RE-TRAINING A HORSE OR MULE THAT HAS DEVELOPED BAD FOOT-CARE HABITS

There is a fine line of control when one handles a horse or mule between the need for the animal to do what the handler deems necessary and what the animal deems necessary. Early on, this becomes very evident in the horses and mules when maintenance of their feet becomes necessary. They may and usually do not take kindly to anyone taking away the control of their first line of self preservation. The necessity of hoof maintenance and the animal’s subsequent resistance may lead to many frustrated sessions with a well meaning but still on the clock farrier or hoof care practitioner. For me, there could be nothing more irritating if I were such a professional, than to show up on the request of an owner, to ply my trade, and have this owner expect me to train or re-train their animal to stand. This is such a sticky point with me that I will not normally purchase a horse or mule without first having a farrier shoe the critter, in front of me. If they misbehave, I have to make a decision if the critter is worth the effort to retrain. This is where someone else’s bad training has usually left off.

Our dear Josie mule is just that kind of an adventure. She is an eight year old molly mule; we have had for four years. She is palomino in color, 14.2 hands tall, weighing approximately 1,000#, and a great worrier. Josie and I have both been blessed with each other. She challenges me to learn how to train her, so she can get beyond the fear and worry she possesses. Sue and I had to train her to give up her back feet, to pack and to live with errors we humans may make in her presence. A sweeter and more attentive animal you will never find. She is also the fastest animal to become detuned for any discipline. She wants to believe in us humans, but at our first sign of weakness she believes she must fend for herself. We have been through several retraining, after a pack box fell off of her as I was loading it. It did not matter that she jumped and knocked it down, not a bit, it was my fault. In another incident, a small piece of plastic blew into her view while I was trimming her feet and from then on she worried about it happening again. It had gotten so bad that a gentle, and animal easy farrier, was not able to shoe her. I scheduled the farrier for three weeks from that date and retrained Josie to become the best of the best with her feet (for now).

When you have to retrain a horse or mule, I think mules are easier; you must look in every facet of the problem. It is similar to a graph, on one side is the
extreme bravery and the other is extreme fear. In the center is a line defining where we expect them to perform. The closer we can get them to that center line the better it is for both of us. Being a thinking critter, they can take advantage of you by going as far from that center line, toward fear, as they can get if left to their choosing. It hit me like a lightning bolt when I stumbled onto what I call the "hoof wobble." I had gotten Josie through all of the training steps for the farrier, in great order, yet she was still rude to me when it came time to put her foot down. She thought she had trained me, that if I did not let her have her foot when she thought I should, she would just slam it down. This was not appropriate behavior in my book. Once I had the foot work completed I would continue to hold onto the foot. I would move it up, down and side to side. I would touch her toe to the floor and pick it back up again. If she disagreed and took control of the foot, I rained on her parade. Now I can rest her toe front or hind on the floor and she will not put weight on it until I remove my hand and say it is ok. I was able to feel her thinking as I held onto that foot, her reluctant hesitations and finally her compliance, cool. I’m so proud of her.

The next farriers visit came due. I went out into the mule paddock, caught her up, took her into the barn and went through the whole drill. Holding the foot up and hammering onto a steel shoe held against her bare feet. I tied all of her feet up so she knew I could. I wobbled all of her feet, then turned her out again and waited for the farrier. When the farrier arrived, I caught Josie up again, tied her loosely to the barn partition and repeated the full drill. Then I had the farrier go through the same thing I had just completed. She could not believe it was the same mule she dealt with three weeks before. I watched both Josie and the farrier very carefully and if either of them varied from what I had trained for, we retraced the steps that had been missed or rules that had been broken. Any farrier worth their salt should be willing to deal in a similar manner with any animal you have trained, to make their job safer and easier. We are the ones
responsible for our animal’s health and well being, not a stable keeper or a farrier.

Sue, my wife, and I have worked up some information that may be of help to others when it comes to figuring out how to get your horse or mule back to that center line. Josie is our training aid; she now has been shod, so you will have to imagine she is still bare foot. This is a system we used to retrain a prior trained mule. To start an untrained one, we approach it differently. Be advised, that this is how we deal with this problem in our animals. You must be convinced that it is a solid way for you to proceed. Do not copy us but develop and decide what is safe for you and your animals. You have the final decision for their well being.

When ever a horse or mule is haltered for training, we make sure that the halter is on tight and that the nose band is well above the cart ledge at the end of the nose. If you do not, in a blow up, they can very easily break this material away from the bone.

Before you work with an animal in training, it is safer for you if you attempt to repel nuisance bugs away from the critter. It also helps the trainee to pay better attention to you. We also spray our animals prior to a farrier working on them.
One legged hobble or cuffs can be used to restrain a front or hind leg. These will reduce the chance of rope burning the pastern, which is very slow and difficult to heal without getting proud flesh.

I prefer the center one because it can wrap the leg almost completely and it is very fast to release. The one on the far right works well, but if the critter dances around a lot it may slip off. The one on the far left will hold the leg great, but in a fearful panic, it is harder to release because of the buckle. I carry the center one with me on all my packing trips, as it will allow me to use a 3/8” sling rope to tie up a foot without burning it, by using this hard rope against the leg. The best rope to use for leg restraint is as big a cotton rope in diameter as you can find and over 20 feet long. This is the rope we use.

I suggest you get a good book on knot tying if you are not familiar with the two knots we will use. The slip bowline and a rolling hitch with a slip loop in it. Form a loop large enough to fit over the opposite leg from the one you plan to work on. Tie in a loop with a slip bowline and put this leg into the bight and snug it up.

We led the running end of the rope (the end away from the knot) over Josie’s back to her opposite side. Now we are ready to lift the opposite front leg or hold up the opposite rear hind.
I lift Josie’s front foot to the desired height and wrap the cotton rope twice around her pastern or we could apply a cuff. We held the leg up until we were sure she was comfortable, before proceeding further. During this whole process or with any training evolution, take your time, be gentle and move quietly. The end product is trust.

Once Josie was quiet and comfortable, we proceeded. I kept control of her foot while Sue tapped on her bare foot, first with the hammer handle, then moving onto the hammer head, then an old loose shoe was put against her bare foot and hammered on with the shoeing hammer. When she accepted this part of the process, we moved onto the other front foot. We shifted the bowline and duplicated the wraps on that foot. Safety note: always be aware of your arms and legs in relation to the direction the rope will move.
if the animal were to jump or the rope was hurriedly released. Sue is above the rope, forward and away from the direction of travel of either the foot or the rope.

If it is necessary to tie up the foot and step away, simply cross over the loops and come back under itself with a quick release loop. This is now a running hitch with a safety loop. We did not leave Josie unattended in this condition.

To deal with the rear hind foot on Josie’s same side, I put a cuff on that pastern and ran the cotton rope through the smallest ring. I gently lifted the foot straight up until she knew what I was up to, and then I pulled the leg back and stretched it out. This will hold the foot in a secure working position.
This is a safe alternative if a cuff is not available. Do not tie this with a sling rope from you pack gear. I lifted the leg to the position I wanted, then I slipped an overhand loop around the pastern, stepped away and picked up the foot to the height needed.

I have tension on the rope as Sue puts a stand under Josie's foot. Sue then worked on training the hind foot the same way as she did the front. Because of the direction of the pull on the rope it is difficult for her to work above the rope only. Once Josie was trained in the hoof wobble, Sue would take the foot and gently wobble it down until she was ready to free it.

Josie has not had any trouble extending her foot forward to be placed onto a stand for the final dressing. The next photo shows how we would have dealt with it if it had been a problem.
I would have tied a loop around her neck with a slip bowline. Lead the running end between her back legs and around the pastern of the hind leg on the same side. Dip the running end of the cotton rope through the loop. Pull on the rope, lifting the foot forward. The rope can then be tied off to the loop with a simple slip knot.

Josie was drilled almost every day in the preceding three weeks. Repetition is the key to her success. A boring drill is in a mule’s mind abuse. Because of this, we kept it mixed up to eliminate this problem.

Because Josie had been great in handling her feet in the past, we just needed to convince her to remember the training she has already had and smooth out some bad habits she had developed along the way. This included her being reluctant to pick up her foot for the farrier. She refused to allow the farrier to nail a shoe onto her foot and jumped off of the hoof stand. She also historically would walk away from you when you released her foot. One had to continually chase her down. Now if she takes one step away from anyone working on her feet, she gets an immediate thundering response from me. She is getting better at this; because she again believes that she must listen to me. Thanks largely to the simple hoof wobble.

A firefighter entering a burning building without any element of fear in his mind is not brave, take my word for it, he’s crazy. I respect this mule very much, I know that she is always working against a strong element of fear in her heart, but she is brave and she tries. Thanks to her, Sue and I understand better and can respect these efforts for her conquest of fear that equals bravery, not just in her, but also in the rest of our gang.
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