

Training Mules & Donkeys Looks at Athletic Conditioning
(subhead) Is Your Equine Getting the Right Workout?
By Helen T. Hertz

At a recent training clinic hosted at Meredith Hodges' Lucky Three Ranch in Loveland, Colo., Meredith and her good friend Joanne Lang, an animal massage therapist and rehabilitation expert, held a special session on athletic conditioning. Their subjects were two of Meredith's molly mules, April and Vicki. April was born at Lucky Three and has enjoyed the benefit of Meredith's training and maintenance program her whole life. Her superior physical conditioning and steady temperament are evidence of her meticulous upbringing.

Vicki was also born at the ranch but, at a young age, was sold. For several years she was left alone in a pasture, neglected to the point that her halter had actually begun to grow into her face. About two years ago Vicki was purchased and brought back to Lucky Three.

After assessing the damage, Meredith and Joanne put Vicki on a program of gentle exercise and therapeutic massage. Slowly they gained her trust and began to see improvement. Today, she's a different animal. When she arrived, she couldn't even walk or trot correctly. Nor would she allow herself to be bridled. Now she is one of the first to the gate for her lessons and not only allows the bridle, but takes great pleasure in having her ears and head massaged. She moves through all three gaits in an improved and balanced frame and in time, will be able to carry a rider in the same fashion.

During the clinic, Meredith and Joanne demonstrated the differences in flexibility and strength between the Vicki and her healthier counterpart and discussed proper techniques to improve Vicki's condition. They had one primary message: It is critically important to condition an animal *for* a task, rather than *during* a task.

"You wouldn't ask a football player to condition his body by playing a game without preparatory exercises, yet that is what we often expect from our equines," says Meredith. "It's better to take the time to go through the proper exercises that will strengthen the muscles for the task rather than thinking that the task will condition the animal's muscles properly."

This lesson is so central to the training process—both for the healthy and injured animal—that Meredith is producing a new program specifically on Athletic Conditioning and Rehabilitation for her *Training Mules & Donkeys* series. The show, which will air on RFD-TV and RFD HD early in 2008, will examine in detail techniques to help you develop your animal's posture, frame, balance, coordination and muscle development. Meredith demonstrates exercises to strengthen the entire body in the proper posture, and addresses diet and care, all critical components of a program that ensures your equine is comfortable in his body and therefore better able to perform.

For years Meredith has emphasized the importance of a detailed, sequential training program—one that addresses not only the movements, or tasks that you want from your equine, but also the physical, mental and emotional well being of the animal. Meredith says this is even more critical for older, poorly trained and abused animals.

"When your equine perceives that you have his best interest at heart, he will be grateful, appreciative and compliant," she says. "When you are willing to spend the time it really takes to develop muscles and tendons and overall strength correctly, he will feel

better and become a happy companion who really wants to be with you and who is truly able to perform to the best of his ability.

“Remember,” she adds, “you are cultivating a friendship with your equine that should last a lifetime! This is why it is important to take it slowly and do the kinds of positive things that will enhance this friendship and result in a safe and enjoyable relationship.”

For more information about Meredith Hodges and *Training Mules and Donkeys* on RFD-TV, please visit www.luckythreeranch.com and check the RFD-TV schedule for show times.