WHAT ABOUT A MULE?

By Marlene Quiring

Mules are gaining in popularity across North America. This is a direct reflection of the quality of mules being bred, raised and trained in more recent years. Exposure through trail rides, shows and exhibitions are causing more people to take a second look at these ‘’horses with long ears.’’ Some folks who have been secretly desirous of a mule are now stepping forward and actively searching for the right mule for them. For those of you who are interested in or curious about this vigorous hybrid, here are some interesting facts and observations regarding mule ownership.

First of all a mule is the result of breeding a horse mare of any breed to an intact male donkey. Any breed you favor can be used to raise that ‘’type’’ of mule. A mammoth or standard donkey jack can be used to cover the larger horse breeds and a miniature donkey on a very small or miniature horse. Depending on your choice of parents, the resulting offspring can vary from very large draft mules over 17 hands high to the tinniest of mules under 36 inches. You can create the mule you want in one generation.

An interesting occurrence in mule production is the unpredictability of the end product. Sixteen and seventeen hand mules have originated from 14-hand mares and vice versa. There is somewhat of a genetic gamble when you are desirous of a certain type of mule. Personal experience has been that there are some mare and jack crosses that are quite consistent and some that are not. This seems to be more of a phenomenon in mule production than in the horse-breeding world.

A donkey has 62 chromosomes and a horse has 64, leaving the mule with an uneven number of chromosomes at 63, rendering the mule sterile. However male mules or johns as they are often called still carry all the equipment to breed and will become unmanageable to handle if not castrated. This should happen between 5 months of age to a year. If they are castrated too young, there can be a higher risk of evisceration. Make sure you work with a vet that uses anesthesia, and knows that all donkeys and mules castrated should undergo ligation- the tying off of blood vessels, to prevent excessive bleeding which can also be fatal. Having experienced both scenarios, I wish the experience upon no one! Opting to skip anesthesia, most often results in a mule or donkey that is unforgiving for a long time afterwards.

Although female mules or mollies are born with strong maternal instincts, they are also sterile. There have been reported cases of mollies giving birth but this is an extremely rare occurrence. Mollies do have heat cycles, but generally do not show like a horse mare. Of the few mollies I have been around that showed any heat cycle, it has been short lived and very mild with only one of them acting irrational and only for one day. If heat cycles become a problem, having the molly mule spayed is an option. There are differences of opinion on whether mollies or johns make the best mules. Personally, I don’t have a preference as for me, a good mule is a good mule no matter what the gender.

Mules come in all sizes, colors and shapes. While the donkey has a strong influence on the build of the mule, the most desirable mules have a conformation more closely resembling that of the horse. However all mule lovers love to see those long, beautiful ears, an inheritance from the donkey. Conformation is important but can be secondary to having a good disposition. The bad reputation that still precedes mules in some areas of North American is a carry-over from when horse mares that were not desirable for anything else were bred to a Jack to produce something of value. The result was often an animal that could work but carried the same undesirable disposition as its mother, and was generally difficult to handle. Good mares were not always bred to good Jacks, thus the mules that were raised for a time in the development of the west were often cantankerous and unpredictable. Thankfully, those days have past and now it is becoming more predominant to only raise mules out of good proven mares. The results are mules that excel in beauty, brains and disposition.

Mules are not stubborn. They are however self-preservers and they come by that desirable trait from their father the donkey. When a mule is faced with danger, he is more likely to freeze [like the donkey] or only flee for a short distance. Because of this, he is much less likely to do anything injurious to himself or his rider. That is one of the reasons mules make such excellent trail-riding animals. They have been used to carry thousands of tourists down the Grand Canyon for over 100 years with never a casualty. Their sure-footedness and sensibility when faced with danger has made them the choice mount for climbing and travelling in treacherous terrain.

One of the most appealing characteristics of a mule is their very distinct personality. In my many years of raising mules, I found young mules were comparable to dealing with a creature that is a cross between a child and a dog! They are attention seeking, comical, jealous and affectionate all at the same time. Even mature mules will show jealousy and will pout if things don’t go their way. To top that off many mules appear to have a very warped sense of humor and you had better be prepared to share in their humor if you really want to get along with them. Mules appear to spend a lot of time thinking, and generally it’s for their own benefit! If you cannot leave your ego at the door when you go out to work with your mule you should probably not own one. You must prepare yourself to be smarter than that intelligent hybrid you are working with!

Some of the comments that I have heard over the years is that many people are very surprised to see that mules can run. They are in fact extremely athletic, agile creatures and they can turn on the speed, when they want to! Being cautious and self-preserving by nature, they are generally more reluctant to over-extend or over-exert themselves, especially for long periods of time. Mules can indeed gallop with the best of them, but not all mules really want to set any world records. That being said, mule racing is a growing sport in certain areas of the United States. The mules run on regular racetracks and set some very fast times. In the famous words of Ogden Nash ‘‘in the world of mules, there are no rules!’’ My translation of this is ‘’Mules can do anything… if they want to!’’

Whether you desire a mule with a lot of speed or not, mule riders appreciate the more comfortable ride that they get from a mule. This of course depends somewhat on what type of mare the mule was raised out of but even mules raised from draft mares are generally quite rideable. The mule’s narrower body and his inherited gait from his father the donkey is much easier on your hips and knees and generally makes for a much smoother ride than what most horses can offer other than naturally gaited horses such as the Tennessee Walker or the Peruvian Pasco. A horse tends to give you a lot of side-to-side motion while a mule gives more of a rocking chair motion. This is one reason why mules make such excellent pack animals – a load that has less movement is easier to carry and stays on better.

Mules are hardier than their horse cousins; they require less feed and can thrive on a lesser quality. This is all due to their donkey parentage. They will generally remain useful for a longer time and will outlive most horses. Their feet, although smaller than a horse, are tougher and more upright and rarely flat footed. Their self-preservation instinct makes them much less prone to injuring themselves. Over the years, I’ve had several horses cut and injure themselves sometimes with disastrous results. During that time, the worst injury any mature mule ever sustained on our farm was a sprained ankle. Personally I like an animal that is ‘’easy’’ on the vet. bill!

One thing to remember with a mule or a donkey is that they mature slower than horses and must not be subjected to carrying weight at an early age, which unfortunately is a practice in too many horse breeds. Light riding as a late 3 yr old is possible but waiting until they are at least 4 for anything more strenuous gives them a better chance of lasting longer. They can grow until the age of 8 so if you want them to stay sound for the length of their life, which can be between 30 to 40 years, you will make sure they are physically and mentally mature before you subject them to any hard riding.

Mules are very social animals and like the horse prefer to stick with the herd. However, it is not unusual for a mule foal to walk away from his frantic mother and visit with his human admirers. Adult mules that have been raised in a nurturing atmosphere will also more readily seek out human companionship and often display a very loyal, loving affinity towards people. They much more readily will become attached to the person who spends the most time with them, sometimes so much so that they will not work as well with anyone else and will display shyness around strangers. Quite often horse people are afraid that the mule might be aggressive towards horses – quite the opposite usually happens – mules love horses and are easily bossed by a horse. I believe that the mule is less likely to forget his mother long after he has been weaned. A mule does not know he is different from a horse and would rather bond with another horse than another mule, even if that horse does not like the mule! It is a well-known fact that outfitters often keep a horse mare with their herd of pack mules as the mules will never leave camp as long as the mare is there.

As far as I’m concerned, there are many more pluses than minuses if you are considering adding a mule to your life. However mules are not for everyone and it is best that you do your homework first before you decide to take that step into the ‘’world of the longears!’’ Many folks find mules addicting and even though they are sterile, mules have a way of ‘’reproducing’’ at an alarming rate! My only consolation to you if you get yourself into this position, is to remind you that you are ‘in good company!’’

*Marlene has raised mules for many years and admits to being ‘’possessed’’ by them! Her main focus now is directed towards educating owners and potential owners in understanding this wonderful creature!*