

NEVER RUSH A NEW MULE

By Terry Wagner

One thing I have learned about mules, is don't rush things with a new mule. Almost every week I get calls from someone who has just acquired a new mule. The caller as you would expect is excited about the new mule and expresses the desire to get the animal out on the trail the day after the mule arrives. Sometimes these folks are new to equines entirely, for some they have owned horses and this is their first mule. I have never had an experienced mule person call and say they were leaving on a big trail ride with their new mule the day the mule set foot on their real estate.

I have also had folks call that have



Sandy's first ride on Sky.

been seriously injured, physically or mentally after trying to take their new mule on their "big summer ride" two days after the new mule of their dreams arrived in his or her new corral. When I hear these horror stories I think how just a little patience would have avoided a lot of problems. Someone who is new to mules that winds up in a storm usually arrives there from a lack of understanding of how a mule's mind turns.

I recently talked to a couple who were leaving the mule world and going back to riding horses. They said they had bought and sold several mules over a three year period and had nothing but bad experiences with all the mules they had purchased. During this conversation, which was a call asking if I knew anyone shopping for a mule, it was obvious to me that these folks had rushed themselves on the mule and didn't let the mules have time to adjust to their new surroundings.

Several years ago I bought a mule named Playboy. He was a drop dead gorgeous mule. He was about 15 hands high, small ears. I realized at the time I bought him that he had some issues but I felt they were nothing that couldn't be overcome. After I got him home he didn't seem to connect well with people and kind of looked on me as an invading force. I spent lots of days just brushing him and fussing over him. A few handfuls of oats helped a great deal and in the long run I rode him for almost two years without a single bad move on his part. I rode him all through our Apache Sitgreaves National Forest and packed a rifle on him all through the Blue Primitive Range during deer season. I decided he was worth a fair amount of money and sold him to a lady on the east coast. I heard



nothing about him till two years later when a lady called and said she owned him and he was the worst runaway she had ever experienced. It was obvious from her call that she was concerned she was going to get badly hurt on him. The woman was looking for insight into how to get along with the mule. I told her my experiences with him had all been positive and suggested she seek the help of a professional mule trainer. I have often wondered how Playboy was approached by the people he came in contact with.

Mules have a tendency to become very attached to a good home. Just like people, if a home is dysfunctional and constantly in an uproar, people don't want to hang out there very often. Same thing with a mule; if they like their surroundings and the folks who care for them, they get really attached to their home. When a mule is sold from a home they like this really upsets their apple cart. You may claim the mule by right of purchase but you did it without the permission of the mule. He/she doesn't understand money and a bill of sale. You may own the mule by right of sale and possession but the mule is not really yours till he/she decides to let that happen.

An example of that is Sandy's mule, Sky. We acquired her from a friend here in Arizona. She had lived at Larry and Dallas George's barn in Payton, Arizona for several years. To say that Larry, a retired veterinarian, and Dallas, a member of the quarter horse hall of fame, gave Sky a loving and rewarding home experience would be an understatement. Due to health reasons, doctors suggested that Dallas end her riding career. Due to Larry and Dallas' attachment to Sky they kept her around for two years, not riding her. When they offered to sell her to us, Sandy and I jumped at the chance and bought her. We brought her home on a Saturday afternoon and went through the process of introducing her to Buggs, Jones, and Andy, the three mules we owned at the

time. It was a strange introduction, as Sky would have nothing to do with them and immediately started pacing the dry lot fence around the barn. There she paced for sixty-three days and she paced twenty-four hours a day. She was barefoot when we brought her home and after a month I had new shoes put on her as she was wearing her bare feet to nothing pacing the corral. She wore the new shoes out in three weeks from her constant pacing.

We would take her out and brush her and fuss over her and do everything we could make her know we appreciated her and that she was a really good girl. When feeding time came she would grab a mouthful of feed and continue to walk the fence line. The only way she would eat required that I lock her in a pen and feed her. Even then she would eat and circle around inside the pen. A friend suggested I pen her up full time. With her mindset at that time I was sure she would develop weaving, which is a really difficult habit to break and is very hard on the mule. For those

not familiar with weaving, the mule / horse will spread their front legs apart and swing their head back and forth in a half circular motion, swinging it from side to side at the same time. This is physically very hard on their legs and neck.

Sky's issue was plain; her body was here in our back yard but her brain was still in Larry George's barn. I knew that if we tried to ride her we would have nothing but trouble. Finally on the sixty-third morning I looked out the back door and Sky was standing with the other mules with a leg relaxed and watching the back door to see when I would feed them. She had finally decided our house was home.

I rode her the next day for her first time in two years, with no issues. She has come along nicely since then, side passing, neck reining, decent transitions, backing, and she learned to sidle up to a mounting block or other objects for a rider to mount easier than any mule I have seen. For the last several years, Sandy and I have only ridden



with other riders about two or three times, and we almost never run into other trail riders in our area. Meeting new equines seems to be a slight challenge for Sky, but more trail encounters with strange company will cure that. That is our next challenge. If we had tried to ride her for any reason when we first got her things would have taken a quick change with a less than desirable outcome I'm sure.

We most recently acquired another molly mule named Pearl; again, from Larry George. Pearl is a 15.1 hand high grulla colored mule, weighing about 1100 pounds. She had been in Larry's barn for almost ten years. To say she was happy and contented there was obvious. When we brought Pearl home, her attitude was different than Sky's attitude had been. She immediately established herself as the new queen bee in the corral and made it clear she wasn't taking any sass from anyone. She

attempted this same attitude with people. She was easy to catch and didn't pace but once caught she thought she was the leader.

It was obvious this could be the start of a disaster. If she would be this way on the ground she could be trouble under saddle. I know for a fact Larry rode the mule through thick and thin with nothing but praise for her common sense but we had turned her world upside down. We brushed her and praised her when she did things right and consistently made her work whenever she wanted to be pushy or pull out on the lead rope. Finally she gave it up and now wants to be caught, is easy to lead and the first at the gate when you walk out the back door. To watch her attitude change was amazing. She constantly talks to us when we go outside and she watches us with great intent whenever we start doing anything within her range of site. The first ride

on her was exceptional. Pearl has been professionally trained and it shows. However, if we had pushed her for a ride as soon as she got home I am convinced the outcome would not have been good and she is big enough and strong enough to break things.

I give you Sky and Pearl as examples of what could have been a negative outcome if we had tried to ride them too soon after their arrival here at Three Bells Mules. I have had similar examples of this, not rushing mules over the years, and encourage new mule owners not to rush things with their new mules. Give your new mule the opportunity to let you know he has settled into his new home and is happy there. If you listen, and watch them, the mule will let you know when he/she is right with your world. My advice to new mule owners is *never rush a new mule*.

Su Amigo, Terry

To contact Terry Wagner for information on this article or prior articles, email: tbmsaddles@gmail.com

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