

Longears: Equines Without Limits
By Helen T. Hertz

In their August issue of *USDF Connection* Magazine the United States Dressage Federation named the mule its “Breed of the Month.” Pictured in the article was the amazing Audrey Goldsmith astride her mule, Heart B Porter Creek, “the winningest mule in the history of U.S. dressage.” The American Mule Association was acknowledged as the All-Breeds awards program participating organization representing the mule, and trainer, educator and advocate Meredith Hodges was mentioned as one who “deserves much of the credit for mules’ advancement in the dressage world.”

Read that again: “... mules’ advancement in the dressage world.” It’s been more than 20 years since Meredith first approached the USDF to request permission to participate in their events. Mules were just beginning to emerge as something other than work animals, and those who took an interest were just beginning to discover the hybrid’s innate versatility and—under the right conditions—willingness to learn. Progress, however, was slow, basically because we humans don’t much care for change. It’s ironic really, how we’ve characterized the mule as stubborn because he can be wary, self-protective and resistant to new ways of acting or thinking, and yet that’s exactly how we are. Train a mule for show? How absurd! This wasn’t just a new way of looking at equines of the long-eared variety, it was a cultural shift. After all, we thought we knew what these animals were for!

Long admired for their service to this country, mules have been revered for their sure-footedness and resilience in the fields, the mines, the mountains and in battle. But the show arena? It’s taken people like Meredith years of effort to train and breed mules ready for show, but today at shows such as the Mule Days Celebration in Bishop, Columbia Mule Days, Great Celebration Mule & Donkey Show in Shelbyville and Hell’s Canyon Mule Days, mules perform in dozens of Western and English disciplines and donkeys find their share of the action as well.

And, as Audrey and Porter and a few others have shown us, the sky’s the limit. Through diplomacy, respectful persistence and diligent effort, some determined folks won the opportunity to introduce mules to sanctioned dressage competition. This is serious business, serious competition and not the only place where mules and horses mingle. Mules also compete with horses in endurance and trail events. In fact, mules have benefitted greatly from the horse industry. Drawing on the great traditions of fine horsemanship, mule trainers have taken longears to new heights and discovered potential in these animals unheard of even 30 years ago. As equine equals, mules and horses and their people are stronger as a group, and that’s critical in these trying economic times and in an era where the rural way of life is increasingly squeezed by the pressures of suburban growth.

Mules have also found new ways to serve their human friends. Therapeutic riding centers around the country are discovering the benefit of using mules in their programs, finding that they offer a gentle, comfortable ride and can take great care of their disabled passengers. Meredith has plans to develop a non-profit organization that will give at-risk kids the opportunity to work with rescued and rehabilitated mules and when the animals

are trained, donate them to the therapeutic riding center of their choice—a great way to help equines, help kids and help individuals with disabilities and the people who work with them.

People who've trained longears know the elation that comes when their equine has a breakthrough and masters something new. After weeks, months or even years of trying, something happens and a new standard of performance is set. It's a great feeling—something to remember. Perhaps the best way to show our appreciation for the way mules have served us in the past is to never limit what they may achieve in the future.

For more information about the USDF All-Breeds program, visit www.usdf.org or e-mail allbreeds@usdf.org. For more information about Meredith Hodges and Training Mules and Donkeys: A Logical Approach to Longears, visit www.LuckyThreeRanch.com or call 800-816-7566.