

Meredith Hodges Goes Back to Basics in a New Way by Helen T. Hertz

All professionals, regardless of their field, must strike a balance between the need to innovate and grow and the need to stay true to the fundamentals—the foundation—of their work. Meredith Hodges, whose program *Training Mules and Donkeys* is one of the longest-running shows on RFD-TV, knows this better than anyone. Meredith's correspondence training program has at its core the fundamentals of behavior modification and a sequential course of resistance-free techniques that have, over the years, produced one champion equine after another.

"These basics don't change," Meredith says. "Even now, as I advise my students to begin with the first video in my series and take the material in order, I go back myself, when I'm working with a new animal, and build my base—my relationship—with him before I move forward."

Training a mule or donkey is like taking him through school, Meredith says. Just as every student must begin with kindergarten and advance only after he or she has mastered the material at each level, so it is with your equine.

"The first lesson is the most critical and probably the one most often skipped," Hodges says. "This is where you forge a relationship with the animal, where you earn his trust, become his friend. Without this foundation, he will fight you every step of the way."

The first video in Meredith's series includes a review of the differences between longears and horses—we all know it's about more than ears—and a lesson in foal psychology. She also covers the fundamentals of handling, haltering, tying, leading, showmanship and loading. Begin here, she advises, and both you and your animal will benefit.

Each video in Meredith's training series and each episode of Meredith's television show is designed to illustrate a series of techniques in systematic, sequential fashion. Doing it right takes time and patience, but the pay off is worth it!

And where do innovation and growth come in the way she uses her expertise and in the forums she creates in order to share it with others. Since launching *Training Mules and Donkeys* on RFD-TV more than 6 years ago, she has not only updated her core programming with new material, she has also produced new shows

Hodges has been helping people decipher donkey and mule psychology for years, not only to facilitate training but also to improve the animals' standing. No one has done more to help eradicate the stereotypes that have plagued longears for so long. Her popular series, *Training Mules and Donkeys*, has aired on RFD-TV for six years. And most recently Hodges produced a documentary mini-series, *Those Magnificent Mules*, also seen on RFD-TV.

Meredith has also taken her positive message on mules to children, with her character Jasper the Mule. To date she has published four children's books, Jasper: the Story of a Mule, Jasper: A Christmas Cap, Jasper: A Precious Valentine, and Jasper: a Fabulous Fourth, with a fifth, Jasper: A Turkey Tale due out this September. In 2005 Hodges brought Jasper to television with an animated version of *Jasper: The Story of a Mule*, also available on DVD.

“Jasper has become a big hit with kids because they can relate to him,” says Hodges. “They know how it feels to be lonely when you don’t fit in, to be brave when you’re scared, and to be happy when you’re with your friends. If they see that a little mule colt feels like they do, then maybe they’ll be less inclined to believe the myths that have surrounded mules for so long.”

For Hodges, Jasper the Mule was a step in the long journey that has taken her from her first encounter with mules at her mother’s ranch in California, to her own Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colorado, where she keeps nineteen mules, one donkey and eight horses. The ranch also features a Longears Sculpture Park, and Hodges frequently gives tours to the public. The park is part of a legacy she hopes will lead more people to discover the marvelous mule and win greater support for the animals she loves so much. If you’d like more information about Meredith Hodges and Jasper the Mule, please visit, www.luckythreeranch.com and www.jasperthemule.com or call 800-816-7566.