Problem Solving

Speeding Up and Standing Still

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*(Reprinted from Western Mule Magazine)*

If you think about it, everything we want from our mule can be put into two main categories: “Go” and “Stop.” A side-pass or a backup up is a need for “go.” Standing quietly at the hitching post is a need for “Stop.” Crossing a puddle or maintaining a lope for consistent circles is a “go” cue, while standing still for mounting, letting the farrier hold a foot or standing still to be caught requires the “whoa.”

When we know that these two categories exist, we can more effectively make a plan for solving problems and advancing the control we have with existing cues. Because these categories are opposites, they have very different factors. Knowing what is effective for the job in front of us plays a large part in how much we will enjoy our mules. This would be a great time to discuss identifying problems, creating lesson plans to solve those problems, and building solid cues.

“Speeding Up”

The amount of natural energy a trainer has to work with will depend on the mule. Some mules love to move, while others seem so lazy it’s hard to envision riding at faster speeds. The character and experience of a mule will determine how hard the rider needs to work to motivate the mule to move. Every mule has a level of motivation that makes him turn his ears and think, “What does this rider want?”

One dependable feature of mules is that, with consistency and a good reward system, the level of motivation needed to cause a change will decrease over time. For example, if a five-pound tap with the whip was needed at the beginning of the lesson, a less intense tap will be required as the lesson is practiced.

Mules need a reason to do everything for us, but the reason needs to be important to him. The same is true with people. The threat of a $40 speeding ticket may be enough to persuade a sixteen-year-old girl to pay attention to the posted speed limit, while a $400 ticket might be nothing to a hardened speeder. Anytime we have trouble getting our mule to do something, we need to ask ourselves, “what is his motivation and reward for obeying our cue?” If we haven’t pre-planned his motivation and reward, the training is going to take a long time.

It’s important to remember that there is a difference between a motivator and a cue. For example, when I train my mule to lope, I have a specific cue for that gait, usually applying pressure with my outside leg, slightly behind the neutral position on his barrel. The motivation for getting into the lope is kicking with both legs, a swat with the whip, a verbal encouragement - some kind of pressure that is impossible for him to ignore. After I give him the cue, I will add whatever level of motivation I need to encourage him to find the right answer. Sometimes I need to make his life pretty uncomfortable. I don’t want to add so much motivation that he pulls away, bucks, or otherwise becomes out of control, but I do need enough pressure to make him think, “How can I get her to stop that?” Some mules are motivated by nothing less than a whip lash while others literally jump in response to an ounce of pressure.

Whichever is the case, the moment the mule does what I want, I should instantly release the cue and the motivator.

A motivator will only be effective when it’s followed by a reward, the release of all pressure. The moment the mule does what I want, the pressure from the motivation AND the cue stops. I concentrate on being as quiet as possible, giving him peace in every sense of the word. There should be no pressure from my seat, hands, legs or even body language. I would only apply those pressures if I needed him to make a change - speed up, slow down, go left or right, etc.

Once you establish clear “go” cues, we can proceed to working on the “whoa” cues.

“Standing Still or Whoa”

As many people have found out, it is impossible to make a mule stand still. We could use tranquilizers (and even then, sometimes a mule will move!), twitch him (which only breaks down trust), put him in stocks (oh wait, he can move in those too!), hobble one or more legs (anyone seen a mule move with hobbles on?? Of course.), or plant him to dry in concrete (yeah, that won’t turn out well…). Regardless of what we do, forcing a mule to hold still is futile.

Knowing that we cannot make our mule stand still compels us to search for creative tactics that will teach him to stand still. We know that we can inspire a mule to move. We also know that mules, like people, are basically lazy. We would rather sit on the couch than work, right? The key is developing lessons that use the mule’s laziness to our advantage. So how do we teach our mule to stand still consistently?

At best, the “whoa” or “stand still” cue is an offer to the mule. As he becomes better trained, he learns to take advantage of every chance to relax. His motivation to move caused by fear or nervousness gets replaced with knowing what comes next. He learns that if he does not hold still, he will get to lope in circles, practice side-passing, or be put to some form of task.

Mules are conditioned response animals. The best way to promote good habits in our mule is to inspire the response in the conditions we want, straight from the first day of training. The idea that a mule needs to make a mistake in order to learn what is correct is not only dangerous, it’s also incredibly counter-productive. Would I want my mule to learn to pull away from me so that I have to correct him? Of course not! My time and training is far more positive and effective if I set him up for the correct response to every cue I give.

Taking into account the principle in the above paragraph, I should only ask my mule to stand still for a reasonable period of time. Let’s say my trail riding group has stopped for a break and my mule is not wanting to stand still. If I tried to make him stand still, chances are he is only going to get more nervous and fidgety. But if I gave him a job like trotting a pattern around some trees, or practicing our reining and then gave him a chance to stand still, he may take the offer for a minute or so. The best thing I can do for him at that moment is to ask him to go back to trotting the trees before he gets fidgety again. This sets him up to develop the habit of waiting on my signal to move. If I wait until he moves on his own initiative, I will be placed in the re-active position of the relationship, which isn’t good for either of us. As my mule learns to wait for my “go” signal, his standstill will become more reliable.

Never resent your mule’s willingness to move. Use it to your advantage! We cannot even teach our mule to take our offer of standing still if he is always standing still. His movement is useful. Knowing how to use and value movement from our mule is a crucial step towards adding control in every area of his performance.

“Whoa” cues depend on the “go” cues for reinforcement. The better we are able to move our mule, the better his “whoa” will be. Capitalize on your mule’s “go” to maximize your mule’s “whoa.”