

Blue Ribbons

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Blue Ribbons the object of showing, right? It seems many times that we spend thousands of dollars and drive thousands of miles for the quest of the blue ribbon. However, it goes a little deeper than that and please allow me to explain. I was putting the second blanket on my mule Playboy this evening because all of his hair has been clipped off so we could attend the 3rd Annual NASMA World Show in Amarillo, TX. It's freezing cold in Georgia (like 40 degrees) and my mule should be fuzzy with a lot of hair.

When I was slipping the blanket on over his head, I was thinking to myself all of the stuff we do to show such as spending 2 hours to body clip in October. I then started to think about all the hours I spend picking his stall, washing, paying someone to braid his mane or band it and not to mention the hours spent on his back. However, I could not imagine life with out my mule or without the idea of preparing for a show. Then one must ask themselves do we really do all of this for a ribbon?

Each of us has something we are very passionate about or truly love doing. The more I think about how much showing mules mean to me, I realize that I have pretty much modeled my whole life around my mule(s). I attended college for some years in pursuit of a degree that would better aid me in understanding equine and being able to better take care of them as well as be more selective when crossing them. Not to mention the goal of getting a good job to support my expensive habit. However, I must admit that with the growth of the mule and donkey industry I must not be the only one that loves devoting time to showing.

I have noticed in the past few years that many people have been much more conscious about breeding selection. I believe this has become evident in the show ring. There are finer, athletic animals these days showing at Mule and Donkey shows since I can remember. Along with the selection process of choosing smaller more refined jacks and mares bred to perform, I wonder just how long it will be before our industry is faced with some of the challenges that are more common among the horse industry such as lameness and genetic disorders. Today's show mules are also required to do many events which increases the amount of stress put on them physically and mentally.

Many "show horses" train their entire life for one or maybe two events like western pleasure and or hunter over fences. But not our mules! That's one of the fun and challenging things about showing mules and the quest for the blue ribbon is the fact they must be able to compete in western pleasure, mulemanship, hunter under saddle, over fence classes, trail, dressage, showmanship, cutting, reining, drive, etc. In all reality today most mule exhibitors are competing for the tri-colored ribbons or high point awards.

I recently returned from the All American Quarter Horse Congress in Columbus, OH, I really noticed the physical difference in the western pleasure horses and the hunter under

saddle horses. It's almost as if there are two breeds within one breed. I have been to other quarter horse and breed shows but never really noticed or thought that much about it. I was most impressed with a three year old futurity, western pleasure horse that was shown with a beautiful long, flowing mane. He obviously had more than one job such as reining or cutting and western pleasure. That was when the light bulb went off about how each class had a horse with a distinct conformation. It was very refreshing to see that horse in the western pleasure class and the fact that he moved nice and the judges placed him. Just take a moment and think about how many mules show in the multiple events and perform superior in all. I think this is a major accomplishment to our industry and to our mule shows. This brings up another issue in terms of the way our mules go. Today, in order to compete for the blue ribbon not only must your mule be diverse in his/her training but it must move correct.

I look at the halter mules of today versus seven or eight years ago and they (meaning a majority of them) resemble that of halter horses, more muscling, longer leaner necks, balanced, in general more horse like, beautiful animals! I have also noticed something that concerns me especially with some of the show mules out of thoroughbred mares, the hoof size and bone size is decreasing. In addition, I have spoken with more trainers, yes; mule trainers are a common site now just look at the amateur division at a NASMA show or AMA show and the classes are huge because we (us amateurs) want to compete in a division where we have a chance for that blue ribbon.

Anyway, back to my discussion on feet and legs, many trainers now do preventive and necessary treatment for soundness such as hock injections or injectable joint therapies that do not involve injecting the actual joint of concern. This to me is amazing! But really it shouldn't be out of the question to administer joint therapies or have soundness issues, when one thinks about how hard some of these mules are being challenged to perform the many events one requires them to do so one can win that "blue ribbon." Did our mules say ten years ago need this type of treatment? Maybe, I just don't recall people treating for lameness in most mules. Also, how many mules were wearing aluminum shoes or sliding plates 10 years ago? How many mules do you remember with a mane with bands or braids?

Along with joint and soundness concerns in our "show mules" I wonder when our industry maybe plagued with genetic disorders. A veterinarian in South Carolina, Dr. Laurie Stokes, has actually done some research in regards to using quarter horse mares that carry the dominant gene for HYPP and breeding them to jacks. I'm currently in the process of trying to get in touch with her to report on her research and to share it with the rest of the mule and donkey world. The question here is, can these mares be safely used to raise mules and or will the mules have HYPP? She has actually taken hair samples from some mules that have Impressive bloodlines. Again, another challenge of breeding nicer mares to jacks to produce "show mules" we maybe increasing our chances of adding genetic disorders to our industry or maybe we can provide a safe outlet and use for these horses with such conditions. We need more research! I hope our mule and donkey organizations will begin to realize this and start funding research for the future of our animules.

Along with physical issues that are becoming more obvious in our mules that we are now leaving with professional trainers, taking extensive riding lessons with, and even in the beginning selecting mares and jacks to produce a mule to perform, we are faced with nutritional issues to help ensure that blue ribbon victory. What to feed our mules and donkeys for optimum performance. There are many options for feeding equine. In the past many mules were only feed corn and then worked all day was this the best diet? I personally don't like a lot of carbohydrates (corn is nearly all carbohydrates in the form of starch) but grass in the pasture is also extremely high due to fructans (so not good to put an equine on a complete Atkins diet, unless similar diet is prescribed by a veterinarian to treat Cushions or Insulin Resistances). Carbohydrates (starches and sugars) provide quick energy and the energy level and feeling is similar to eating a candy bar, your insulin goes way up and you feel like running a mile or so and then all the energy is gone and you feel weak or lethargic. Most often higher carbohydrate diets are fed to race animals so consider this diet if that's the intent with your mule.

Recent research has suggested feeding more fat to equine for a "safer form of energy" and a "cooler energy." Many feeds today can be as high as 12-14% fat and keep in mind these are percents and you are feeding pounds. Most fat sources are coming from Rice Bran, Flax seed, and a little from Beat Pulp. Make sure the feed has vitamin E in it to help prevent oxidation of the fat molecules and increases the self life. Also, make sure it's stabilized rice bran. Beat pulp is an excellent source of fiber and its slow digesting meaning it will stay in the small intestine longer than most fibers, such as grass/hay (moves through the system faster due to being faster fermentating).

About feeding a fat source that produces a "cool form of energy" many feed companies claim their low carbohydrate/high fat feed will produce a cool energy, this is referring to the response of the equine after consuming its concentrate (the grain) and some research has indicated the equine will remain calm. Also, most of these diets will include 11-14% protein, which is needed for muscles especially repair and remodeling which is very important to a performance animal!

I have been feeding my mule a high fat diet for the past year and he's been on two different feed companies' diets. He has acted much calmer than ever before! He has also been kept off pasture for most of the year, to keep him at a target weight/condition, so of course we can show and go after the "blue ribbon." But I honestly believe the grain has altered his behavior. He is bred to be somewhat responsive and flightier, his dam was an appendix mare but since changing his diet from an all grain diet to the high fat there has been an alteration in his disposition. Do keep in mind when feeding concentrates, that good quality hay is needed as well as clean, fresh water, but the grain or diet alone can not win the blue ribbon for you. The correct diet fed on a routine basis (best to feed several small meals versus one large meal because the stomach is only the size of a basketball) is part of the formula for winning a blue ribbon.

Again, in the quest for the "blue ribbon" we have begun to separate ourselves into categories where we fit due to the level of competition has risen. I must say I have never

enjoyed showing so much as I have this past year. I have been a part of the amateur division for the past 8 years and I have taken it for granted. After attending the NASMA World Show in Amarillo I was reminded of how much fun shows could be! I love to compete and win but you are not going to always win the blue ribbon. There's so much more than winning. To me the most important thing I strive to keep in mind is how much I enjoy and love the bond I have made with my mule as well as the many dear friends I have made showing from coast to coast. This year a lot of new people have started showing such as the Reddish family from Stark, FL. It's great to see new folks as well as the regulars! I believe another part of being successful includes putting yourself in a positive environment by surrounding yourself with positive people. This should improve the showing experience exponentially! I hope next year when preparing for the show season or breeding season you will consider what type of mares you are breeding to what type of jacks as well as considering all of the aspects of being successful in showing. Never less, remember no matter how many times you show, it's always a learning process and you can always improve because your mule can do more than one event! I ask that when you begin the show season next year that you can take the time to enjoy the whole experience including that with your mule, family, and friends in preparation for the show and the adventure of winning a blue ribbon.

P.S. Please don't forget to have fun and meet some new folks!