

Alberta Donkey and Mule Club News, December 2015

Something that comes up time and again regarding donkeys and mules is: When can we start riding them? Many owners and professional trainers believe that you can start riding two year old horses or mules, however these same people usually do not have a clinical background regarding the physical maturity of equines and unfortunately some are more concerned with a quicker financial return.

Tim Barton of Banff, AB. advises that in order to assess physical maturity in horses, mules and donkeys, we need to understand their skeletal system. Bones grow in diameter and length and can continue to grow well past the typical age at which most equines are put into physical training. If extra weight is added to the skeletal frame at an early age, the epiphyseal or growth plates can become distorted and conformational problems can result.

Mules, donkeys and several horse breeds are typically slow to mature. These slower maturing breeds should not be ridden until 3 or 4 and any hard riding should be avoided until they're at least 5 or 6. These animals may look physically mature at age two or three but stressing their skeletal system before they are fully mature can have limiting consequences to their usefulness. In fact, some mules have kept growing in height until eight or nine years of age.

Dr. Deb Bennett states that the last bones to fuse in a horse are the vertebral column. These do not fuse until the horse is at least 5 1/2 years old. The taller your horse [or mule] and the longer its neck, the later full fusion will occur. If the equine is a male, add another six months to that. For example, a 17-hand TB or Saddlebred or WB gelding may not be fully mature until his 8th year. So do you really want to be riding your 2 or 3 year old mule or donkey?



20 year old aisy and her young rider, 5 year old Kate Langell sharing secrets. Daisy was started with lots of ground work, progressed to being driven and was not ridden until at least 5 or 6 years old. A twenty year old mule is still in their prime, especially when allowed to mature before any hard work.

When an immature animal does not yet have a firm bone structure, a lot of the other features in the body have to start taking up the slack. If these animals are stressed too hard while they're still very immature, they can suffer tremendous damage to muscles, ligaments and tendons resulting in conformational features such as lordosis [sway-backed] or scoliosis [deviation of the spine]. Putting too much weight on the bone structure can tear ligaments that aren't strong enough to hold the spinal column together. A "cold-backed animal can be the result of having to carry weight when it was physically not ready. Other parts of the anatomy have had to take up the slack while the bones are still maturing and likely the animal has experienced discomfort or pain as a result.

Mules and other slower maturing breeds need extra time to grow up mentally too. Allowing this time pays off in the long run. Horses can work up into their late 20's and mules into their late 30's if they haven't been hurt as youngsters by overstraining them mentally or physically. Of course along with this goes good health care including good dental care. Tim believes that horses and mules don't die as much from old age as they do bad teeth, thus rendering them unable to eat properly. So please think twice before you decide that your young mule or donkey is ready to ride. Do all your groundwork first and get him broke from the ground up. Then when he is mature enough to handle light weight, he is also already broke to ride.

MERRY MULETIDINGS

Marlene Quiring