

“In Support of the Use of Mules & Donkeys”

May 14, 2005

I would like to say that it is both an honor and a privilege to be able to talk about the use of mules and donkeys in therapeutic riding programs.

Since 1973, I have been involved with the training, breeding and showing of mules and donkeys in a variety of equine athletic events including English, Western, Dressage, Driving, Gymkhana and Combined Training. My mules and donkeys have competed to championship levels over their 15 years of showing and today, they are the stars of my video training series, television shows and give exhibition performances for the public. Our most recent exhibition was given during the “Ride For The Cure” cancer fund raiser at the opening of our new event center, The Ranch, in Loveland, Colorado in October of 2003.

In 1976, I was a psychiatric technician at Sonoma and Napa State Hospitals in Northern California. This is where I learned behavior modification techniques that I would later use in my mule and donkey training. While I was at these two hospitals over a span of four years, I worked with numerous residents with a variety of disabilities. When you work with people who are severely handicapped, you begin to realize how difficult the everyday tasks that we take for granted are for someone who is compromised to such a great extent. I worked mostly as a behaviorist, but often engaged in physical therapies with occupational and physical therapists.

These people were confined to a hospital and had no hope of ever being able to visit a facility like the Hearts & Horses therapeutic riding program in Loveland, Colorado. The most they could hope for was a jaunt around the grounds in a wheelchair. Most were simply bedridden and could expect no more than a few basic comforts and regular medical maintenance. It was then that I realized that they needed more than just my physical presence and nursing abilities to give some joy to their lives.

They all needed some degree of communication with me to be able to experience joy and not sink into the depths of despair, so I worked each day with each resident trying to initiate that smile for the day in addition to my regular duties. My efforts were rewarded time and time again. To this day, I still fondly remember most of them by face and my star pupils, Katrina, Jimmy and Bertram by name.

I moved to Colorado in 1980 to attend vet school at Colorado State University, but opted to quit in 1982 and stay home to raise my family and begin training equines for people, particularly mules. When I first began training mules for my mother in 1973, I was horrified that she would even ask me to do such a thing. I had heard all of the old myths about mules and donkeys being stubborn, difficult and dangerous creatures. However, as my mother told me, these were only myths and inside of three months I had fallen in love with them.

One need only meet a mule or donkey and spend a little time with them to discover how incredibly loving, loyal and intelligent they really are. There are excerpts from the Bible that tell of mules being ridden by Kings in the early days of civilization, but they were later replaced with the image of man on his great steed, the horse. Since the immersion of that image, mules and donkeys have humbly been in the background, serving man on every front without ever asking for anything in return.

Mules and donkeys are diligent in their work. When they are approached properly, they learn quickly and won't deviate from their purpose. When they are approached with force and inconsideration, they will refuse to comply and therein lays the reason for the old myths. But what the myths don't tell you is that the human being was responsible for the reaction they got from the mule or donkey.

Many people have asked, "Why would a human beat a donkey or mule?" The answer to this is really quite simple, "because they make us look stupid!" But being the arrogant creatures that we can sometimes be, we wouldn't necessarily think of it, I have learned so much from my longears since I decided to listen to them rather than imposing my own great expectations. I began to realize that they actually did exactly what I was teaching them. I just wasn't always asking for things in the correct way.

Mules and donkeys are incredibly loving and loyal as I said before and you would be amazed at the jobs they do in every country around the world, even when they are starved and ignored. The people that you meet who own mules and donkeys are some of the nicest and most loving people in the world. You will see entire families bonding together with their longears down to the youngest members. A family I know in Bennett, Colorado, began their first grandchild's career with mules, riding in a pannier on a pack saddle during a parade in Denver. That pack mule knew the value of his load and was extremely careful not to jostle him in any way. I would never trust a horse to be that steady.

Perhaps the words of others besides me can help you to grasp the depth of love that Longears bring to the table....

Related Article listed Below:

- 1) "Touched By An Angel" (See "Touched By an Angel", Related story on Mule Crossing Page.)

This kind of love spills over into the lives of those who come in contact with longears. Difficult life situations are somehow made easier and more bearable. Longears can become a partner in parenting when all else fails. Imagine 10-year-old Jessica Robbins who has two siblings that are handicapped and a very busy mother...

- 2) “10-year-old Receives Horsemanship Award” (See “10 Year Old wins Award”)

Related Article listed Below:

Mules and donkeys are no stranger to handicaps themselves and exhibit the same courage and determination you see in some handicapped people.

Related Articles listed Below:

- 3) “Choia” (See “Choia’s Story”)
- 4) “Primrose” (See “Primrose gets Artificial Leg”)

We all need love and support to try to overcome these kinds of disabilities in addition to the more technical and medical approaches. It is this love and support that enables the technical and medical approaches to really work. Without it, the patients would most likely give up and their bodies would follow suit.

When considering horses for therapeutic riding programs, there are certain criteria to be met. The horse needs to possess a calm and accepting nature, he needs to be easy to catch, easy to groom and saddle, has a soft eye, picks up his feet easily, lowers his head, responds to commands, is good in a herd situation and is sound at all three gaits. This would be the same criteria you would have when selecting a mule or donkey for this same purpose.

We should be careful about stereotyping mules and donkeys. We cannot even say that all horses would be suitable for this activity. It takes a very special individual to handle themselves safely in this situation. Mules and donkeys are no different. Like humans, there are many different types of individuals, some suited for some things and others who are better suited for something else. So, saying that all mules and donkeys would not be suited for therapeutic riding programs is not really an accurate assessment. In addition to the fact that there are a lot of longears that would suit a therapeutic riding situation, there is the added benefit that longears outlive horses by roughly twenty years, so their use life is much longer.

Longears have already been used successfully in this area of rehabilitation.

- 1) Beekman Therapeutic Center in Mid-Michigan (insert article here)
- 2) “Cali and a Mule named Oreo.” (insert article here)
- 3) Pat O’Halloran heads the Challenged Riders of Sandpoint Idaho and when asked whether he felt longears were useful in these programs, he answered, “Why of course! Pat O’Halloran has used a mule named Jasper for some time and has recently purchased a team of Percheron mules that are now teaching handicapped kids to drive teams. He says the joy that these kids get from their accomplishments is unmatched. Their lives have been made whole by their experience with these mules and the horses in his program.

I have heard concerns about whether the way of going of a mule or donkey is truly as therapeutic as it is with horses. Again, I would have to say that they are all equines and each individual has a different way of going even within their own species. The disabilities in the riders are also as different as night and day as are their therapeutic needs.

The solution lies in picking the right equine for the right rider to maximize physical therapeutic value. There are some disabled riders who will never really be able to make measurable physical progress, but their progress is made in their attitude towards life, just being able to get out and ride so that their life has some meaning and purpose, so they can experience joy in an otherwise depressing situation.

Learn to look beyond your immediate surroundings. There are other groups that can make significant contributions to your purpose and you to theirs. A wonderful example is the Donkey Sanctuary in Sidmouth, England. They are essentially a rescue operation that houses over 2000 donkeys. They rehabilitate the abused donkeys, then use the ones who are able in a handicapped riding program called the Slade Centre. Handicapped kids are given the opportunity to both ride and drive these animals and the donkeys enjoy every minute of it as longears were born to serve.

It is not such a stretch to believe that some of our own wild mustangs, burros, older and rejected equines could find a home with therapeutic riding programs across the country. Finding human volunteers is the bigger problem.

When you look for equines to use in therapeutic riding programs, don't discount the value of mules and donkeys. One of the more redeeming qualities they possess is the ability to love and be genuinely affectionate to people, not just compliant like the horse. People love their horses and the horses accept our love...mules and donkeys will give it back!

The more practical assets of mules and donkeys include:

- 1) they are surefooted
- 2) cheaper to keep
- 3) more resistant to parasites and disease
- 4) are athletic equals to horses
- 5) are less likely to get hurt

When I think of all those residents at Napa and Sonoma State Hospitals, I only wish that some of them could have had the benefit of such wonderful and fulfilling programs as the therapeutic riding programs across the country. I know there were some there who would have benefited from such a program, but they were sentenced to life within the confines of a state hospital. Those of you who have dedicated your lives to this purpose are to be admired and congratulated for your efforts. You have positively touched so many lives through your efforts.

The work that therapeutic riding programs are doing now will lay the groundwork for the programs of tomorrow and will define the growth of therapeutic riding programs in the future. When choosing animals for these programs, keep an open mind, don't fall prey to stereotypes and follow your heart. The help you give mankind is priceless whether it is publicly recognized or not.

Volunteers are needed to keep these programs going and we are here to help. We want to encourage participation from both people and equines. Longears have much to offer in this area, particularly donkeys with their generally sedate and loving ways. A list of therapeutic riding programs in your area can be found on the NAHRA website at NAHRA.org. Find out how you can help!

If you wish to list your therapeutic riding program with us, we are proud to help. Reciprocal links to therapeutic riding programs' websites are encouraged.