

From Plow to Piaffe!

By Helen T. Hertz

1993 was a good year for Lucky Three Mae Bea C.T. That was the year she won the Novice Division at the Abbe Ranch Horse Trials in Larkspur, Colo. A first place finish in competition with 56 horses is a significant achievement for any equine, but this Combined Training victory was particularly noteworthy because Mae Bea C.T. is a mule.

She's a rare mule to be sure, but not as unusual as you might think. Well-bred, well-trained saddle mules are becoming increasingly competitive in classes that were once beyond their reach. In 2007, at Bishop Mule Days, the largest mule show in the country, bridle division flat classes each boasted as many as 30 competitors, and jumping events were equally popular. Growing numbers of mule riders are looking to improve their skills through dressage training and competition, and the horse establishment—the USEF in particular—has embraced the mule community if not with open arms, then at least with open minds.

Meredith Hodges, who owns Mae Bea C.T. and several other champion mules, has spent nearly three decades mining the mule's potential as athlete and performer. She's discovered what she believes to be a limitless capacity for competitive achievement and while she doesn't foresee the addition of mules to the Olympic team roster, she does insist that dressage training is a must for every serious rider and therefore, those with a preference for mules should have equal opportunity to participate in every aspect of that training.

Meredith's interest in long-eared equines grew from the time she went to work at her mother's ranch in Healdsburg, Calif., in 1973. As proprietor of the 1,000-acre Windy Valley Ranch, Joyce Doty ran a successful business breeding and training high-quality mules. Her daughter, however, had always been partial to horses and believed the common lore that mules were stubborn, stupid and not only mean, but inclined to hold a grudge and seek retribution at their leisure. Frankly, they frightened her. But Meredith took the plunge and soon came to the revelatory realization that, in truth, mules were not stubborn or dumb or even mean; they were only cautious, with a strong instinct for self-preservation. She quickly discovered that when she treated them with patience, kindness and consideration, the mules recognized she had their best interests at heart and would not only comply, but go the extra mile to give their very best. She was smitten with her new long-eared friends and soon had a case of "mule fever" she'd never kick.

By 1980, Meredith had moved to Colorado and established her own fledgling mule ranch. Lucky Three Ranch grew steadily over the years as Meredith established herself as a gifted breeder and trainer. In 1986 her insatiable quest to take her training to higher levels took her to the USDF Convention in Houston. She knew the key to advancement was dressage training but before she took the leap, she wanted assurances that she would be allowed to test her skills and measure her progress at schooling shows in her area.

With some reservation the USDF granted her permission to participate in non-sanctioned shows at the show organizers' discretion. Armed with this qualified endorsement, Meredith began training with her local USDF instructor Melinda

Weatherford. Her partner, Lucky Three Sundowner, was a talented mule out of an AQHA-registered mare who, as a four-year-old, had won a World Championship in Reining. But dressage was something new to both of them and both had limiting habits to overcome.

For the next several years Meredith diligently trained with both Sundowner and Mae Bea C.T., who turned out to be an enthusiastic jumper. As their training progressed, Meredith urged the folks at Bishop Mule Days to add dressage classes to their established Western, English and Jumping classes. By 1989 Meredith and Sundowner were working at Second Level, and in 1990 they took first place in a newly established Second Level Class at Bishop. In 1992 Meredith asked Bishop for a Third Level Class and they obliged, though only two mules competed. Sunny scored sixes and sevens in the class, placing first against his only competition, Dolly Barton. By 1993 Meredith and Sundowner were working at Fourth Level. They competed at Bishop at Third Level for a second year and easily won as the only mule in the class. For Meredith, attaining Fourth Level was a great achievement.

“As a child I had a picture of Col. Alois Podhajsky above my bed, and as an adult I dreamed of dancing with Sunny through dressage,” she says. “So you can imagine how thrilled I was when we could passage and piaffe together, whether we were in competition or just at home alone.”

And that is at the crux of Meredith’s sometimes strident push to find a place for mules in the rarified world of English riding.

“Of course, in upper levels of competition, we should stick with apples to apples,” she says. “But the quantity and quality of learning that takes place in the dressage arena should be available to everyone.”

Meredith doesn’t stand alone on this issue. Fellow mule advocate Carole Sweet laid claim to one of the proudest moments in longears history when she, with the help of a few allies, persuaded the USEF to amend its rules to include mules in the organization’s sanctioned dressage competitions. So what would prompt a busy, working mother of two to launch this full-out, multi-year campaign on behalf of mules and their riders? All it took was a friend in distress.

One day Carole’s good friend Linda Pittman, to whom Carole had sold her own mule, called her distraught. Linda had been in dressage training with her mule for some time, working to qualify for the Annual Championships of the California Dressage Society, Carole recalled.

“She told me the CDS by-laws had been changed to ‘specifically exclude mules from all CDS competitions,’” she says. “[To me] it was disguised intolerance for any breed that didn’t fit the model of a classic dressage horse.”

Carole, who describes herself as a life-long do-gooder, saw this as a serious injustice.

“The CDS was endorsing exclusivity and discrimination in a discipline that was promoted as suitable for every one,” she says. “I thought this needed to be fixed.”

Carole contacted members of the CDS Executive Board but got nowhere. Then she tried the USDF President, who told her that unless it was a rated show, organizers essentially had free rein and could include mules or not. The USEF (USAE at the time)

said there was nothing they could do. Disheartened by the lack of response on the national level, Carole and Linda returned to the CDS to request that mules at least be admitted into schooling shows. They attended the CDS Annual Conference where Linda pled her case. The response was a resounding “no.”

“What bothered me was how we were treated,” Carole says. “Those Board members who did speak were vehemently opposed to letting mules back in. They treated us with contempt and refused to hear us. All I could think was, where’s your responsibility to your members? When you exclude the mule, you also exclude the rider.”

The CDS Executive Board questioned her commitment to the issue.

“Are you serious enough about this to go to next week’s annual USAE meeting,” they asked.

Carole spent the next three days preparing a hefty packet of materials for the meeting. It included endorsements from every major mule organization, facts and figures on the industry, and information from the USAE Endurance and Driving disciplines, which allow mules in competition.

“The feeling in the mule community was that mules had been discriminated against for so long and this was a chance to do something about it. I got letters of endorsement from everyone,” she says.

Carole received a personal invitation from the Dressage Committee Chair to attend a closed-door meeting to discuss the matter. Though she wasn’t able to attend, the materials she sent and the answers she provided to some tough questions were enough to convince the committee to endorse the rule-change proposal.

“That legitimized it,” Carole says. “Now it wasn’t just me saying this should happen, it was the Dressage Committee. They were incredible to work with.”

In January 2004, Carole, her friend Linda Pittman, Meredith Hodges and Leah Patton of the American Donkey and Mule Society all traveled to Los Angeles to attend the USEF Convention.

“Meredith had already done so much on behalf of mules, I knew she would want to be part of this and Leah as well,” Carole says. “They were a huge help.”

The four attended meetings and lobbied hard in anticipation of a vote by the Board. Carole says it was to their advantage that two of the organization’s goals that year were to build USEF membership and reach out to the grass roots of the horse community.

“What could be more grass roots than mule riders?” she says. “You’ve got this huge population of mule riders, which could translate into income for the organization.”

In the end, after three years of persistence, Carole’s moment of triumph arrived. The Board voted to approve the rule change and admit mules into sanctioned competition, with the exception of high-performance qualifying and selection trials. Carole, Meredith and the others were ecstatic.

“I’m so thrilled for what we could do for all those people who love mules.” Carole says. “Now they’re in the sand box. There’s still some sand kicking going on, but they’re in!”

Now that it’s done, the USEF rule change hasn’t exactly launched a revolution. In fact, it’s been kind of quiet out there, and Carole has wondered what effect the rule

change has actually had. She suspects it could take a while for mule riders, low on the totem pole for so long, to acquire the skills, the nerve and the sense of possibility that will propel them to higher levels of performance, but she's confident they will and the mules, too, will rise to the challenge.

"Riding a mule in dressage is no different the riding a horse," she says. Any animal's ability is based on temperament, conformation and heart."

Meredith Hodges, whose program *Training Mules and Donkeys* on RFD-TV reaches millions of viewers every week, knows that with proper training, care and athletic conditioning, mules can excel in any discipline.

"If you understand the mule's psychology and his physical needs, you can reach truly amazing levels of performance," she says.

One place where mules strut their stuff in ever growing numbers is Bishop Mule Days. Each Memorial Day weekend 700 mules and several thousand people congregate in Bishop, Calif., for a competition that includes more than 180 events. Mule Days Executive Director Kim Craft says that more riders compete in the English classes than in the Western events.

"Last year we saw 25 to 30 competitors in our flat classes," Craft says. "We use USEF "R" rated judges, and these riders come to compete in World Champion classes and win real champion points."

Craft says she's been truly impressed by the Mule Days competitors who have raised the bar in every event.

"Mule Days used to be Mom and Pop and a two-horse trailer," she says. "But these competitors train much harder and compete more seriously, and these mules are incredible."

Craft says it's the knowledge and the people that have brought the mule this far. Most who take their mules into English classes don't do so with visions of trouncing the competition at an AQHA show, she says. They're simply trying to become better riders through study and practice.

"This is more about learning than performing," Craft says. "These are people passionate about their animals who want to become the best riders they can be."

Meredith agrees. "Bishop is a World Class show," she says. "The USEF and the entire dressage community can be proud of the competitors there and how they represent the extraordinary discipline of dressage."

So don't be surprised if you happen to come across a mule or two at your next horse show. If they're there, Meredith, Carole and plenty of others will tell you, "They've earned it!"

*For more information about Meredith Hodges, please visit [www.luckythreeranch.com](http://www.luckythreeranch.com) or call 800-816-7566. For information about Bishop Mule Days, go to [www.muledays.org](http://www.muledays.org). And if you have a story about a mule in sanctioned dressage competition, Carole Sweet would love to hear it at [nextpairout@gmail.com](mailto:nextpairout@gmail.com).*