My weekly chat with Steve Edwards allowed me to interview him about some details regarding the mule that needed clarification. His positive demeanor and never ending energy is amazing. Steve is very willing to set me straight on some facts; this one is for the record.

Cindy K Roberts: Steve, clarify the nutritional requirements in the mule.

Steve: There are some mules... just look at 'em, they're fat as all get out! Their fat pockets along the crest of the neck top of the ribs and dock of the tail are horrible! And that is because of the sugar content in the feed. So the carbohydrates now have gone into the donkey side of the mule which is the crest of the neck, top of the ribs, and dock of the tail.

CKR: In my opinion most mules don’t need grain.

Steve: They do need grain; let me explain why and when. Mules (that are riding or being worked) need oats. Notice I said OATS, not crimped oats because crimped oats are a fattening agent that builds carbohydrates within that grain head that creates the fat. Now if we want energy which we do want when we go on a trail and we want to keep our topline good; we must increase our feed to go up the trail. We’ve already got so many proteins and carbohydrates in that flake of hay. That will not maintain the animal’s energy level, nor will it maintain the topline being used every day going up and down the trail. When I know I’m going up that trail and I need energy level and want to keep my topline, I need to feed whole oats. Whole oats are energy builders, they are not fat builders. I put a nosebag of whole oats on him (Mr. Mule) while I am saddling, before that energy kicks in for those whole oats, I am now going up the trail as the mule is burning energy he is getting that energy from the whole oats, he is not gettin’ it completely from that hay, that we feed every day... he has to have something that can give him the energy without burning off the muscle. If Mr. Mule burns muscle, we will see him lose his topline and we do see that. The downside of it, Cindy, is we are feeding the animals the same whether we are trail riding or standing in the corral. If I went to a smorgasbord every three days, boy ‘ol Steve would get porkier than he is already! But if I watch my feed intake and I am out there working every day and I eat the right feed, by golly I will make it through! Feed your mule for the job he will be doing.

CKR: When you hear a mule myth, does that tend to aggravate you?

Steve: No, I just let it roll off my back now. I just try to show them (otherwise). Let me give you an example. Let’s just say I am doing some halter work with a mule and I am shaking the flag. Somebody watching might think I am desensitizing to the flag. But I am really doing halter work, not desensitizing to the flag. It is respect for that halter that I am working on because the mule bumped it. I want the mule to respect that halter.
Here’s a myth, put the saddle up on the mule’s back and it is going to be there. No! We have a fat pocket right at the 6th and 7th rib 4 inches behind the scapula. And if we just sit the saddle up there the first thing it does is stick up in the back! What we didn’t do is take in the thought of that fat pocket . . some more prevalent on others . . that the fat pocket makes that saddle want to tip ahead. The way the mule carries his weight down low towards his shoulders makes that saddle tip ahead. But you take my saddles and you put your hand in the seat and hold it down it now fits from the fat pocket back an average of 70%; if you don’t have a fat pocket and you don’t have an overly fat mule then that saddle is going to fit 80-90%. So that’s when people say that tree didn’t fit, the down side is they are not using the tree, they are not putting it on the back the way it was designed. Horse saddles have twists and that twist puts pressure on that 6th and 7th rib.

CKR: What is the best thing that anyone can say about a mule; what in your mind is his best quality?

Steve: I think they are consistent. Their flight and fright for the most part is not as prevalent as it is in the horse. You do have to take into consideration how the mule was bred, but for the most part, consistency and self reliance are very important in a mule. They like to be with the herd leader, too. You’ll see a mule wanting to be with a lead horse. Why is that? Because they rely on the leadership from that horse so if we are as consistent as that horse is, (by)showing leadership, that mule will be that consistent for us (the herd leader).

CKR: Thank you again for your time in talking with me; I apologize for taking up your time during a clinic, I didn’t realize you were busy.

Steve: Oh, no no. I am in Arizona! I had people come in to do a workshop. One of the fun things I do, Cindy, is I get to see a lot of people but also a lot of professionals (in this business.) And it is fun. I did a clinic in Florida; I had four veterinarians there. I didn’t know that they were vets, but it really doesn’t make any difference to me. I am not there to put on a show. I am there to show what I believe is working good for me. I always say, “If it doesn’t work for you, don’t use it.”

This one lady was a Parelli (follower) plus she was a veterinarian and a good rider. I started showing (the audience) the way a mule is built. I placed my saddle tree on several different mules; then taking her mule and putting one of my saddles on (the mule) with loose cinches and I told her to climb on. She couldn’t believe that saddle didn’t move. She rode around for 5 or 6 minutes. I had her move back to me, I then shoved my arm clear through the front cinch to the rear cinch and I asked, “Does your saddle feel unstable?”

She said “No.” I went ahead and loosened up the front cinch where it is hanging 3 or 4 inches from the animal and I said, “Move around in the saddle.”

She moved around. The saddle stayed put. When you tighten the front cinch on the saddle, it puts pressure on that 6th and 7th rib (on the mule) and that is most uncomfortable. If you understand how a mule moves, and you tighten the back cinch only, it takes the pressure off of that 6th and 7th rib and the saddle now rides like it should. That is the way I designed it. If you use everything I have : my saddle pads, my britchen, my cinches, and breast collar - if you use the entire package, you are going to have the saddle work the way it should because these are
things I have designed to make the saddle work. The saddle will work (efficiently) as I designed it, if you use the gear that supports it. Cindy, if more mules are outfitted with correctly fitting saddle and tack, there would be less wrecks and more consistency in the mule (while he rides or works.) The simple fact is that if the mule is comfortable, he will work better. Make him uncomfortable, and you will not like the result. I wish I could reach out to all the mule riders to help them understand the right way of saddling their mules and explain to them what works and what doesn’t.

Just for the record, Cindy, I think the mule is a spectacular animal and I am here to help him any way that I can.

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