Steve Edwards and I have been engaging in cell phone chat over morning coffee. This week’s topics related to his clinics and how RFD TV became a reality for him. A respected cowboy with an unpretentious style, Steve knows that wisdom doesn’t come easy and life lessons have a spiritual meaning. A self-made man that believes in God’s word, Steve is eager to share his life experiences with me.

Cindy K Roberts: Steve, what are the most common questions that people ask at your clinics?

Steve: My favorite clinic is “Why Does My Mule Do That?” that is simply because the mule made a mistake or we think he made a mistake and actually he did a mule thing. We generally put the blame on the mule when really we didn’t communicate effectively (to begin with.) For instance, the client will tend to use only his hands and their voice expecting the mule to work from that when we should be using our leg as a part of our communication. We expect the mule to just go down the trail . . . I just got an email from a person that bought a mule after seeing little kids ride it, brought it home and a week later he could not get the mule to leave the barn. I asked him if he used spurs and the guy said no that he was afraid to use spurs and so there again that is an intricate part (in communicating to the mule) that we don’t use, but we expect the mule to do these things especially after we have seen little kids riding it; the mule went out and did just fine. But in a new area (to expect the mule) to do these things (in a new setting) all the time, you can’t do that.

CKR: What type of behavior problems do mule owners bring to you at your clinics?

Steve: The mule won’t stop . . . they pull on it (the mule) and pull on it and he won’t stop. That can come from improper use of the bit. (Also,) the bit is improperly placed in the mouth; they are using the wrong bridle with the bit, they are using the wrong reins with the bit. These are four (issues) that are mechanical. How to use your hand(s) with that bit is another important issue. Most people will lean on a mule. When a bit has shanks it is meant to be used one handed. What people tend to do is instead of allowing the bit to work with a loose rein and one handed; they make the mule, make the bit do the work by pulling and making them go.

CKR: What seems to be the most frequent issue between the mule owner and his mule?
Steve: The mule getting into their space on the ground. What we tend to do, we feel that we can pet Fluffy and make a friend out of Fluffy . . . we are nice to them. When we look at the communication of the equine, they don’t say a word other than a whinny or a bray to communicate I am over here, where are you going? What we have to understand is the mule communicates with his body. So if the mule wants me to go to the right, he steps into my space and naturally I will step out of his way and pretty soon the mule has put me where he wants me. Time and time again, the mule has found out he can make you move. Now let’s put it in the saddle. The mule says I want to go over here by my buddy so rather than fixing it when it (the issue) was a half a pound, now the problem is much bigger. When the mule’s nose points to the right he is going to the right, when the nose points to the left, the mule is going to the left. We should right then, not make the mule move in a circle which so many people do but to take the rein and go, right, left, right left. In other words take your hand and bump the right rein and take your left hand bump the left rein and say no you are not going to the right. But because our timing is not correct he’s (the mule is) already there! If we would first fix our timing down on the ground, watch the nose start to go, wiggle the lead rope, we can start getting our timing correct first on the ground while using the lead rope and then, when we progress into the saddle now we have our hands on the reins and now we communicate don’t go there.

CKR: In other words, if a mule doesn’t respect you on the ground then he won’t respect you in the saddle either.

Steve: It’s not so much “respect” it’s a matter of who is on top of the pecking order. Our leadership needs to be continually shown; most people think if I hit Fluffy then Fluffy won’t respect me and we won’t get along. But if we look at the mare, who is the herd leader and she pins her ears to say ‘get out of my space’ and the horse or mule kept going, then the mare pins her ears and swishes her tail and says ‘now I am telling you, get out of my space!’ The third step is (for her) to turn and bite or kick. Ask, tell and demand. You would think an animal that has been kicked by a herd leader, he would not ever go back to be around the herd leader but that animal has so much respect for that herd leader that he will stay right with it because of the respect that they have for him. So it’s OK to give them a swat, it’s OK to use your spur but the problem is we tend to barely ask them or we overdue it by correcting them through spurs. The biggest problem is folks do not practice on the ground what they should have, in the saddle. The problem is not the mule, the problem is us; our timing! Our timing is too late; the mule is already in my space! But if I would wiggle the rope because the mule cares more about his nose then he does his mouth; as soon as he feels that fly land on him he moves the fly. If you would wiggle the rope you would say to him that is an incorrect decision if you barely pick up on the rein you are saying (to the mule) that is an incorrect decision. But what we tend to do; now that the mule is going, we get ahold of the rein and we pull, we are demanding on him when we should have been asking him. Ask, tell and demand. We are always at that demanding stage because of our (poor) timing. Because of our (poor) timing, now that mule is invading our space. Like Tom Dorrance would say, Tom always said he was the lawyer for the horse. Basically what he was saying is we put all the blame on the horse and it’s not the horse. We didn’t use simple communication skills to see the smallest try to go on, we want to see the big try not the small try.

CKR: How long do you think the average mule owner owns his mule?
Steve: Three years.

CKR: Then they move on to the next one?

Steve: They move on to the next one. Riders tend to search for that perfect mule and it don’t exist!

CKR: Is it hard for mule riders to ask for advice?

Steve: Yes and a lot depends on if you are male or female. Eight percent of my clientele are female and they don’t let pride get in their way . . . most people feel they are OK with just the way they are, they ride Fluffy, going up the trail, and we’re OK. I don’t need to learn to side-pass or a turn on the forehead, or turn on the hindquarters, I don’t need to know that until one day when I have a wreck. What happened? Well, I didn’t have the communication skills. Besides that, we have so many different professionals out there that have a lot of great ideas but no one particular person has all the answers. Plus we are living in an educational time frame. Back when I was working on the ranch, you just watched it being done, rarely anyone said, pick up a rein like this. You just had to watch, at the school of hard-knocks. Now we have all that information, the down side is Cindy, look at all the cookie cutters. They are all doing the same thing saying you have to desensitize your mule. Some trainers hang flags or banners, they are going to desensitize their mule so that when the mule sees this, he is not going to have a problem (at a show or event.) I will give you an example, I have practiced for the world championship at Bishop for months ahead of time but when I got to that show what I did have was loud music, banners, animals running loose in my big arena (back home) but what I didn’t have . . . was 10,000 people. I cannot desensitize nor have a mule remember every single thing, and say because the mule saw that now there won’t be a problem. Why do people think they don’t need to go to clinics? It is because they feel their mule is trained, the mule knows it and therefore I can just go down the trail.

CKR: What do you think is the most difficult training issue that most mule owners find hard to understand?

Steve: The mechanics of the mule. How does the mule stride? What happens when a mule elevates his head or drops his head? The mule is always carrying on a conversation with us; the down side is we’re not listening to the conversation because we don’t know what is going on with them. (Riders tend to think) when I put a bit in the mule’s mouth or a saddle on his back, and now we can go down the trail. No. The mule has to be physically and mentally ready for going down that trail and they cannot physically be ready for it with a bit shoved in their mouth creating two wrinkles. Their mind is on I am uncomfortable; I’ve got this thing creating two wrinkles in my mouth. Or they (riders) are going down the trail and they have the wonderful Steve Edwards saddle and the mule is starting to shake his head going down the hill. A rider will think because he has the right saddle and the right pad, the mule will go down the trail just fine. Mechanically the saddle has to be adjusted correctly and when the mule is comfortable, life is good. The life of the mule is comfortable and uncomfortable. When he is uncomfortable, he will find a reason to go back to the barn, or run off or buck you off or to spin and turn on his hand-quarters.

CKR: What is the most well received topic at your clinics?
Steve: How to fix their mule. Not one particular thing because everybody has a subject that is near and dear to them. Such as wanting to pick up a back foot . . . I recently showed some clients with my come-along-hitch adjusted to the head for communicating to the nose, I can communicate and fix the majority of the problems they had because of a properly adjusted halter, because a mule cares more about his nose than he does his mouth.

CKR: When mule riders walk away from your clinics what do you think they take with them?

Steve: They take 10% of what I’ve done there and that 10% is important to them. They take away the thought; it is not the mule that must know what to do . . . it is me. I am the herd leader.

CKR: Tell me about your experience with RFD-TV.

Steve: I sent my DVD’s to RFD-TV to see about selling them. Several months when by and I got a phone call from a producer interested in airing my DVD’s on RFD-TV. It just took off like crazy! People were calling, asking who’s this guy training mules? We’ve been watching and he has new ideas, so it took off from there. Next I was getting calls to do clinics all over the place! One of my client’s is the Minnesota Zoo and they have an equine program there. I went there and trained on their draft horses and their handlers and put together a safety program for them like I did here for the Phoenix Zoo in Arizona.

CKR: Was it like Hollywood? Did they make you wear makeup?

Steve: No. If you watch my DVD’s I don’t choreograph anything.

CKR: Was there any kind of prep work to getting the mules ready to go on cameral for RFD-TV?

Steve: No, I wanted people to see the mistakes so when things happen, I was right in there to fix it. What I don’t do Cindy is when I go to do these expos and they bring a mule to me, I meet that mule for the first time with 700 people looking at me.

CKR: What kind of mule myths do you hear from people today?

Steve: Don’t hurt the mule he’ll get even with you. Mules don’t need shoes. Mules don’t need to have their teeth floated. Mules don’t need to have a specific bit. Mules don’t need to have specific saddle. Mules don’t need a britchen or crupper. Mules are safer than horses. Do you want me to go on? What’s happening Cindy is these people are buying mules and are thinking . . . now I am going to be safe! They might as well buy a Sherman tank and go on down the road that will be the only way to be safe . . . again what are we doing? We are expecting the animal to take care of us.

CKR: Yes, and it’s a partnership.

Steve: Yeah, it is. I get hired by attorneys to give my expert opinion on how an equine accident happened. For instance at the Grand Canyon we feel the animals are safe and have done a good job and have an excellent record. But have they made mistakes? Oh yeah, what makes it so unique about the Grand Canyon? Because the mule does not have to think about what you are doing sittin’ in the saddle. You’re just a fat tourist sittin’ on the back of that mule and the mule knows, to get one behind the other
because it is their nature to be an equine and follow the leader ... that’s sitting, that’s not riding. Now let’s take that same mule to ride him away from the rest of the herd. If you don’t have the ability you can’t do it. That mule knows that naturally that if he stays in one behind the other he’s safe. He’s safe in the herd. If you the herd leader takes him out, you better show him that going that way is going to be the most comfortable way and leaving the animals is going to be comfortable but going back to the animals is going to be uncomfortable!

You see Cindy; the mule is what he is ... a creature that possesses good traits from both the donkey and the horse. And he is very detailed in his thinking. I have been blessed that I get the everyday opportunity to work with mules and their owners. I enjoy helping other mule owners to understand and appreciate the mule for what he is and to increase the communication between them ... because that will strengthen the partnership with their mule.

[Steve Edwards can be reached through his web site: www.muleranch.com and by phone 602-999-6853.]

[Cindy K. Roberts is an author and contributing feature writer with a lifetime experience in training mules and horses. Cindy can be reached at cindy@everycowgirlsdream.com.]