

WOW! Did I stir up a hornet's nest with the last article on mules. Mule lovers and detractors came out of the woodwork (or maybe it was the Bosque) to voice their opinions. Since the last article was my opinion pretty much, I decided research was in order...

I did one of those "Man on the Street" approaches with a pencil and pad at the post office and Village Mercantile, but I think people thought I was an agent from the IRS or something and there was little stomach for spending time talking to me. So I did what any modern day researcher does and Googled the topic. Many hour later I felt I had mastered the subject so here goes with the why mules even exist and why you would prefer a mule over a horse. (There are more mules than horses in the world today and they on average are worth more when sold.) I want to acknowledge the help of Paul and Betsy Hutchins, founders of the American Donkey and Mule Society for the following observations.

"Mules endure heat better than horses do.

It has been scientifically proven that the donkey is similar to the camel in its ability, when water starved, to drink only enough water to replace lost body fluids. Most mules inherit this ability. Water founder in a mule is so rare as to be notable when it does occur.

Mules have fewer feeding problems than horses do.

Many farmers keep their draft and work mules together in pens with feed available at all times, yet the mules rarely overeat to the point of colic or founder. Mules from pony mares, however, may grass or grain or road founder, so the idea that a mule never founders is not true. Mules require no fancy hay—just plain, clean, fresh hay suitable for equines. People who buy cheaper weedy hay find that their mules clean out the weeds first.

Mules eat less than horses do.

Mules that are not working usually don't need grain at all. Good pasture or clean hay is the usual maintenance ration, unless extra fat is required for show purposes. Many a man has complained that his mules won't fatten because they won't eat enough, requiring the owner to spend extra money buying richer food to put the fat on. When mules are working, their grain ration is usually about

1/3 less than that of a horse of the same size. Of course, a mule must be fed enough for its size, its metabolism, and the work it is doing.

Mules rarely have hoof problems.

Mules naturally have small, upright, boxy feet—which is part of the secret of their surefootedness. Mules that work on pavement, stony ground, etc. are shod, but most pleasure animals, or mules that work on softer ground, never see a shoe. Regular hoof trimming keeps them just fine. Their feet are strong, tough, flexible, and usually not as brittle and shelly as those of a horse. They have less of a problem with splitting, chipping, and contracted heels.

Mules excel in physical soundness.

Mules last longer, are more "maintenance free," and are less expensive at the vet's office than horses are. Leg problems are far less likely in a mule than in a horse, and when leg problems do occur, they are far less severe. "Why do they stay sound?" wonders Robert Miller, DVM. "Seeking answers... equine practitioners exposed daily to the tragedy of lameness in beautiful horses, look at the mules, run their hands down the tough little legs, and wonder." Not only legs, but wind, "innards," and all other parts of the mule including his hide are tougher and more durable than comparable parts of the horse. Hybrid vigor explains a lot of this; the tough physical and mental qualities of the donkey explain the rest.

Mules live longer productive lives than horses do.

Farm mules average 18 years to a horse's 15 years. When the mule is a companion animal doing lighter work and getting better medical care, better feed, and good management, the mule can give its owner good riding at age 30; 40-year-old retirees are not at all uncommon.

Mules can more easily than horses be handled in large groups.

Mules can be corralled on farms 30 or 40 to a group, or up to 500 in a feeding pen, without the injuries or other consequences commonly seen with horses.

Mules have a strong sense of self preservation.

This is one good reason why mules physically last longer than horses do. If they are overheated, overworked, or overused for any reason, mules will either slow down to a safe pace or stop completely. Mules are not stubborn. Neither are

donkeys. Yes, if you want them to work too hard for their own well being, especially in hot weather, they will be "stubborn." We have never heard of a messenger running a mule to death the way legends say they ran their horses! The facts that mules are inclined not to panic, that they think about what is happening to them, and they take care of their own physical well being prevents many accidents that might happen if they were horses.

Mules are surefooted and careful.

Their surefootedness is partly physical and partly psychological. On the physical side, the mule has a narrower body than a horse of the same height and weight. He gets this from the ass side of the family. His legs are strong and his feet are small and neat. This narrow structure and small hoof configuration enable him to place his feet carefully and neatly. On the psychological side, mules have a tendency to assess situations and act according to their views (most of which have to do with self preservation). A mule will trust its own judgment before it trusts yours.

Mules incur fewer veterinary expenses.

It seems odd and unprovable, but to the confirmed mule owner a horse seems to be a vet bill waiting for a place to happen. Hybrid vigor accounts for a good deal of the mule's sturdy health. The toughness of the ass accounts for the other aspects. Perhaps the instinct of self preservation that shows up in such diverse ways as not drinking or eating too much when hot, or not panicking when caught in barbed wire, accounts for the rest. This is not to say that mules never get sick, injured, or otherwise "damaged." It is just that they are tougher than horses and they take care of themselves better.

Mules don't look like horses.

This is the thing about a mule that is most obvious to the casual observer--of course they look different. Well, you see, mule lovers like the look of a mule. We love those magnificent big ears. We love to watch those ears flop in a relaxing rhythm on a placid drive, or prick rigidly forward when the mule spots something interesting. We begin to think there is something wrong with those tiny little useless-looking ears of a horse. We like the mule's look of strength without bulk. We enjoy being different, knowing that a mule will draw attention where only the most outstanding and expensive horse will stand out from the

crowd. Everyone looks at a colorful Appaloosa, but everyone "oohs" and "aahs" over a colorful Appaloosa mule. We like the way a mule sounds, too—kinda silly, but fun.

Mules are loaded with personality.

This is the most difficult thing to define. Yes, mules are intelligent. They can be very decided about how they want to do things. They are great at running a bluff, a trait they undoubtedly get from the donkey. All of our donkeys refuse to do anything until they are absolutely positive that we are going to make them do it, then they give right in and cooperate like angels. Rather than pit your strength against the tremendous strength of a mule, you must outthink him to calmly outmaneuver him. The key to handling mules is to do things simply, calmly, and firmly. Don't lose your temper and don't push too hard until you are ready and sure you can make it stick. The big secret to having a calm mule that never kicks and doesn't have bad habits is to handle it firmly but gently from the time it is born, or from the time you acquire the mule."

So there you have it. The hybrid power of the best of horse and donkey make these animals the work "horses" of the equine world. As the owner of 3 mules, I have got to say they are truly characters and although look ungainly at times, they make up for it with hybrid vigor. See you on the trail!