

There is one particular aspect where the mule actually outshines the horse, and that is high-jumping.

Mules have a particular sport all their own called the Coon Hunter's Jump. The sport got its origin from the raccoon hunter moving his saddle and pack mules through the woods. Wooden or stone fences could be taken down, but wire ones could not. The hunter would flag the fence with his coat or a blanket, and jump his string of pack mules over one by one.

In the show ring, mules jump a single rail standard to increasing heights. The last clean jump is the winner. Mules only 50 inches tall at the withers have been known to clear jumps of up to 72 inches. These jumps are not from a galloping approach, like Puissance jumps, but are from a standing start inside a marked area.



What Makes Mules So Danged Special?

by Pat Parelli

Mules are, by definition, a hybrid cross between a horse and a donkey.

There are two ways to produce a mule: You can breed a female (mare) horse to a male donkey, called a jack. This is the most typical breeding to create a hybrid cross that's called a mule. The other way is to breed a female donkey (a jennet) to a horse stallion, and then you get a "hinny" mule. Either way, they're the same kind of animal offspring; they're mules.

Some people claim they can tell the difference between these two types of offspring. They claim that hinnys have shorter ears, but I've certainly seen hinnys that didn't.

UNDERSTANDING MULES

There's one thing about mules:

Never say never and don't always say always. You can usually say usually. But that means maybe. To understand mules, there are a few things you need to comprehend.

Number one, a horse is a "flight-from-fear" animal. A flight-from-fear animal is basically a "plains" animal, which serves them quite well. They can see for miles in any direction, run on straight terrain to get away from predators, and they can duck and dart for survival.

Donkeys, on the other hand, are mountainous animals. For mountainous animals, running when frightened is usually not a smart thing. They could run only 20 feet and fall off a cliff. So what most mountainous prey animals do when startled, is freeze. Then they assess

the problem, then sneak or "stealth" out of the situation. They'll find a clear place to run once they've assessed that situation, too. And then they run like crazy.



But most of the time, survival for mountainous animals is based on being very aware of their surroundings and having a very keen sense of



distance and approach. In other words, is anything approaching, and at what distance is it? Then their idea is, "As long as I can stay 'x' distance away from you (predator), then I can survive." It's usually hard to get undetectably close when you're coming from a distance in mountainous terrain, so the donkey thinks, "I can just go 20 feet this way, or 20 feet higher, and I'll be okay." Those instincts reflect how mountainous prey animals tend to act.

This is one of the things in natural horsemanship we talk about: prey animals and predators. They're not all the same, certainly. For example, prey animals that have horns act differently from prey animals that don't. One of

their primary means of defense is certainly their horns. This even applies to wild cattle or deer or elk. They distance themselves, like we just discussed, or like a billy goat they'll defend themselves and their territory with their horns. So all these animals are slightly different in their prey/predator relationships.

HYBRID VIGOR

We also need to understand what a mule's hybrid vigor means. It essentially means that $1 + 1 = 5$ (or something like that; you get the idea). For example, if you breed a 1200 pound horse to an 800 pound

donkey, you might get a 1000 pound mule. A 1000 pound mule will eat just about the same as the 800 pound donkey, and do quite well. That's hybrid vigor. The 1000 pound mule will also do the work of a 1200 pound (and maybe even bigger) horse. That's also hybrid vigor.

One thing I've noticed over the years, dealing with all the different mules I've trained and ridden in competition, is that what we breed for in other species isn't necessarily true for mules. For example, with breeding horses to horses, you can see a pattern of prepotency in a sire. Prepotency means that the stallion has strong characteristics that are "stamped" in his get; they show up time after time after time, and people might say, "I can always tell a foal that's out of so-and-so stallion."

Prepotency in a sire is oftentimes desirable, but with mules, it seems that the opposite tends to be true more often than not.

So when I say, "Mules are just like horses, only more-so," what comes to mind is that if the mare had a mule foal, whatever characteristics the mare had (skittish, gentle, fast, strong, smart) – that mule foal is probably going to pick up those traits and super-charge them. This is where the hybrid vigor can work for you or against you. The people who have been most successful with mules really tend to have mares with very strong characteristics, and their strong, positive characteristics – things that you would really want in a mule, such as calm, smart, brave, athletic – show up in the mule foal.

Where some people tend to get into trouble is that some mules are super-charged with the wrong characteristics. Mules that are ear-shy, for example, have a "challenge" factor that is so huge that 99% of people never get the mule over it. The

amount of savvy you'd have to have to get the mule over that would be really high.

This is why I've always been attracted to mules and chose them from the beginning. I knew I had to learn quickly and learn well. So I placed myself in various situations with mules. I personally have ridden and/or trained over 300 different mules. I've certainly learned quite a bit over the years. The experiences have taught me that you must treat a mule like you should treat a horse.

MULE + MULE (OR HORSE OR DONKEY) = 0

Horses have an equal number of chromosomes (64). Donkeys have an equal number of chromosomes (62). They're both equids with a fairly equal number of chromosomes. Mules come out with an uneven number of chromosomes (63). Being a hybrid animal means that it cannot reproduce – because its chromosome structure won't allow it. So that's why mules can't breed and reproduce.

MULE RUSSIAN ROULETTE

The next factor to understand about mules is what I call "Russian roulette" – the genetic factor of mules. I have seen a mare have one mule foal that at maturity was 14 hands high. The next mule foal out of the same mare and by the same jack was 16'3 at maturity. I rode this one mule, about 15 hands, named Double Trouble for Troy Henry, and his full sister was 16'3. Same mare, same jack. These are some of the complications about mules.

LOVE MULES, LOVE DONKEYS

In order to know mules, you have to know donkeys. This is probably why many people can't get along with mules – they think mules are more like horses than donkeys. Well, sometimes that's true. I've seen where mules that acted more like horses made good saddle mules,

and mules that acted more like donkeys made good pack mules and farm animals. As I said, a donkey, the mountainous prey animal, when startled will stop and think his way out of a situation. This is why when pack horses get scared as the trail starts to break away, they start scrambling, the situation gets worse, and they wind up falling off the cliff and getting killed. A pack mule (with more donkey-like characteristics) or a pack donkey when startled, will stop, freeze, think, and figure how to get out of the situation.

Understanding mules is a lot about understanding donkey behavior. Oftentimes people who love mules also love donkeys; that's not always the case with horse people.



“PROTECTION” BEHAVIOR

One of the characteristics that donkeys often exhibit is “protection” behavior. A good example of protection behavior is when a shepherd turns a donkey in with a flock of goats or sheep, and the donkeys, in protecting their flock, keep the coyotes and mountain lions away. I've seen donkeys and mules kill calves, sheep, lambs, dogs. This is oftentimes part of their “protective” nature. So it doesn't surprise me that mules are often the most misunderstood animal on the face of the earth.

In the “Readers Digest” version of what I just discussed, we can see that there is a lot to a mule; they're much more complex than most horse people are aware of.

You can train a horse, but you have to come to an understanding with a mule. 🐎

Fact or Fiction? Mule vs. Mountain Lion

In this high-tech, digital era it's hard to tell real photos from fake.

These photos of a mule attacking a mountain lion were posted on the Internet. While the story may not be entirely true, the action taken by the mule is highly probable due to the mule's relationship to donkeys and the donkey's “protective” nature.

**LIKE FATHER,
LIKE SON,
LIKE TRUCK**

NORTHEAST
CONVERSIONS

neconversions.com • 800-429-5850

Parelli Awards Presentation Profile

After eight years in the Program, I passed Level 3 on my Missouri Fox Trotter, Velvet.

During the annual holiday party with the close-knit group at my boarding facility, a friend made the announcement that everyone had gotten together to give me a wonderful memento of my glorious journey through Parelli.

I was stunned. It had pictures of me, Velvet, Pat Parelli and my Instructor Jenny Vaught. My best friend Barb pointed out the piece of

Velvet's tail nestled between the Savvy String leather strips.

Now that I'm able to look at the presentation without crying, I think that this is the ultimate depiction of my Parelli Journey. Wherever my journey leads me, my picture will move with me.

Good friends with whom to enjoy the greatest journey ever taken... the Parelli Journey and great horse partners is about as good as it gets in this world!

Thanks to all my great friends, great horses and to Ginny Sue who made this special presentation that depicts my passion!

— Susan Engle,
Level 3 Graduate

(269) 781-2564
awards@parelli.com