

Fixing a *Hard To Catch* Mule



Make sure your mule responds to the “Come to You” cue before you begin



Teach your mule to stand calmly and accept the halter

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I receive a lot of calls from mule owners who have mules they can not catch. This can be very frustrating. The first step in training your mule to be caught is to teach your mule to come to you on cue. See the November 2009 issue of *Mules and More* magazine or visit my web site www.diamondcreekmules.com for instructions on teaching the “Come to You” cue.

The “Come to You” lesson is important because you are teaching your mule a cue that you will need during your “catching” lesson.

Always remember, any training lesson can be ended at any time. You do not have to teach your mule the entire lesson all at once. You may stop at any time as long as your mule is calm and has responded correctly to a cue you have given him.

After your mule will come to you in a given area, you are ready to move to the next step. You will need your halter and lead rope, which to most mules, signifies that he will be caught for some reason.

Walk towards your mule with your halter and lead rope. Let's say you are 30 feet from your mule when you start walking towards him. If you think your mule will walk away from you when you are 20 feet from him, then you need to turn around and walk directly away from him at 21 feet. In

other words, you leave before your mule does.

Now, I am sure you are scratching your head...but, the key is to turn around and walk away from your mule before he moves away from you. When you move away from your mule before he leaves you, you are giving him a release.

In any training lesson we do, the release is what your mule looks for and learns from. If we chase him all over the pasture until he is caught, he will keep running because we have not given him a release, so he is thinking, run, run, run. If we give a release before he moves, then he will begin to change his thinking and say, “OK... I will stay.”

When you begin walking up to a hard to catch mule, he is probably thinking, “Oh no, what does he want.” At this point, your mule is getting emotional and becoming nervous or uncertain about what you want.

If you turn and walk away before your mule does, you are teaching him to not be afraid. You are teaching your mule to think, “Is that all he wanted? I did not need to be afraid.”

The timing of your release is what makes the difference in your training. For this lesson, if the mule moves away before you gave your mule a release, you have gone too close. If the mule does move away, ask the mule to “Come to You.” Next time, make sure you walk away sooner.

After you walk away, turn and face your mule again and



If your mule walks away, you are going too fast

repeat the process. Begin walking towards him again and just before you think he will move, walk away and give your mule a release.

Over time, walk and release closer and closer to your mule, until you are standing one foot in front of your mule.

Now you are ready for step three. When you are within a few feet of your mule consistently, you are still going to walk away, but instead of walking directly away from your mule, walk at a 45 degree angle away from your mule's head in the direction of his hip.

Repeat step three several times until your mule starts turning and facing you...and eventually following you. We are halfway there.

Next, turn and pet your mule and praise him. While you are praising him, use this opportunity to "sack out" your mule with your hands. Rub him all over with your hands. Do not use the lead rope to sack your mule out yet. Not until your mule is totally relaxed. Be sure to hold the halter and lead rope in the opposite hand that you will "sack out" your mule with.

Note, if your mule is moving away from your hands while you are sacking out your mule, you are moving your hands too slowly or keeping them on his body too long. He is tell-



TIM starts sacking out Silky with his hand

ing you he is sensitive to your hands and afraid. He is looking for a quicker release. In this case, touch him for just a second and take your hand away. Build up to five or ten seconds and so on.



Make sure you sack out your mule's entire head, including the ears

Keep sacking out your mule with your hand building on keeping your hand on his head, ears and pole longer and longer. If your mule does not like his ears touched, start on his forehead and swipe your hand over them very quickly. You want to go so quickly that he reacts to your touch after you have already touched his ears. Remember, you can gradually go slower the more comfortable he gets. You can tell he is getting more comfortable because he is reacting less.

Work your hand down his head, to his neck and finally to his front shoulders. This will take many repetitions. Make sure you release your mule, take your hand away, each time you touch him.

The next step is to sack out your mule with the halter and lead rope. Repeat the same process you used with your hand. Start by touching him for a second with the halter, then taking it away. By this time, your mule will be used to seeing the halter since you had the halter in your hand as you sacked him out with your hand.

Work slow building on each step. If the mule moves away you have gone too far. Ask the mule to come to you and start again.

If he reacts or moves away each time you try to touch him, back up. You may have to start by raising the halter and lead rope up in the air six inches, then lowering it.

Sack the mule with the halter and lead rope until your mule will stand while you place the halter on your mule. You have just trained your hard to catch mule to be caught. Congratulations!



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