

Problem Solving

Spring Warm-Ups ————— By Monica Erman

Better riding weather is just around the corner! Many of us have spent the winter months surviving the cold as best we can. The frozen and slippery ground is not conducive for riding and training. We've made sure our mules are fed and sheltered, groomed, and had their feet trimmed. It's okay if that's about all. But now that the days are longer and beginning to warm up, we can start to think about another kind of warm-up, training. Here are some tips and exercises to implement into the first rides and training session of the new season.

Be willing to start slow. Don't go out to the first ride in three months by pulling your mule into the barn, saddling up and jumping into the saddle in under five minutes. That's a good formula for an inaugural bronc ride. Instead, halter your mule after he has had a good amount of time outside to stretch his legs and shed excess energy. Spend generous and organized time grooming and tacking up, watching him for signs that he is nervous. If he seems wary during some point of the process, be willing to back up or even postpone saddling up. Instead, lead him to a round pen or arena for some groundwork exercises. It might take a couple sessions to get both of you back in the groove of working together. Allow ample time and attention to the process and let it work for you. Don't try to force a topic if you or your mule are not ready.

Do what you are already very good at. I might be in the minority, but each spring I'm a little apprehensive about the first couple rides. And honestly, I'm okay with that. Riding can be dangerous and some healthy appreciation for the risks is a good thing. We don't want to ignore common sense. But we also don't want to let fear hold us back from getting better at riding.

The best way to build confidence is to work from a spot of confidence and then push toward a new level. When you are just starting to get back to working with your mule in the spring, choose a subject that you and your mule are very good at whether that's groundwork, lunging, some tricks,



round penning or riding in the home pasture. Don't try to teach new things or even pick up where you left off last fall. Do something you are rock solid comfortable and consistent with. Practice that subject for one or two full sessions, almost to the point of holding yourself back when you want to do something else. That will set you up to be eager for tomorrow's ride.

Now here are some good warm-up drills that can help maximize the effectiveness of your riding time.

Trot, trot, trot. Trotting is one of the best gaits for training exercises! If you spend five minutes in an exercise at a trot, it is almost three times more effective than doing the exercise at a walk. Aim to train at a trot and get the most "bang" for your time.

Markers. This is a wonderful exercise for young or green

mules in the arena before they are ridden in unconfined areas and can be done just about anywhere. The best place is a level area, free of anything dangerous like machinery or protruding objects that you might bump into.

Start the exercise at a walk before you advance to a trot. The more speed you can incorporate into the exercise, the more advanced your exercise will become. But don't try to run before you can walk!

Keeping your eyes up and to where you are going, pick out a marker on the ground. It can be a rock, a divot, a dandelion, anything you see. Lock your eyes on that marker and say to yourself, "Turn around it to the right." As you pass the marker, make a mental note as to how you did. Did your mule end up walking straight over the top? Did the marker pass under your left stirrup instead of staying just off your right side? How much pressure on the bit did you have to put on your mule to make the turn? After you have made those observations, look for your next marker. Practice until you can have your mule guide exactly where you want.

Your mule will have no idea what those markers are or what your predetermined path is. It's all about how well you can steer him and how he responds to your signals.

Turn into the fence. This is a fantastic exercise to improve softness and timing for both the mule and rider. Work with a very safe fence, whether it's a solid wall or a smooth pipe fence. Do not do this on a barbed wire, electric or even post and rail fence. (I'll explain why later.)

Start at a walk parallel to the fence. Steadily pick up the rein closest to the fence and draw the mule into a turn into the fence. It's not going to be a pretty turn at first. Your mule is likely to walk forward with his nose against the fence for some steps. Put enough pressure on the bit to motivate him to change his direction.

The fence acts as barrier and makes it more obvious to your mule that he is being rewarded for turning. He may bump his nose on the fence as he learns what you want him to do. That is why it's important not to use a wire fence or a fence with protruding posts.

At some point, the mule will stop going along the fence and change his direction. This next step is the important part! The moment you feel him begin to go the new direction, release all pressure on his bit and let him continue the turn on a very loose rein. You want him to feel the reward of zero bit pressure during the turn. (What jobs do you work at the best; the ones you get paid for on that day or the ones

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 1st in Horse Pattern, 4th and 6th 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 1st in Trail and 4th 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.



Contact Monica at
monica_417@outlook.com

you get paid for two weeks later? The same is true with your mule.)

Why practice these exercises if your mule is already broke to ride? Because worse gets worse and better gets better. Well-trained mules do not just happen. They are made by us, the rider. Communication and understanding with mules or people are not qualities that simply materialize by themselves. Good mule training is not complicated but it does require attentiveness and thoughtful practice.

I would love to hear from you! If you have a training problem or question, feel free to email me at monica_417@outlook.com.

