

Why a Mule?

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Over and over the question is asked, “Why would you prefer a mule to a horse?” So many mule lovers just cannot answer it fully and completely. It is a hard question to answer. It is too much like trying to describe your best girl or favorite beau to somebody and expecting them to understand why you love that person. Have you ever tried to put into coherent words the personality and behavior patterns of someone to a third person? It is very difficult!

Of course you can start with the accepted physical superiorities of the mule. That is more factual and easier for people to see. You can even number some of them such as:

1. **The mule endures heat much better than the horse.** I will never forget the double show we attended here in Texas on a hot day. There were beautiful palominos in one arena and fine mules in the other. They were all performing in the same classes except that the individual mules would go in many classes, such as western pleasure, barrels, single driving, coon jumping, halter and probably an egg and spoon and pole bending class thrown in, whereas the horses were more specialized and only went in one or two classes in most cases. The thing that impressed everyone who noticed it, was that the palominos were absolutely black with sweat. They were dripping, frothing, and drenched in it. I purposely examined most of the mules. They were sweating – under their browbands and saddlepads! The animals I had at the show drank one bucket of water each the full day and they each went in 7 classes! If you looked around you didn’t see any mule owner hot walking his animal – only in really exceptional cases such as endurance riding or exceptional activity in very hot weather is a mule walked until cool. Most are turned loose to roll in the sand and cool themselves out. Cautious riders withhold water, some never do. Because the donkey has a built-in mechanism (this has been proven by scientific research) similar to the camel in which the donkey when water starved will only drink enough to replace its lost body fluids- the mule has inherited this in almost all cases. Water founder in a mule is so rare it is something to be noted when seen. (The small ones, however, from pony mares, will grass, grain or road founder sometimes, so the idea that mules never founder is not really true.
2. **Feeding.** There are less feeding problems with mules than there are with horses. It is the custom on many farm areas to keep grain in front of the draft and work mules at all times when they are not working. Mules that are often kept together in pens with feed in front of them at all times, don’t founder or even overeat. Many a man has cursed at the mules he wanted to fatten for market because they wouldn’t eat enough and he had to spend extra money buying them richer food to put the fat on.

Mules are happier with plain hay. No fancy hay is needed for them (although many use it), just clean, fresh hay which is suitable for equines. Many people have bought cheaper hay with weeds and other unsightly things in it only to find that their mules clean out the weeds first! Some mules will indeed get in to the grain bin and overeat to the point of colic and founder, but most actually won't. Some people are greedier than others too. Mules eat less. If they are not working they 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. When working, their grain ration is usually about 1/3 less than a horse their size, although of course they have to have enough for their particular size, metabolism and the work they are doing.

3. **Physical soundness.** Mules excel here. They have strong, tough, flexible feet and many are never shod at all. 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 and regular trimming keeps them just fine. Their feet are usually not as brittle and shelly as those of a horse and there is less problem with splitting, chipping and contracted heels. Mules naturally have soft, upright boxy feet, which is part of the secret of their surefootedness. Mules also stay extremely sound in the legs. Leg problems are far less likely and when they occur, far less severe. Not only legs, but also wind, "innards", and all the other parts of the mule including his hide are tougher and longer lasting and more durable than the horse. Hybrid vigor explains a lot of this – the tough physical and mental qualities of the donkey explain the rest. Mules last longer, are more "maintenance free", and less expensive at the vet's office than horses on the average. The fact that they are inclined not to panic, to think about what is happening to them, and to take care of themselves physically, prevents many accidents that might happen if they were horses.
4. **Self Preservation:** This may belong in personality – but it is one good reason why mules last longer physically. If they are overheated, overworked, or overused for any reason the mules will either slow down to a daft pace or just stop completely. So far we have never heard of a messenger running a mule to death the way the legends say they did their horses!
5. **Longevity:** Mules as a rule of thumb live longer productive lives than horses. In farming days when an animal's value depended on how long it could do a day's work it was estimated by experts that mules averaged 18 years to the 15 years of horses. A quotation from the pamphlet "Jacks, Jennets and Mules" may help to illustrate. "One of our members employs 160 mules in harness. He buys 3-year-olds only, and never sells one. When they become unfit for work they are humanely destroyed. His records are exact. Of 89 mules bought in 1921, twenty-eight were still at work at age 24 year in 1942. The average age of death of the 61 which had passed away was 20 years" These days when a mule is almost always a companion and even a pet, the lighter work, better medical care, better feed and good management, the modern mule gets, means that many of them are still giving their owners good riding at up to age 30, and 40 years old retirees are not all that uncommon.

6. **Mules can be handled in large groups:** Another quote from “Jacks, Jennets and Mules.” “Mules can be handled in large groups, 30 or 40 in a corral on farms or up to 500 in feeding pens, without injuries of consequences. It is common practice in the South to pull the harness off mules noon or night, and turn them loose in a big corral or lot with access to all the water, hay and grain they want. They usually will first roll in a sand pile, which should be available. They will then eat hay for a while, drink a little water and after a while eat a little grain; then back to hay and water at intervals; but they do not over-eat on grain – that is. They will not eat enough to injure themselves; though if not at very hard work they will eat more grain than is necessary.”
7. **Mules are surefooted and careful:** On the trail, in the mountains and between narrow rows of tobacco and cotton mules have proved their worth over and over again. The surefootedness of the mule is partly physical and partly psychological. The mule always has a narrower body than a horse of the same height and weight. He gets this from the ass side of his family. His legs are strong and his feet are small and neat. This narrow structure and small hoof configuration enables him to place his feet carefully and neatly. His other advantage is psychological. Mules have a tendency to assess situations and act according to their views (most of which have to do with self preservation). Many riders don't like this. Smoke Elser and Bill Brown say in their books “packin' in on Mules and Horses” that “a mule's placid disposition often masks the fact that she is extremely alert and has a strong urge to look out for herself. Even the most tractable riding mule rarely places the same degree of trust in her rider as a good horse. When things start to go wrong (in the mountains) a mule will often react in unexpected ways and can be slow to respond to her rider. When we've got to move fast to untangle a pack string, catch a loose mule or straighten a pack that has slipped, we prefer to use a mount that lets us do the thinking. Bill and Smoke have this to say about their pack mules. “Mules travel more easily than horses in the mountains, a difference which shows up clearly when they must pack dead weight. This is largely because horses and mules are put together differently, and consequently have different ways of moving. A horse is built along the lines of a frog, with long coiled hind legs for power and shorter front legs for balance...on the level about 60% of a horse or mule's weight is over the front legs. Downhill the percentage goes up and to save his knees a horse has to get his hind legs way up under him and take the longest steps he can without interfering with his front feet. The result is a rolling, side gait that a pack picks up and exaggerates. The swaying load makes the horse work harder and makes the saddle and load harder to keep in the middle of the horse's back. Even though mules too are built on the frog pattern, they are leveler, with reality longer front legs. This gives them smoother way of going, particularly downhill where they take shorter steps and sway less. Mules also seem to have better balance. Narrower feet and a generally narrower build help them traverse steep terrain where a horse's wider and more oval feet are a hindrance. But much of a mule's edge as a mountaineer, may be mental. On steep slopes or in heavy deadfall where horses tend to become panicky, a mule merely becomes more intense. Her big ears point

forward, and she keeps her eyes on what she is doing. Mules can be led safely into country too steep for most horses... mules have strong, straight backs that aren't likely to break down under heavy loads. Handled properly, they learn to like people and are easy to catch. That's important in the hills as in their tendency to quickly become attached to the animals they run with. You can picket your saddle horse with your mules loose and get a good night's sleep knowing that your mules will be there in the morning. Donkeys also throw some light on why a mule can balance a heavy load well. For some physical reason, which is not immediately obvious, the marked swaying which occurs when a horse walks is not present with a donkey. People who are used to riding donkeys and who switch to a horse remark on the side to side movement that a walking horse has compared to a donkey. Many mules inherit this level sort of walk and trot which enables them to have better balance of heavy loads on their backs.

8. **Veterinary expenses are less:** It seems odd and unprovable but to a confirmed mule owner, horses seem to be a vet bill waiting for a place to happen. Hybrid vigor accounts for a good deal of the sturdy health of the mule as a race. The toughness of the ass accounts for other aspects. Perhaps the instinct of self-preservation which 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 saying that mules never get sick, injured or otherwise "damaged", it is just that they seem to be tougher from the hide in than horses and take care of themselves better.
9. **Mules look different:** This is the thing that is most obvious to the casual observer – of course they look different. Well, you see, mule lovers LIKE to look at mules. We love those beautiful (even magnificent) big ears. We love to watch the flop in a relaxing rhythm on a placid trail ride, or prick rigidly forward when something interesting is spotted. We begin to think there is something wrong with horses – they look deformed – oh yes, those tiny little useless looking ears! Oh well, each to his own taste. We like the look of strength without bulk, the streamlined look of our mules with their manes roached and their shaved tails. We actually enjoy being different! We know 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. People who ride saddle mules often like to have a mount that stands out from the rest both in looks and stamina and so they ride a mule. (We like the way they sound too – kinda silly but fun!)
10. **And finally, personality:** This is the hardest thing to define, and I will do a very incomplete job of it – as anyone must who turns to words. Yes, they are intelligent, they can be very decided about how they want to do things; they are magnificent at running bluffs! They get this from the donkey, I suppose. All our donkeys are noted for the mannerisms that they have which makes them perhaps refuse to do something until they are ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE that you are going to make them do it. Then they give right in and cooperate like angels. Anyone who is going to train or use mules should be aware of this quality. Rather than put your strength against a mule's (which is tremendous) always either outthink him or use physical

means too calmly (that word is emphasized) CALMLY, outmaneuver him. By physical means I mean gadgets – yes that horrifying word. Things that come immediately to mind are tying up a front or hind foot, draw reins, twitches, chain leads, etc. All these used carefully to achieve a specific goal allow you to call your mules bluff and once you do that you have won. The key to handling mules is 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. Don't assume he is human but don't assume he is stupid or you will be in trouble! Young mules seem to have more fear of humans and more fear of strange situations than young horses or donkeys. Young mules with no experience thrive on routine and quiet calm care and MUCH HANDLING! THE BIG SECRET TO CALM MULES THAT NEVER KICK AND DON'T HAVE BAD HABITS IS HANDLING THEM FIRMLY BUT GENTLY FROM THE TIME THEY ARE BORN OR FROM THE TIME YOU ACQUIRE THEM. Ground work done on a mule repays itself time and time again so don't be in too much of a hurry to ride or drive- spend time on training, discipline and ground work first. Don Merrit, an experienced mule trainer says, " When a mule resents something and resists from then on you can expect a fight. You can't make as many mistakes with a mule as you can in training a horse. You must be especially persistent. You must quietly ease a mule through all of the initial steps of training until he accepts it. Then you'll have no trouble."

11. **Mules are not stubborn:** Neither are donkeys, for that matter. Too many mules and donkeys have been carelessly broken or not trained at ALL and expected to know what to do and to obey immediately. Too many mules have been treated roughly and frightened when young instead of made confident in their handlers. And, too many handlers have failed to take into account that strong sense of self-preservation that a mule has. Yes, if you want him to work too hard for his own well being, especially in hot weather he will be "stubborn". Yes, if you want him to cross that rickety wooden bridge with no proof to his mind that it will be safe, he will be "stubborn", and yes, if you try to frighten or hurt him to make him cross he will definitely be "stubborn" and may even fight back and a mule can AIM a kick for best results – believe me.

Donkey and mules generally dislike dogs, so be careful. Once a mule gets used to dogs most mules will ignore them and some even play with the family dog, but strange dogs may be chased and pawed.

Some mules, (usually gelding) and some horse gelding I have known will play roughly with and even outright kill foals, goats, sheep and other small livestock. This seems to be an extension of their dog fetish; so don't put you mules in with this kind of stock until you are sure they are not that kind.

Mules pal up. Yes, I know, so do horses. But donkeys and mules are the original Damon and Pythias. Don't buy ONE of the team of mules and expect any good work. Except for the occasional very independent individual mules that have been kept in a team need a

teammate, if they don't have one they can't concentrate on their work and may be totally useless. They will also have inseparable friends in their pasture.

This is something that has to be taken into account. We have a good riding mule that has to be tied to a tree all the time we are out with his horse buddy or he will try to jump the fence and follow. Train them early to leave their friends no matter how rough it is. Then make them do it, and make them accept separation even if you DO have to tie them to a tree! Older mules get better if they have been carefully handled in this respect when young. Young mules are rather insecure animals and the natural herd instinct is exceptionally strong in them because of this. The favorite pal of any mule is a horse, probably because his mother was a horse, but given if they have no horse to become attached to, they will become fast friends with a pony, a donkey or another mule.

Merritt's mules are an amazingly friendly bunch. When guests walk out from camp after a day's ride, it's not unusual for some of the pack mules to tag along. These animals are content because Merritt has taken the time to learn the specialized training that mules require.

"At least, it can take a lot longer," he explains. "A mule is not always so quick to submit to man's will. It takes longer to convince him that he is not going to be hurt. Some of the old-time wranglers who have worked for me were convinced that a mule was "just getting to be good when he was about 12 years old."