

The Stableizer

Ideal Restraint Method for Horses and Mules

By Heather Smith Thomas

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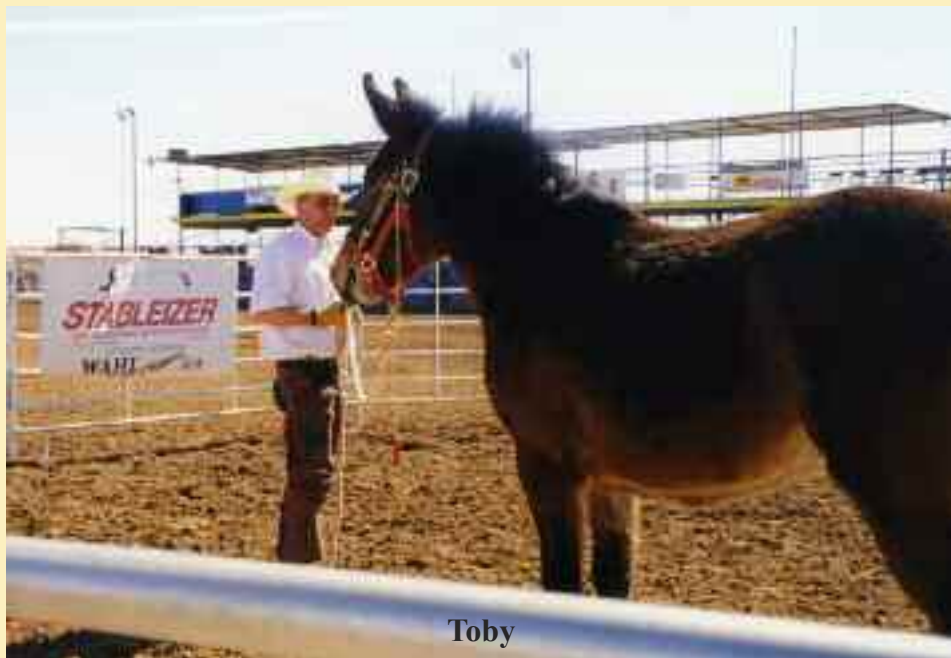
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An ingenious restraint tool for equines has been in use now for about 15 years. This unique method for “holding your horses” (and mules) was developed by Buck Wheeler, who grew up breaking horses on the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation in North Dakota. He created a modern adaptation of the old Indian “war bridle” that’s much more effective and also more humane and versatile. His invention is now being used by a growing number of horsemen, mule owners, trainers, veterinarians and farriers to make their job easier. The “Stableizer” works much better than tranquilizers, lip chains or twitches for restraining or calming an unruly mule or horse, and is very effective when you have to give the animal shots, medical treatment, trim or shoe its feet, load it into a trailer, clip it, or any other procedure it might resist.

The Stableizer works better than a twitch because equines don’t resent it and it’s easy to put on. It stays on and won’t fall off. One person can put it on and leave it on while working on the animal alone, and it’s safe for both the animal and the human. There’s no “ax-handle” to hit you in the head. The Stableizer relaxes and “sedates” a mule or horse. Yet unlike a twitch, the animal can still move with it on—so you can lead him, load him in a trailer, or even give him training lessons.

The device slips over the animal’s head and goes behind the ears and under the top lip next to the gum. It is then tightened up, using the cord handle, which utilizes a couple of small pulleys rigged up like a miniature fence stretcher. It is designed to put pressure behind the ears and under the lip. The pressure points behind the ears stimulate release of endorphins, which are natural narcotic-like substances produced by the body. Endorphins block pain and make the animal feel calm and relaxed—making him feel good. The pressure point beneath the lip blocks the release of adrenalin, which also tends to relax the animal. The portion of the cord that goes under the lip is covered with plastic tubing so it does not cut into the gum or lip; it causes no pain.

Buck Wheeler says it took three years to



Toby

perfect the device. He and his wife Karen and their three sons make the Stableizers at their farm in Ellendale, Minnesota. He says it was a long process at first, getting it to work right. “For instance, the final product uses the 5th handle we tried, but it really works well. This handle is just a little piece of light plastic; if it swings around it won’t hurt a horse or a person.” The Stableizer is made in five sizes, to fit foals and miniature horses, on up to large draft horses. It works on donkeys and mules, zebras and llamas. “We created it through trial and error, with help from many veterinarians, vet schools, horseshoers, trainers, equine dentists and a lot of other great people,” says Buck.

After he perfected it, the next step was to get people to try it. In 1996 Buck showed it to D. Wayne Lukas, a racehorse trainer. Lukas used it on all of his Kentucky Derby entrants. His Derby winner, Grindstone, wore it while being led to the saddling paddock and to the starting gate for the race. Another horse he was training, also wore it, and was the calmest he’d ever been when wearing it on his way to the starting gate before winning the Belmont Stakes that year. (*Editor’s Note: who was notorious for acting up all the time*) After that, more trainers and horse breeders started using it. Buck said that at first, many veterinarians and far-

riers had doubts about its effectiveness, but now they are his best customers, and the Stableizer is used in many veterinary hospitals.

The reason it works so well to restrain the animal or make it more relaxed and cooperative is that the mule or horse or experiences pleasure rather than pain while wearing it. The animal also remembers the experience (foot trimming, clipping, etc.) as a good experience rather than something to fear, and is more cooperative the next time. Many individuals resent the reapplication of a twitch, but don’t seem to mind having the Stableizer put on again, and often stay calm and relaxed for up to ten minutes even after it is removed. Many mule and horses get to where they tolerate the activity (the clipping, wound doctoring, or whatever they are being restrained for) so much better after a few sessions that they no longer need the Stableizer.

Trainers, vets and farriers appreciate this tool because one person can apply it and leave it in place, then work on the animal without needing anyone to help; the animal just stands quietly. It’s also handy as a training device. “A mule or horse doesn’t learn anything when drugged, but remembers everything you do with the Stableizer,” says Buck. The animal remembers that first lead-

ing lesson, first saddling, first shoeing, first trailer loading, etc. as a pleasant experience (since he feels so good while you're doing it) and never has any suspicions or fears about it.

Training usually takes many hours, getting the animal accustomed to every new thing—gaining his trust and dispelling his fears—so he won't react adversely. But when the Stableizer is used to introduce him to something new, it enables him to accept it with immediate tolerance. As Buck says, when the animal hears the clipper, he associates it with pleasure rather than alarm, since he had such a good feeling while you were using it the first time with the Stableizer. This tool makes many procedures safer for the human and kinder to the animal.

TOBY'S STORY – Over the past dozen years, Buck has been giving demonstrations at horse shows, sales, race meets and other events, showing how the Stableizer can be used to restrain or train mules or horses. He is usually given the most unruly animals available to use in his demonstrations, and has worked with draft horses, racehorses,

mules, zebras, BLM mustangs, and many problem equines. At the Equine Spectacular (Phoenix, Arizona—February 1999) he worked with an unbroke 4-year-old mule named Toby. The mule's owner, Vicki Johnson, tells why she offered this mule for him to work with.

"Toby is a good-looking mule that I bought as a three-year-old, and I was unaware of his problems," she says. "He was sick as a baby and his only experience with people was lots of shots and doctoring. After he recovered, they turned him loose on a ranch in Montana and he had no further handling until I got him. I quickly discovered how resentful he was, and had serious problems handling him. He was hard to catch; he'd snort and jerk away. I couldn't lead him or handle him, and couldn't pick up his feet. He'd kick, and was really dangerous. I tried a lip chain, a twitch, and a war bridle—anything I could think of to make him more manageable, but these just made him mad. Pain made him fight," she says.

She took him to Buck Wheeler's clinic at Equine Spectacular to use in Wheeler's

demonstration of the Stableizer. Buck says that when Toby was first brought into the arena, "You could not touch this critter without him leaving town." The mule was extremely wary, resentful, and uncooperative. Because of his bad attitude and bad memories, Buck did two sessions with him. "It's a lot easier and faster to train an unbroke animal that has never been handled, than one with bad memories and bad habits," he says. For instance, in the same seminar he took an untouched wild horse fresh off the desert and soon had it broke to lead and saddle, and it readily came up to him to be caught.

By the end of the second session with Toby, the resentful mule was becoming calmer. Buck could handle him all over and was able to pick up his feet, clip him, and sack him out over his entire body; the mule was completely cooperative while wearing the Stableizer.

Vicki used the Stableizer on Toby after that, and was able to progress with his training. "The Stableizer really made a difference," she says. "He was no longer mad; it changed his attitude about being handled,

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Buck Wheeler
and Toby**

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and he didn't get angry every time I tried to do something with him. He was learning, without being resentful. This made his training easier, without so much danger to me."



Works on donkeys too.

She says that it can be hard to train a mule after he has problem.

"Mules are so athletic and intelligent. They never forget a bad experience, and if you make a mistake, you pay for it dearly. Toby was basically worthless in his former state of mind, but after using the Stableizer we made progress and our training went okay, continuing to use the Stableizer. I did a lot of groundwork with him—leading, ground driving, foot handling, and so on—with him wearing the Stableizer."

She had several other young mules and wanted to train them from the beginning. "I became more confident that I could do a good job with them, easing them through any rough spots with the Stableizer." Toby is a perfect example of a talented equine that got off to a bad start, but was salvageable, thanks to this amazing restraint device.

Heather Smith Thomas is a rancher/writer, raising beef cattle and a few horses with her husband, Lynn Thomas, on a ranch near Salmon, Idaho. Growing up on a ranch she has raised and trained horses and mules for fifty years and has been writing about them nearly that long. As a writer, she has sold more than 8,000 stories and articles to more than 200 different publications, and has written twenty books. Most of her writing deals with cattle health care or horse health, behavior and training.