

## “She Has a Kind Mind!”



We were packing out the trail crew from Nine Stream Camp (ten miles in) on the Staircase Trail, in the Olympic National Park, when the above photo was taken. What is significant about this photo is, that following this shot, I had one heck of an “oh! my goodness” moment. Maudie, my white Arab mule and I had just started a long down hill stretch, when it went south. She let me know she was in trouble by making the most unusual sound I ever heard come out of a mule (it was somewhere between a moan and a hiccup). I could feel it, as well as hear it. The first thing that came to mind was “is she about to colic right here on the trail, under me?” I stopped her post haste, crossways in the trail. I sat there briefly, wondering what to do next, when I noticed the latigo from my front cinch lying on the ground at her off (right) side. Oops, somehow the knot had worked loose and it had dropped off. All of our saddles are double cinched, which left the rear cinch still tightly in place and bumping into her belly like a broken whale-bone-stay in a worn out old corset.

I very gingerly slid off and reset the front cinch. What a good girl! Maud is a very experienced 19 year old mule, who has had many a mishap with me and lived through everyone. She just stood there and waited for me to clean up

another mess I had gotten her into. In this case, it was a lot of wet saddle blanket experience that saved me one heck of a rodeo. She has a very kind mind, which has saved my bacon more than once.

When it comes to survival on the trail, there is no substitute for getting out there and doing it. Proper foundation training can help in jump starting this process. In the animal world, there is a herd structure and we believe that anytime we can let this ingrained system work for us, we win. We are not purposing that we have the silver bullet that will turn around a rogue, but we do know it will make any training process safer and easier for a good mule or horse and the trainer.

Trust is the back bone for all of our training processes. We train our animals ourselves now, because conventional training methods using the 30 to 60 day process seem to be a battle of wills, not a collaborative effort, with trust as the key factor. We have chosen instead, to let the herd do our heavy work. When the herd leader demonstrates to all members that they are subordinate to us humans, at least half of the work is done in establishing trust. Trust in the herd is not about dominance and control. Better put, it is the by-product of these two factors. The herd leader is the main source of protection for the collective group. Because of this trust in their strength, wisdom and skill, it is open only to the most dominant. Into this picture we step, Sue and I, dominant over all. Watch how a gang of mules interact. They are not wicked or cranky to each other, except when it is necessary, and then only long enough to get the job done. Whenever herd dynamics can be applied, training becomes easier.

To take advantage of this, we do not start to train a critter until it is well settled into the herd. We then take them to the round corral, along with another mule or horse, and go through all of the evolutions we will use to train the newbie, with the other critter (watch and learn). When the time is right, we bring in the student and begin. We introduce saddle, blanket, packs, tarps or whatever we want. We take it slow and if it is a bumpy road, we bring in the substitute teacher (living training aid) and go through the apparently scary evolution, next to the nervous student. Keeping our eye on the trust factor is the goal, not the individual task.

Before you know it, they are almost asking for more training and chances to practice trust. In time, following our normal training methods, Sue is aboard,

sitting in the saddle. The next step is to answer the critters question “what do you want me to do?”



Sue is riding Rosie for the first time in a bit-less bridle. Note: a buddy in the background. This is added safety and security for all.

To properly answer this request, we use a training aid called a Bitless bridle. This tool does not go into the mouth of the trainee. It controls their head, without gagging or scaring the mule or horse. We are giving only one head command, and thus it must deal with only that issue. It is funny to watch them rein for the first few times. “Oh my, why is my head turning?” This basic task is accomplished without fear or discomfort.

The next step is moving commands. I will lead the trainee around with the lead rope and Sue will rein, voice command and leg cue, as I mimic her orders. We will continue this until we are convinced they know the drill. At this point, I will lessen my lead rope control until I have none at all and they will be responding to my body moves only. In time, I will move to the center of the round corral and they will go on their own. Works great for us!

(Note: by leading them, you may be able to dissuade them from feeling threatened and possibly bucking, because they are not abandoned with this strange feeling load on their back. “It is ok!” “I am the herd-leader, right here next to you, protecting as you learn.” Consider this, that within the herd, a misbehaving member will be pushed out on it’s own by the herd leader, as punishment. Because of this dynamic, we avoid lunging; this may very easily be considered punishment in the eyes of the trainee, mule or horse’s mind.)



Sue is warming up Darla in the below mentioned bit, prior to taking her out on the trail.

We never put steel into their mouth until we are sure they understand all of the directional commands with the Bitless bridle. We will then introduce a #33 Myler mouthed bit, with a kimmberwick cheek piece. The cheek piece will allow starting in a direct reining position and some day moving onto a curb position, all in the same bit. (Note: we do not ride out of the round corral in the Bitless bridle, because they loose respect for it quickly and easily push through this basic training tool.)

We believe that any fear you set into a mule or horse's mind, is fear that will stick with them and come back to haunt someone. The critters we have started this way have all shown us that they have maintained that original trust, as they have matured. It seems to us, that if we can start with a younger mule with less prior handling, add it to the herd for trust training, and use our method to train with a minimal amount of discomfort to the animal, we are able to get a solid mule out there, with less wet saddle blankets.

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