“PEARLS OF WISDOM” SEMINAR by Marlene Quiring

Several years ago, Dr. Suzy Burnham of Graham TX traveled to Olds, Alberta Canada, to provide a seminar ‘’ Pearls of Wisdom.’’ The Friday sessions were specifically geared to veterinarians and farriers. The Saturday and Sunday sessions were more tailored for us regular folk.

Dr. Suzy was engaging, informative and enthusiastic and made one feel like we were in good company. She spent a lot of time demonstrating on how to scratch and massage your animal, from head to toe and all places in between. She advised using gloves so as to get deeply into the skin and give a really thorough rubbing which is especially useful when getting into those long ears!

Tests done on miniature donkeys at 54 months showed their knees were not closed yet; they mature very slowly as compared to horses. So back off on riding your donkey or mule until they are about 4 years old. They can do some driving before this, but remember they are slower maturing and don’t push your animals until they are physically and mentally able to handle it.

Worming is, of course, necessary and should be done every two months if your animals are in close confinement. In Texas, animals are building up immunity to Ivermectin, so Dr. Suzy recommends you rotate wormers yearly. Ivermectin still does get bots and lungworm, but she feels it might not do as well controlling pinworms, roundworms, etc. Donkeys and mules can also carry tapeworms so be sure to include a wormer that also works for that.

Castration in donkeys or mules is different in that they have extra blood vessels, and Dr. Suzy says to just crimp and cut is NOT adequate. She always does a figure eight suture and makes sure it holds. Mules should be castrated between six to nine months; otherwise they can become difficult to handle. Dr. Suzy advocated, “**Anesthesia with amnesia,”** in other words, always lay a donkey or mule out for castration, as mules especially are very unforgiving of any pain. Mules have been said to be susceptible to Tetanus, however this has mainly been because so many were castrated with a dull, dirty knife in dirty corrals without vaccinations or penicillin, and contracted Tetanus and died, or bled to death. Make sure you keep animals up to date on vaccinations applicable to your area. Tetanus is always a must!

Dr. Suzy on Mules: Sadly, mules are very difficult to do research on because there are such differences between animal to animal, even the same parents can produce such different offspring, making them difficult critters to study. Seventy percent of mules born are molly’s! And yes, there have been very rare instances where a molly has conceived and bore offspring. Donkeys have 62 chromosomes and horses have 64 and the mules’ ends up with 63, so it is next to impossible for this to happen, but you know that they say about things being impossible!

Whether you’re breeding a donkey or a mare, don’t breed the animal until it is at least a three-year-old. If you breed as a two year old you are depriving that animal of its own growth.

Imprinting is a must in Dr. Suzy’s books, especially for a mule. When the baby is born get your hands on it and habituate it to such things as having its feet handled, ears and any place on its body touched, clippers, etc. Habituation means to [gently] repeat the stimuli enough times so it no longer bothers that baby. They must get over their resistance to the point where they remain calm, and accept the pressure. This is of utmost importance and will reduce the stress on handling as they get older.

When a mule gets a bad habit they’re difficult to break, so don’t let that happen. In order to train a mule he must think it’s his idea. Put the pressure on him and wait, don’t scream, use a whip or get harsh… just wait, wait for the correct response and release any pressure immediately. He’ll find the way and think it was his idea. Give him a problem, say take away his front foot, then be his savior when he gives to the pressure by releasing his foot immediately.

When tying a mule, make sure you have good strong equipment that won’t break. Tie him to a tree “with deep roots.” Generally a mule will pull once, then twice, and then will stand still. He realizes he’s caught. Immediately turn him loose, that’s his reward… you saved him! It’s all a psychological game with the mule. A mule has to bond with you. Young mules get bored so quickly that you have to keep changing things for them, even if it’s just arranging the cones a different way for a pattern. Their minds need to be kept entertained as they’re always thinking. Mules love routine, but because of this, can get so they don’t work well if their routine isn’t adhered to, so it’s important to vary their activities and not let them get into a rut. Don’t do everything the same every day, keep things interesting and teach them to accept variety.

Because mules Love horses and bond to them quickly (that’s why outfitters never need to worry about where their mules are when they have a lead mare) you will need to plan ahead so you will be able to ride away from their horse friends.

If you’re on a trail with you mule and you come across something that’s going to eat them, let them stop and face the danger. Don’t punish them for being afraid, but encourage them by speaking to them or singing and Exhale your breath. It will encourage them to take a step or two forward, until they realize their bogeyman is okay.

Tail wringing is often seen in mules and Dr. Suzy feels it should be tolerated to a degree. She will not penalize a mule for tail wringing in a class when they’re being obedient in everything else. Mules seem to like to have that “sass” from the back end. (To me it seems to say they always have the last word)!

A nervous mule needs to be trained to lower his head and look you in the eye. He must “hook up” with you. They need to learn to bond with you and look to you for help, otherwise you may still have a mule that will work for you, but will only tolerate you and will not desire to be with you.

Mules respond well to music. If you need to do some arena work, put on some rousing music and you will find your mule keeping up the rhythm. Dr. Suzy, like many of us, admitted to singing to our mules and you know what, they like it!! Dr. Suzy says there’s nothing better than a good mule and she has sold her horses and committed to her 17-hand thoroughbred molly mule, Ramona. Donkeys and mules, with their challenging and free thinking sprit, are such fun to work with, Dr. Suzy can think of nothing better!!