

MULES AND DONKEYS - THE RELATIVE NEWCOMERS TO THE EQUINE RECREATIONAL SCENE

Tex S. Taylor, DVM
Texas A&M University

- Donkeys and mules are rapidly gaining popularity as equines for recreational activities.
- Donkeys of all sizes are being recognized for their suitability as mounts and companions for the inexperienced equine enthusiasts.
- In general the herd health requirements for donkeys and mules are similar to those for horses.
- There are some behavioral, anatomical and pain tolerance differences that may effect the diagnosis of disease and injury.
- Donkeys and mules do not have the same responses as horses to the commonly used equine sedatives, tranquilizers and injectable anesthetics.

In the early to mid 1970's in the United States, mules began to reappear as recreational animals rather than workstock. Donkeys have been following in their hoofprints but lagging about 10 years behind. These unique animals may represent the fastest growing section of the equine recreational industry.

These past 30 years have seen mules, and to a lesser extent donkeys, go from ignored beasts of burden to competitively competing in practically all realms of equine sports. Their sale prices have risen from \$100-200, sometimes even less, to some selling for well into the 5 figure range.

The following definitions are needed to effectively understand and converse about mules and donkeys. This is not all of the definitions but are the more common and basic list.

Mule	- the hybrid resulting from mating a male ass to a female horse
Hinny	- the hybrid resulting from mating a male horse to a female ass
Mare Mule	- female mule, often also called a molly mule
Mare Hinny	- female hinny, often also called a molly hinny
Horse Mule	- a male mule, also often called a john mule
Horse Hinny	- a male hinny, may also be called a john hinny
Mule Mare	- a female horse used to produce mules
Donkey	- common world wide name for members of the ass family
Jack	- an uncastrated male ass
Jenny/Jennet	- a female ass

Although there are a few breeds of asses recognized, in the United States donkeys are more commonly classified by size.

Miniatures	-	36" and under
Mammoths	-	56" and above - some accept females at 54"
Standards	-	36" to 56". The standard size is often divided into three categories

It should be kept in mid that the hybrids (mules and hinnys) may be male or female but are almost always sterile. The males should always be castrated for tractability.

Today we find mules competing in all the same events as horses. This list includes but is not limited to: racing, trail riding, wagon trains, dressage, driving events, timed contests, pleasure classes, roping, pulling contests, parades and gaited classes. By breeding better and specialized mares to better jacks, mule breeders are producing animals capable of successfully competing with horses in many events.

Large standard and mammoth donkeys are currently being selectively bred for performance traits and they too are slowly beginning to make effective mounts for these same events.

There are probably many reasons for this strong interest in mules for recreation. Some of the more prominent are as follows. There are still some people who where raised in families where mules were effectively used for workstock. Mules have always been part of their lives and they are seeking reasons for it to continue. Another avid support group is the "recovering horse people". These are people who have been active in horse events and have become disenchanted with them or just tired and are looking for something different. Other people just enjoy being a little bit different.

Mules have long been credited with being more surefooted over rough terrain than horses. They appear to be able to exist on a somewhat lower quality diet and to be more resistant to disease and lameness. They are more tolerant of heat stress and appear to have a longer life expectancy than horses. Mules also, to many people, seem to have a more individualized personality and bond closer with their owners.

A disadvantage for some people is that unless one understands their mental makeup they can be a challenge to train.

The mental makeup of the donkey can also present a challenge to the potential trainer. They are a bit different from both the horse and the mule. However this same mentality is what seems to be markedly increasing their use as saddle animals.

In today's society people have more leisure time, more money, and an ever-increasing interest in equine related recreation. These are accompanied by limited or absent understanding and skills with the equine species. Many of these people are also retirees or of a comparable age. Many have also had adverse experiences with horses and/or mules. They are finding that the larger donkeys make very satisfactory companions. In the donkey they can find an animal of a size to do what they want to do and yet be easy to mount. They are less likely to run away or shy and if they do the reaction is markedly milder than that of the horse and mule. In addition many donkeys at age 3,4 & 5 and a few month's to a year of training can be the so called "bomb proof" animal it takes some mules and horses 10-12 years to become.

Individuals wanting to participate in equine related events that have had bad experiences with horses and mules and are currently looking for a well trained donkey are quite common. Saddle donkeys are probably just coming into their era of popularity.

From a health care perspective the routine care of the donkey and mule is similar to the horse. Deworming, vaccination and foot care intervals are essentially the same. They usually can be fed the same feeds although maybe they require a lessor quantity. Most of the medical problems are the same although some seem to be less frequent. Their increased tolerance for pain and failure to demonstrate the same clinical signs of disease as do horses frequently makes a medical diagnosis more difficult.

This discussion has focused on the donkey and mule as a participant in equine recreational events. However, it must be acknowledged that the largest segment of the donkey industry may currently be the people who own them as pets. The pet category is dominated by the miniature but it would be incorrect to assume that the miniatures are not establishing their own reputation as equine performance animals.

