

# Breaking the mold



Like all No Worries Club Members, Mel Wilson and her husband Scotty are avid Clinton fans. They've used his training methods and seen the results in their well behaved equines and have countless show ring successes. However, unlike most NWC members, Mel and Scotty put Clinton's program to use on their mules. The couple owns Sagebrush Mules, a 40 acre ranch in Iberia, Mo. where they care for about 23 mules and horses. They stand their own registered jack—Horseshoe Hill Colonel, whom they breed to their Quarter Horse, Appaloosa and Paint broodmares. Besides their breeding stock, the Wilson's also have several riding mules, one that stands at a whopping 16.1 hands that Mel calls her gentle giant. Not only are Mel and Scotty mule owners and breeders, but they are also actively involved in the North American Saddle Mule Association where Mel heads up the Membership Committee.

Breeding and raising mules is a relatively new adventure for the Wilsons who have been surrounded by horses their entire lives. Mel grew up around Quarter Horses and Scotty always had a horse around to ride. When the two got married, they bought a piece of property that didn't have any animals on it, so Scotty decided that he wanted a mule to take to Colorado hunting. "Of course he got a mule and then I had to get a mule to go along with his," Mel says. "When we went to pick up my mule, there was a mare there with a mule baby. When I saw the baby, that was

all it took.” Sagebrush Mules was started and little by little over the past four years, the Wilson’s have been adding to their herd.

When they first got started with mules, they followed advice from other well-meaning mule handlers, which promptly backfired on them. “One of the things we were told was not to start working with the babies until they were weaned because it’s normal for them to want to be with their mom and if you separate them, the foal will put up a flight or fight reaction,” Mel explains.

After discovering Clinton and hearing his strong beliefs on imprinting, the Wilsons decided to give it a try and have found amazing results. “We start with the imprinting DVD by Robert Miller and follow everything through,” Mel says. “Every step works.”

The Wilsons first saw Clinton on RFD-TV riding Diez. “When I saw the things he could do with that horse I had to know more,” Mel says. “Since then, we’ve gone to his clinics and have his DVDs that we use with all of our mules and horses.” Besides being impressed with what Clinton can do with a finished horse, Mel was blown away by his ability to explain his training methods. “So many trainers have a tendency to not say why they’re doing something. Clinton breaks it down into laymen terms. He doesn’t throw phrases or words around that people don’t understand. He comes down to our level, whether that be for a beginner, intermediate or expert. And the best part about it—regular people can make it work,” Mel says.

Once they started implementing Clinton’s methods on their mules, the Wilson’s saw a night and day difference in not only their mules’ behavior, but their performance as well. “Before it was kind of like fighting a losing battle,” Mel explains. “It’s hard to show an animal what to do when you’re not sure yourself what you should be doing. It’s not until you see Clinton’s techniques that you understand why steps one and two are important. A lot of people want to jump in and start training the mule, but they haven’t taught him step one or two yet, and then they don’t understand why step three isn’t working.”

Following a logical step-by-step training program is extremely important when working with mules according to the Wilsons. “A mule has to feel safe in the situation and understand why you’re asking him to do something before he’ll even consider doing it,” Mel warns. “Whereas you can ask a horse to do just about anything and he’ll do it, even if it is potentially dangerous.” Mel and Scotty follow Clinton’s program from imprinting newborn foals through to the groundwork and riding exercises. By the time that Scotty is done roundpenning the mules and teaching them the various groundwork exercises, he’s never had one buck when he puts the saddle on for the first time. Both Mel and Scotty are firm believers in doing as much as they possibly can with their young stock so that by the time they’re 2 or 3 years old there’s no big hassle. “It all boils down to the technique. Like Clinton says, it takes time on the ground. If you do your groundwork correctly, the horse, or mule in our case, will understand the same concept under saddle,” Mel says.

### **As stubborn as a mule?**

“That’s the biggest misconception there is,” Mel says. That line of thinking comes from not truly understanding the way a mule thinks. “A lot of people don’t understand that if a mule perceives what you’re asking him to do is dangerous and will cause him to hurt himself, you can hook a tractor-trailer to him and he’s not going to do it,” Mel explains. “In my opinion, that doesn’t make them stubborn, that makes them safe.” It’s the feeling of safety that Mel likes most about riding mules because she knows she can relax and enjoy the ride the mule isn’t going to do anything to hurt either himself or her.

“I will admit that it does take more time to train a mule than a horse,” Mel concedes, “but once they’re trained, it’s a done deal.” The Wilsons can throw their mules out to pasture for six months, bring them back into training and not have to review any of the previous lessons they’ve already taught them, which is a testament to the mule’s ability to remember everything he’s been taught.

To share how eager and willing mules are to please and do what is expected of them, Mel points to a trailering experience. “We had our mules pastured a couple of miles away from the house and we needed to bring them back home. So Scotty drove a trailer out into the middle of the pasture, opened the trailer door, the mules instantly came running, loaded themselves in the trailer, Scotty locked the doors and off they went.”

Looking back on her and Scotty’s experience breeding and raising mules, Mel recommends that newcomers to mule ownership start working with their animal as soon as possible. “If you get them started as a weanling and do the groundwork with them, it makes life so much easier because they catch on so quickly. It really all boils down to Clinton’s techniques.” On the other hand, if you wait to start working with an adult mule, you’ll have your work cut out for you. “At the shows we go to, it’s really easy to see if people are working their animals the way they are supposed to or not,” Mel says. “If you follow the steps, the mules will basically teach themselves as you move through the program.”

