



Ideas for Assessing Conformation of The Mule

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Assessing The Mule

The Donkey & Mule Society of NZ has printed this booklet to provide a guide until its own Standards of Conformation and Type for Mules is published.

The following collection of photos have been kindly sent to us from the American Donkey and Mule Society to help give those involved with showing, judging and breeding mules in New Zealand some understanding on how to approach assessing the mule. We were not sent any photos of pony mules but mules come in all sizes, determined by the choice of mare and jack used. The usual principles of conformation and movement apply to all mules as they do to any other equine but are combined with consideration each mules parentage.

Each photo has been critiqued by Leah Patton and allows you to follow her through the judging process over a range of mules. She is a highly respected member of the ADMS executive and is currently their office manager, registrar and assistant editor. She loves drawing, writes many articles and owns breeds and judges mules and donkeys.

Photo 1



The mule in Photo 1 is a nice, compact mule. Lovely head and neck (the photo may be a bit deceiving as to the actual top-line of the neck). Would prefer a slightly more sloping shoulder, but sufficient. Good chest. Legs straight in front but slightly coon-footed (broken angle). Short, round barrel, short backed. A little small in the hip, under muscled at croup, stands under slightly. A nicely turned out mule, would have to see her move in the ring.

Photo 2



The mule in Photo 2 is larger than the first, with a longer neck and longer back. Nice neck, good shoulder and chest. Straight forelegs, but the elbow is set a bit high. Long back, long underline as well. A little small in the hip also (common in mules, from the jack) and needs some more muscling to eliminate that bump on the croup. Stands just a little sickle hocked in the rear. Still a very nice mule.

Photo 3



Photo 3 shows an excellent example of a saddle mule. Neck a little thin and straight, clipping the mane into a small standing ridge instead of completely roached would help the general appearance. A typical head, but not too large or heavy for the animal. A lovely shoulder, sufficient withers, would like a bit more chest development. Straight forelegs, would like a little more bone below the knee. Nice short, strong back with a matching underline. Good hip, in proportion to the rest of the mule. She is not standing square, which makes it difficult to judge her hind end, but the angles seem to be good.

Photo 4



The mule in Photo 4 is very horse like in type, long and lean. If you cover the ears, it could well be a TB horse. While not the ideal halter photo with the head stretched up, the animal is very well balanced. A nice shoulder and withers, a little shallow through the loins, but typical of that breeding. (I would like to see the front hooves trimmed a little shorter). A pleasant head and lovely neck, this mule looks to be one that the owner would be happy to work with.

Photo 5



Photo 5 shows a mule that was being shown as a two-year old. Not as nice a neck as the mule in Photo 4, or as nice a coupling toward the hip. Straight shoulder, flat withers, long back. Slightly cow-hocked behind.

Photo 6



The mule in Photo 6 is a very nice mule at first glance. Even though still rump-high and growing, this draft mule is better balanced than some of the other mules. Wealth of bone, though upright in the shoulder.

Photo 7

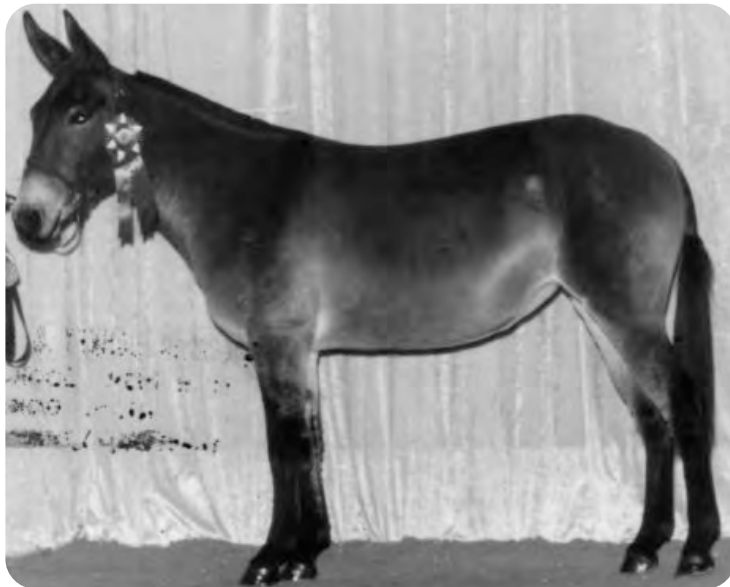


Photo 7 shows a mule with a very nice front end, though I would prefer a longer, more sloping shoulder. A bit too tucked up in the waist and shallow in the hip (again, usually a fault of the jack). Good forelegs, though somewhat coon-footed in front.

Photo 8



The mule in Photo 8 has an overly long back for the height. The neck is long, with a nice headset, the shoulder angle only moderate. The withers are fairly flat, the back itself long with a small hip. The underline is long and tucked up. I would prefer heavier bone in the legs under this animal.

Photo 9



The mule in Photo 9 also has a very long back, usually contributed by the jack (or donkey parent). It is rump-high, which can be forgiven if it is under the age of 5. Pleasant head, nice neck though slightly longer on underside, moderate shoulder. Forelegs fine, but back end slightly sickle hocked.

Photo 10



Photo 10 shows a well balanced and overall nice type of mule. Nice head and neck. Good shoulder, still a little straighter than I would desire. Excellent chest and forelegs. Nice top-line and underline. Excellent hip.

Photo 11



The mule in Photo 11 has a narrow neck that does not tie in well to the withers or chest. Very upright shoulder and prominent wither. Legs set very far forward, very long underline. Weak hip, long sloping croup. Sickie hocked in back.

Photo 12



Photo 12 is a younger molly mule. She is very angular, yet elegant. A feminine head, straight neck, Set well into shoulder, which is a little too upright. Forelegs nicely straight with lovely pastern angles. Very flat back and withers. Back is over-long for her age. Smallish hip, but in proportion with the rest of her. Hind legs appear a bit cow-hocked. Even with the long back, overall appearance would probably make a nice hunter type mule.

Photo 13



The donkey conformation shows strongly in the mule in Photo 13. Short, thick neck, well developed chest but upright shoulder. Very flat (mutton) withered, long back. Underline long and rises to a narrow flank. Hip is nicely rounded, but too small for overall proportion. Weak stifles. Stands with forelegs black, a bit post legged in back.

To rate these last four mules together in one class I would place them:

10, 12, 11, 13.

Photo 14
Courtesy of
Lloyd Hawley



The mule in Photo 14 has a nice shoulder, long and sloping. She has enough wither to hold a saddle, but her neck has a slightly longer underline than top line. Her hip is a little shallow. I would prefer more bone in her lower leg to match her hoof size.

Photo 15
Courtesy of
Lloyd Hawley



The mule in Photo 15 is a little more 'rectangular' in conformation. She has a smoother, more donkey-like top and underline, instead of the rounded shape of a horse (which the mule in Photo 14 does have) The line of her neck is thrown off somewhat by the lay-down mane. Her neck could probably be enhanced by clipping a short upright mane into a curve, to draw emphasis to the nice top-line and away from the underline.

Overall, these are probably some of the best adult mules of the entire collection.

The top three would be: Photos 1, 2, 3, followed by photos 4, 6, 7, 10, 14

Photo 16



The mule in Photo 16 has a very straight neck, she is almost bordering on being ewe necked. Her shoulder is very straight and upright. Some wither, enough to hold a saddle, but big in the barrel and front end compared to her hind end. Her top-line weakens considerably at the loin, and her hip is very small and steep. She is post-legged in back.

Photo 17



Photo 17 is a John mule and has a very short thick neck. It would be difficult for him to reach and round into the bridle. He is very flat-withered. Nice shoulder angle, but no definition. Very difficult to keep a saddle on. Good forelegs. Tucked up a bit in the waist. Hip is nice shape, but hind end is shallow and small in comparison to the rest of his build. Weak stifled

Photo 18



Photo 18 is another molly, she is not standing at the idea angle. A full-side view might present a better hip, which is the main fault in this photo. A slightly ewe neck, but good sloping shoulder, nice withers. Good bone in legs, if a bit coon-footed especially in front. Long top-line, rounded croup, but standing square would give us a better picture.

The placing for these last 3 photos would be 18, 17, 16.

Photo 19



Appaloosa in Photo 19 is not an ideal halter pose, very parked out (camped out). Nice head, neck a little long. Nice shoulder angle, but no shoulder definition. Nice straight forelegs, pasterns a little long but hoof angle matches well. Flat withered, back and underline a little too long. Cannot tell much about croup from the angle, but appears to be sufficient hip.

Photo 20



It is difficult for many people to look past the colour of the appaloosa in Photo 20 to see the conformation. Nice head and neck, shoulder needs a little more angle. Nice heavy legs, stands under a bit in front. Long back, long underline, very flat wither. Almost a donkey top-line, and donkey hip. Hind legs very light through the stifles.

Photo 21



Photo 21 is an appaloosa molly mule. At first glance, she is very unbalanced, with legs smaller than expected for her barrel and body. There is no definition from neck to shoulder. The shoulder is almost vertically upright. She is standing under in front (and over at the knees) while at the same time standing camped under in back. The croup is very short. There is a lack of bone in the leg, and the pasterns are long.

Photo 22



Photo 22 is a mule from a spotted donkey parent - and may actually be a hinny instead of a mule. The conformation is very donkey-like. Both the shoulder and the hip are more suited to Jackstock than to a mule. A very upright shoulder with flat withers. A very short, level croup. Weak stifles, though neither hind leg is squared up.

Photo 23



Photo 23 is a yearling molly mule, very smooth and nicely balanced. She has the smooth musculature that is common in many mules (as opposed to the bunchy muscles of a horse). Her neck is long but balanced, with a nice, feminine head. Her shoulder is a little too upright, and she is a little flat withered. Her top-line has a bit of 'hunter's bump' there at her croup. Her underline is excellent for her age. She is clean-limbed, with adequate bone, but perhaps a bit long in the pastern.

Photo 24



Horse judges would probably immediately choose the mule in Photo 24 over Photo 23. However, both have an equal number of flaws that would make it necessary to watch them both move, at the walk and trot, and then re-stack, to make a firm judgement.

Photo 25



Photo 25 is of a bay weanling or yearling mule. Nice overall build, a little long in the back. Nice neck and shoulder set, a little upright. A little over at the knees, pasterns a little too long. Nice hip, lovely turnout.

Photo 26



Photo 26 is a draft mule colt Very nice neck, actually has some curve to it. Nice join of neck into shoulder, nice shoulder angle and excellent forelegs. Would prefer more wither, but nice top-line and excellent hip.

Photo 27



Many horse people would like the colt in Photo 27 at first glance. His neck is a little ewed and has a longer underling. Nice shoulder and wither. Good saddle back. Stands slightly back in the fore, cannot tell from hind legs.

Photo 28



The head on the mule in Photo 28 is very blunt and square. The neck is very short and thick, with a long underline. No definition where it ties into the shoulder, which is very upright. The legs are too light for the build, and cut in under the knees. Long sloping pasterns. Flat withers, steep croup. Long underline. Post-legged in back.

As a Class of all four, without being able to see all of them move, I would probably place them: Photo 26, 25, 27, 28.

Photo 29



The roan molly mule in Photo 29 is actually my own mule, and won second place in Yearlings at the National Show in 1994. She is a very smooth mule, lacking in the typical muscle definition of a horse. She has a feminine head, straight neck in proportion to her build. Not much definition from neck to shoulder, rather flat in the withers, but enough to hold a saddle. Needs more chest definition, even at this age. Fairly nice forelegs, a little long in the pasterns. Round bellied, typical of her build. Hip okay, could use a little better stifle.

Photo 30



Photo 30 is a youngster at a very awkward age, but shows some conformation characteristics that may continue to make him unbalanced even as he matures. His neck is very long for his age, and already shows a longer underline (almost a swan neck). He has a straight shoulder and almost no wither definition. He is big-bellied with a very long underline. This emphasises his shallow heart/girth. Cut in under the knees, upright pasterns. Decent hip and croup.

Photo 31



Photo 31 is of a Chestnut mule foal that is actually a very nice example of a young animal. Good neck that ties in nicely. A little more slope to the shoulder would be nice, but this colt is nicely balanced for its age. A nice rounded rump, standing fairly square. Pasterns are a little upright and he's standing a bit sickle-hocked in back, but compared to the other two foals, by far the best in the class.

Photo 32



Photo 32 shows an appaloosa foal at the worse gangly stage one could try and judge. He has a weak shoulder, long thin neck with a longer underline that top (bordering on ewe necked). He has a flat wither and very long, angular croup. With the upright lines of his shoulder and legs, he would be a choppy mover.

Photo 33



The foal in Photo 33 also has a number of conformational flaws. While the shoulder angle is nicer, the neck is distinctly ewed. The colt is wasp-waisted (tucked up) with a very shallow hip. Again, not standing up in an idea stance, instead being parked out. If this colt were to stand square, the rump would be overly high, and this would exaggerate the small hip and pelvis.

These next two mules are of the 'common' type that most of the general public think of when mules are mentioned. While fine as draft animals in harness, the mule in Photo 35 has no merit as a saddle animal. Photo 34 might make a fine working mount for moving cattle or for gymkhana, it lacks style for any kind of hunter classes.

Photo 34



The mule in Photo 34 has a nice enough head, though a bit Roman nosed, and a nice neck. The shoulder is upright to the point it would interfere with a reaching stride. He also stands behind in front, and is sickle hocked and camped under in the rear. He has a long back, with a short round hip.

Photo 35



The mule in photo 35 is the unfortunate epitome of 'if the mare isn't good enough to breed horse foals, use her for mules'. This big-bodied mule does not match in balance anywhere. The neck is far too short and light for the rest of the body. The shoulder is very straight, though surprisingly the wither is quite prominent. The back is overly long, with a very sloping croup. It appears to be cow-hocked, and somewhat coon-footed.

Photo 36



Photo 36 is a molly mule. She is almost fat, so smooth that it makes looking at her overall conformation difficult. While she does have a bit of slope to her shoulder, she does not have much wither. This is not a good side-on view, but she does appear to be standing under a bit.

Photo 37



The mule in Photo 37 is more heavily built than the mule in Photo 36. He is a little rump high at this point, which if he is under age 5 should not necessarily be a fault. I would prefer to see a little more chest muscling in front of his forelegs, and a little more slope to his shoulder.

Just remember that just because a mule wins Champion one day does not mean it is the best mule, always. It is the best animal of those in the class that day as looked at by one person's opinion. Every judge will tell you, 'If you brought the same class in tomorrow I might place them differently'. Therefore, not all of these mules, in my own judging opinion, is deserving of a champion rosette. It would all depend on what else was in the ring.

I hope all of these photos have helped to show that each mule needs to be evaluated on its own merit first and foremost. While one is not looking necessarily for ideal "horse" conformation, the basic principles of equine conformation should always come first. Square legs, good overall balance and proportion, good harmonious melding of all the parts. The way the mule travels at the walk and trot is as important as the way they stand. A good handler can square up an animal that may move so badly it forges or interferes in-hand.

Just as one may have an Arabian and a Percheron in the same class, so should the mule judge consider each animal as they come into the ring. Overall impression, movement, harmony and balance are the main objectives.

Again, a halter class placing is one person's opinion at one given moment in time. No one judge's placing or opinion should be taken as gospel. However, we're quite thrilled that there are more people interested in learning about correct mule conformation (as opposed to strictly judging them as horses and ignoring the differences contributed by the donkey).

Leah Patton, ADMS

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