THE HARD-TO-CATCH MULE

By Jerry Tindell

It can be a frustrating situation to go to catch your mule only to have the animal run off in the other direction with his head held high and his tail in the air. Maybe there were times before when you walked into your paddock or round corral and your mule walked right up to you. This wouldn’t be too surprising if the mule was accustomed to being caught, led around, petted, given a few treats, and generally made to feel pretty comfortable. Because he came to you easily, you might have assumed you didn’t have a catching problem. Then, you start putting that them to work and your easy-come-to-you mule becomes Mr. Hard-to-Catch. I’ve even heard people say that their usually easy to catch mule runs off when he sees the trailer hooked up.

The purpose of this article is to share with you some strategies to eliminate this hard-to-catch behavior. Let’s look at some of the behaviors we see in our mules, horses and donkeys that are hard-to-catch:

* They walk away or move away when you call to them.
* They see you with your halter in hand, they know you want to catch them, and they trot away or they try to hide from you.

So, what do these behaviors mean? It means that the animal is displaying brace and resistance that can evolve into resentment. This negative emotional and physical response allows the mule to build a case for showing more brace and resistance in future situations. It is therefore very important that you pay attention to how your animal perceives his role in the education you are giving him. You want him to be a willing participant in his training. Remember that when he is hard-to-catch he is learning to be this way, similarly, when he learns to be correct and easy to catch, this too is learned behavior.

There are a couple of things we need to do to be both physically and mentally prepared:

* First, I always walk in the pen or paddock with tools to protect myself and to help me be effective. I want to have something with me that I can use to create excitement or energy. I carry a halter and halter rope, a lunge whip, a lariat rope, and/or a flag.
* Second, I pay attention to my body language. It’s very important that my body have the appearance of being soft but also firm. I want the animal to know that I am serious and that I mean business but at the same time I don’t want to be pushy. I don’t want the horse or mule to feel afraid, on the other hand, I don’t want to communicate that I’m afraid or wimpy. So I don’t go in the pen intending to push them around but I do communicate, through my physical presence that we are going to get along together.

Now let’s look at what we need to do:

* The first thing I do is move them around and pay attention to approach and retreat behaviors. The retreat behavior is going to show up in negative signs such as: moving away, displaying a bad expression, putting the head down, or trying to hide. When these negative behaviors occur I create movement and ask the animal to face up. As soon as he faces up, I release, breathe, lick my lips and wait.

The beginnings of the approach behavior is going to show up in positive behaviors: the ear cups toward me, the eye looks at me, the neck bends in my direction, the hind feet move away. As soon as the animal displays these positive behaviors, I release, step back, and pause. Then, I will ask for movement again. I will continue to do that until the animal can eventually stand a little bit more comfortably within my presence.

* The second thing I do is move behind the shoulder in a half circle towards the hindquarters. This allows the animal to bend his neck and softly step his hindquarters under. When the feet move, the animal relaxes and releases. If I can, I’ll approach and pet the animal, then I’ll walk away. Eventually I want him to stand quietly while he is approached.

Once the mule, horse or donkey is soft to catch - his head is not in the air, he is not afraid of the halter, and not trying to run away from me - I will put on the halter, pet the animal, and proceed to work with them.

If you keep your mule, horse or donkey on a very large piece of property where he can easily get away from you every time you try to catch him, you are setting yourself up for failure and your animal will learn that he can out-maneuver you. Every time you approach, there he goes, high headed, long trotting off, looking back at you, thinking that this run-away game is so much fun. This negative behavior can translate into many other areas, so, you need to alter this situation so you can succeed.

Find a way to gather your animal. Then, get him into a smaller pen. He will have to be in a more contained area so you can start your lesson. The area should be small enough so that he can’t escape from you yet large enough that he can move around.

Now that he is in the more confined area, use the steps described above. Use your energy to draw him in and connect him to you, get him to face up. If you have the option, after getting your animal willingly caught in a small pen, graduate him to a medium-sized pen. When he is easily caught in the medium-sized pen, move him to the larger area where you can really assess how solidly, after multiple trials of repeat and reward, he understands the lesson. If, for example, you find that your animal doesn’t easily come to you when you have moved him up to the medium-sized pen, take him back into the small pen until he shows you that he thoroughly understands what he is supposed to do.

Through this process your animal will learn that when you call his name or whistle to him, he needs to come, or without a doubt, you will go and get him.

Always stay aware of the animal’s safety. We don’t want them to go beyond their comfort zone, for instance, you don’t want to chase after him so that he runs into a fence and hurts himself. Remember, you are building a training foundation in increments. Always appreciate what you’re getting from your animal and reward his try.

Please feel free to call me @ (760) 403-3922 or email info@jerrytindell.com if you have any questions. I’d be happy to help anyway I can. Enjoy spending time with your mule, horse, or donkey. Have fun and don’t get a kick out of it! Stay safe.