YOU WANT TO RAISE A MULE?
By Marlene Quiring

If you are interested in breeding your mare to a jack to acquire a baby mule from the mare of your choice, I’d like to share a bit of advice and experiences gained from our mule raising years. We were no experts in those days, learning some lessons the hard way. I would rather you experience a journey with good memories as opposed to any disappointments that for the most part are preventable.

Today, one of the safest and best ways to get your mare bred is by selecting Artificial Insemination. Many breeders offer this service which minimizes danger to the mare, jack or handler and also gives accurate breeding dates. Before we retired from raising mules, we were using this method on most mares as we felt it was the least traumatic and gave the best results all around. However, if you are a jack owner, you must be able to collect from your jack and take the time to learn the basics of the whole process. Weekend classes are sometimes offered at Agricultural Schools or your local veterinarian may be able to guide you in this procedure.

If you do not have the option of Artificial Insemination or A.I. as it is commonly called, your next best option would be ‘’hand breeding.’’ However if you are a new jack owner, please remember that most mares will not willingly be bred by a jack. Unless the mare is already comfortable around donkeys, an aggressive or noisy jack will likely scare the daylights out of her. Some jacks are very quiet and gentlemanly but some can be very aggressive and boisterous and may terrorize a mare if allowed. Most mares will not “show” to the jack like they would to a stallion, thus making detecting their heat cycles very awkward unless there is a teaser stallion available.

Horse stallions usually breed quite quickly if a mare is presented to them’’ in season.’’ However most jacks do not ‘’watch a clock.’’ Our experience with jacks was that patience was indeed a virtue as we waited to see if the jack decided if ‘’today’’ was a good day to breed that mare! More often than not, it would take a whole evening to breed one or two mares.

If a mare will not willingly let the jack mount, the situation can become scary fast for the mare, the jack and the handlers. We did all hand breeding in a tie stall, which was similar to a breeding chute, where we could get to the mare’s head to calm her or un-tie her if necessary and without danger to us. At times it could become a 3 person job; one to manage the mare, another to handle the jack and another to make sure the jack was successful. Most mares were also dressed with ‘’kicking hobbles’’ to make sure they did not injure the jack or handlers. Needless to say, any hind shoes were always removed first. Other than A.I., hand breeding is the safest and best way to live-cover a mare.

Pasture breeding may work for some but there are many risks involved if that is the route you choose to take. The jack can savage mares and if she has a foal at her side, some jacks will kill the foal. The jack can also be hurt by the mare and most breeders cannot risk having their jack injured or scared to breed a mare again. Beware of the backyard breeder who will “turn your mare out with his jack” for a nominal fee and assume that his jack will breed your mare. Successful pasture breeding jacks are few and far between, and the risks are not worth the gamble. Some folks don’t realize that in order to breed mares, a jack almost always has to have been raised with horses, which makes him want to breed them, not jennets. He basically thinks that he is a horse! Otherwise he is unlikely to cross the equine line and he will likely only be interested in jennets.

Now that you are armed with some information on the work it takes on the jack and handlers part in raising a mule baby, there are many things to take into consideration into choosing your best mare for the job.

#1. She should be at least 3 years of age. Breeding a 2-year-old filly is not fair as she hasn’t finished growing herself. Of course the other extreme would be an aged mare that’s never had a foal. Her chances of carrying are not great but not impossible. With any mare, you should have her palpated by an equine vet. A biopsy of her uterus will tell you what her chances are of conceiving and save you a lot of time and expense if she’s a mare that has a low chance of carrying a foal.

#2. In order to acquire a good mule, you must start with a good-minded mare. Long gone are the days when a mare that was hard to get along with was considered suitable to raise a mule foal. If your mare is easy going, friendly, willing and eager to learn, then she will pass that onto her baby. Yes, a good minded jack is important but not near as critical as the mare. The baby will spend all his time with his momma and will pick up her vices and characteristics, good or bad.

#3, Take a hard look at the mare’s conformation. Minor flaws can often be strengthened by the jack’s influence, but if the mare is unsound she can also pass along her hereditary weaknesses. Both parents should have good conformation in order to guarantee a useful mule. If you are not sure how to judge her conformation, consult with several good professionals for their opinions.

#4. The mare you present to the breeder must also be well broke to handle. She must lead well and must be able to stand tied without pulling back. If there is the possibility of kicking, the mare must be able to accept having breeding hobbles put on her back legs. Make sure if she is shod, that you have her shoes pulled. In other words, she must have the handling and training on her that will make her safe for the breeder and his jack and thus ensure a better chance of delivering to you that mule baby you have your heart set on.

When all goes well and you get that mule baby on the ground, we believe that it is important to establish a human relationship from day one. Foals that are handled with kindness from day one learn to trust people and are so much easier to work with as they get older and bigger. Mules that do not trust people whether from being mishandled or mistreated are next to impossible to change. Their naturally self-preserving nature and dislike of being hurt make them very challenging animals to reclaim and may take years to turn around.

Handling your mule baby while he is young includes teaching him to respect you. Do not misinterpret love for your animals into spoiling them so that they become unsafe to handle. Baby mules do not need harsh discipline; a firm voice is often all that is required to correct improper behavior. They are very intelligent, playful and curious, so use those attributes in a way that builds a good foundation for the rest of their lives. We derived so much joy out of handling our baby mules that I find it incomprehensible that some people never touch their young foals, somehow believing that that is better for them. It is our belief that this is the most critical and opportune time in the making of a good mule. The trust and guidelines they learn at this time in their early life will make them easier to teach and more reliable as a mature animal.

There is nothing as entertaining and delightful as a baby mule, and if you have done your homework on all that is required, you will be rewarded with one of the best experiences in life. Good luck to you!

*Marlene and her husband live in central Alberta with 5 mules and several spoiled cats. Marlene has been a long time mule lover, having raised mules for many years. Her passion is to protect and promote mules and donkeys and to help educate those that own them or are considering ownership.*