

# Problem Solving

## Part 17

### Bathing

By Monica Erman

**Michelle writes:** My mule goes berserk anytime I try to give her a bath. She kicks and strikes at the water coming from the hose and will not stand still when I go to rinse her off. She pulls on the lead rope a lot, too. She hasn't pulled away from me, but I'm concerned she will eventually. How can I make the bathing process a better one for her and me?!

**In response:** It's definitely the season for bathing! It's hot out there. Making sure your mule is trained to willingly accept a bath is another must for a well-rounded mule. If we don't spend the time to train our mule to respond correctly for a bath, it inhibits not just keeping her clean but healthy as well. A vet may someday prescribe water therapy for a wound or medicated shampoo for a skin problem. She might need a shower to lower her body temperature in severe heat, and it's a good idea to rinse the sweat off your mule after a trail ride or training session.

**A few cues to help the process go smoothly.** If your mule doesn't have a few basic cues mastered, trying to do something like bathing or standing for the farrier is simply asking for more trouble. Mules can't understand that if they were to just stand still, the bath would be done sooner. All she understands is that the sensation is unusual, so her instincts tell her to leave or fight. But, if she has been taught some basic cues, that obedience to training will override her instincts and make the situation better. That's what training is all about.

*Go forward cue.* Your mule should step forward in response to the halter and to a tap on her hip, whether from a dressage whip or your hand. This is essential to preventing her from backing away from the tie post or her handler.

*Step to the side.* If a mule cannot run away, he or she will most likely kick in an attempt to get whatever they are worried about to leave. In order to keep ourselves safe, we need a cue that guides the mule's back feet away from us. Practice having your mule yield her hindquarters away from you, to her left and right. Being able to keep her feet busy stepping to the side will go a long way toward stopping her from kicking.



*Back up.* Teaching your mule to stand still is more about teaching her that you are in control of her movement. Oddly enough, the worst way to practice standing still is to spend the majority of your lesson time standing still. Backing up is just one more way to control your mule, and make sure she knows that every step should be done at your instruction.

Before you get the water hose out, spend some time practicing directional ground control. Think about how best to prepare your mule for the cues you will need when you get the water hose out. You'll need to have enough control to hold her with one hand or have her very well halter broke to stand at the post. If you ever think, "Yeah, that's good enough," you would be better off practicing for a while more. "Good enough" has led a lot of people to the vet or the hospital.

#### **Tips to make bathing a good experience.**

*Be thoughtful of the temperature.* No one likes going straight from hot and sweaty to an icy cold shower! Think about the temperature of the air and the water. Start the water on your mule's legs and gradually work up her body, allowing her to get used to the water. If the air is very chilly or it's coming to the end of the day when she won't be able to dry efficiently, consider the timing of her bath a greater priority. It's better to find an-

other way to get a job done than make a problem that takes longer to fix.

*Give a mini bath to build confidence.* If you were to put the water stream on your mule and hold it there, she may feel she has to walk away. Instead, put the water on her legs or hindquarters for only a moment and then take the stream away. Give her a moment to stand without the water, praise her without pressure, and then bring the water back, taking it off again before she feels she has to leave. Gradually, the length of time the water stays on her will increase.

*Move and countermove.* If she does move before you take the water away, ask her to move in the opposite direction to regain control. This is where having ground control really pays off. If she moves to the right, ask her to move left, back up and step forward. Show yourself in control of her movements and then offer her a chance to stand still.

*Important bathing etiquette.*

Avoid harsh shampoos. Equine hair has special oils that shed rain water and keep their skin healthy. Too much shampoo can wreak havoc on your mule's skin. Look for soaps that are plant based and formulated for sensitive skin.

Always scrape off excess water immediately after bathing. Your mule's hair can trap her body heat, and the water in her hair can even heat up in response to the sun. Don't think that leaving water in her hair will help her cool off, because the opposite is true. Use a sweat scrapper, the back of a comb, or even the edge of your hand if that's all you have, to get as much water as possible off her body.

Barn manners such as bathing, standing for the farrier, clipping, and trailer loading are similar to building good habits in ourselves like eating well, exercising, and flossing our teeth. The moment by moment choices we make in handling our mule will make next time better or more difficult. Good mulemanship looks ahead and considers how today's priorities will affect tomorrow's results.

#### About the Author:

Monica has offered quality equine training consultations to mule and horse owners for more than 25 years. She is a graduate of the 1999 John & Josh Lyons Certification Program and completed the course with a mule and an Arabian. Each year, she takes advantage of any opportunity for advanced equine education, including multiple Lyons Advanced Trainer Courses.

In 2012, she competed with two mustangs in the Extreme Mustang Makeover held in New Jersey, receiving 1<sup>st</sup> in Horse Pattern, 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> in Legends Finals as well as taking home the trophy saddle for the Double Downer Championship. At the 2010 Extreme Mustang Makeover, her mustang, Danny, carried her to 1<sup>st</sup> in Trail and 4<sup>th</sup> in the Legends Finals before he was adopted by the Kentucky Horse Park Mustang Troop.

Since 1998, Monica has served trainers, riders and owners across the country with monthly training, boarding, teaching clinics, riding lessons and problem solving. Her facilities in Missouri and Pennsylvania offered colt starting, harness training, show and sale preparation and injury care. She has written articles for Western Mule Magazine, John Lyons' Perfect Horse Magazine, InfoHorse.com and others.

Today, Monica lives in southwest Missouri, giving owners the knowledge and support they are looking for to build their own equestrian goals. Find her on Facebook or contact her through [ben@westernmulemagazine.com](mailto:ben@westernmulemagazine.com).



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## Mule Thoughts...

I'm not totally  
**USELESS**

I can be  
used as  
**BAD**  
**EXAMPLES.**

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I would love to hear from you!  
If you have a training problem  
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