THE SECRET LIVES OF MULES
KICKING STEREOTYPES ABOUT THE STUBBORN HYBRIDS WITH MU'S TIM & TERRY
Tim and Terry, the University of Missouri mule team, lead a wagon of riders around campus for a tour. Photograph by JEREMY JARDINE
A TALE OF TWO Mules

Despite their superior intellect and stamina, these equine hybrids remain under-appreciated.

BY ERIC HOLMBERG

TIM LOOKS INTO THE DARK ABYSS OF A SHALLOW PUDDLE.
The low sun reflects off the water, which makes the bottom hard to see. He approaches the puddle in the black gravel parking lot with his teammate and half-brother, Terry, in tow. They walk from the mule barn preparing to be hitched to the wagon. When they work together, Tim is generally the dominant mule. He walks faster, whereas Terry tends to lag behind. Tim reaches the puddle first, watches it with unblinking focus and even steps over the wagon tongue to keep an eye on it. He’s constantly aware of threats, real or perceived. He’s a mule. That is how they act. If a mule thinks a puddle could swallow it whole, it won’t budge. The mule’s safety comes first; orders come second. That sentiment goes back to the age-old saying: stubborn as a mule. Like any animal, mules can be stubborn, but they often have good reason — one its owner doesn’t always realize. A mule owner eventually learns there is no override for the mule’s self-preservation instinct. It is too strong to be countered with force. It must be understood.
THE MULE PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN Missouri’s identity. The first mule show west of the Mississippi took place in October of 1835 in Columbia, so the story goes. Harry S Truman’s parents made a living buying and selling mules in Lamar, Mo. Truman also had mules in his inauguration parade. Missouri mules have worked Southern cotton fields. They have taken homesteaders and gold rushers West. They have helped log forests and mine caves. They have served in wars around the world for both American and British armies. In 1995, Missouri named the mule its state animal. But even with this recognition, few people know about them. In 1920, there were nearly 5.5 million mules nationwide, but in 2007, there were only about 283,806 mules and donkeys. Today, Missouri is ranked fourth nationally with 11,985 mules and donkeys behind Texas, Tennessee and Oklahoma.

WHAT MAKES A MULE
The mule is a hybrid — a cross between a male donkey, or jack, and a female horse, or mare. A beautiful and useful hybrid, the mule is genetically awkward and nearly always sterile. Horses have 64 chromosomes, which neatly pair off and make 32 sets. With donkeys, it’s the same way: 62 chromosomes, 31 pairs. But mules get stuck in the middle. The mule is cursed with 63 chromosomes, 31 pairs and one lonely chromosome. The genetic material lost in the hybrid is the baby-making gene; the sequence reads like typing the wrong link into a web browser — 404 error, chromosome not found.

John L. Kipling, a museum curator and father of Rudyard Kipling, says it best in his 1904 book *Beast and Man in India* when he describes the traits that make the mule superior to the horse and donkey: “Sure of foot, hard of hide, strong in constitution, frugal in diet, a first-rate weight carrier, indifferent to heat and cold, he combines the best, if the most homely, characteristics of both the noble houses from which he is descended. He fails in beauty, and his infertility is a reproach, but even ugliness has its advantages.”

Despite his lengthy list of its sterling attributes, Kipling still calls the mule homely and ugly. So maybe the mule isn’t sexy. It doesn’t receive the *National Geographic* horse treatment. There are no images of mules galloping across an open meadow with their manes elegantly flowing in the dewy breeze. There is no mule equivalent to Black Beauty.

TIM AND TERRY
The University of Missouri’s current mule team, consisting of Tim and Terry, conquered the unknown tens of feet from their front door. “It was a puddle, and it was reflective, and it’s usually not there,” Dr. John Dodam, MU professor and a Missouri Mule Club advisor, says. By the end of the night, the duo stepped in the puddle several times without thinking.

On that cool afternoon, they were serving as training mules for the Missouri Mule Club’s welcome barbecue for first-year veterinary medicine students. Tim and Terry participate in about 50 events, such as parades and fundraisers, every year. They also give campus tours. Tim and Terry have the same father, a mammoth jack — the largest breed of donkey. Both mules are 18 years old, stand 16.2 hands (five and a half feet to the base of the neck) and weigh about 1,600 pounds. They are sorrel mules, which look copper with a reddish tinge. They share their sorrel color and blond, or flaxen, mane because they were each born to a Belgian mare. One Midwestern mule trainer said Belgians are preferred for mule breeding today because “no man can resist a blonde.” They have white muzzles with black coloring around their mouths. Their faces will get whiter with age, like 35-year-old Hilda, who still lives at the mule barn and was part of MU’s original team from 1984. Her partner, Louise, was euthanized over the summer due to deteriorating health.

The barn, near College Avenue on Rollins Street, doesn’t feel like downtown Columbia or East Campus, which are both only a short distance away. A tall tree
The ears have excellent blood supply, which helps them cool off. The wide-set eyes contribute to their superior peripheral vision.

Photograph by JEREMY JARDINE

A GOOD HEAD ON HIS SHOULDERS  Mules inherit their large heads and ears from donkeys. The ears have excellent blood supply, which helps them cool off. The wide-set eyes contribute to their superior peripheral vision.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The mule is the hybrid of horses and donkeys, and takes (seemingly) the best traits from each. They are smart, tall, have excellent eyesight, live a long time and have built-in heating systems.

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THE HORSE

The horse is taller than the donkey and has a better undercoat to protect from wind, rain and snow. Mules inherit these genetic bonuses. Horses are not as smart as donkeys, but that also means they are less tempermental.

THE DONKEY

The donkey has a larger head and brain than the mule. Both of these traits are passed along to the mule. Donkeys also boast a longer life span and air pockets in their coats that keep them warmer in the winter.

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How to Make a Mule

Mare (female horse) + Jack (male donkey) = Mule

THE FAMILY HISTORY OF MULES

The Mule Club students to practice driving the mules, which keeps Tim and Terry active. In the duo’s formative years, they were raised by Harold McKinnis, a man Dodam calls an artist. McKinnis bred the two mules to be especially patient and forgiving. They have to be able to adapt to different people and different situations. Not just any mule is cut out for this job.

BOONE COUNTY DRAFT HORSE AND MULE SALE

Clarence Koch was the man to see about mules at the Boone County Draft Horse and Mule Sale in September. Koch, originally from Nebraska, now lives in Southwest Missouri. He’s wearing jeans and a jean jacket over a blue dress shirt. He greets people with a big, soft handshake as if he were a mule ambassador. In 2003, Koch identified Tim and Terry to replace Missouri’s old mule team. Koch calls Koch “one of the finest mule men in the country.”

As the tour continues, the wagon drives down Ninth Street where couples and families are enjoying coffee and conversation in front of Starbucks. Two dogs, both tiny compared to the mules, start barking, and cell phones emerge to photograph the mules. The wagon turns left onto Elm Street and circles into the driveway at the intersection with Eighth Street in front of the MU Columns. A lingering group of MU students comes up to pet the mules. The Morehead State women’s golf team from Kentucky wanders past and meets the mules. On the way back to the barn, a man in a gold sedan parks his car up against a curb. After looking down and fumbling, the driver pulls out a black cell phone, cocks it sideways and begins taking pictures.

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mules he has trained over the years was built on trust, he says. His dull, light blue eyes occasionally peek above his soft-cornered rectangular glasses when they slide down his nose. “It’s a lot easier to out-think ‘em than out-whip ‘em,” he says. “I do not own a hotshot. I do not own a whip; I do not own a club. My weapon is a hard tap with a curry comb.”

Ben Tennison, editor-in-chief of Western Mule Magazine, which began in 1994, says Koch’s approach is exactly right. “Not everybody can get along with a mule. Every great mule man I ever met … was not an overbearing, belligerent man. He was kind to his animals,” Tennison says. The mule requires the submission of ego and the honesty of mutual respect. Trust is what allows mules to do extraordinary things.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Extraordinary things are what Tim and Terry did a few months ago. Walking the team around the parking lot in front of the mule barn is an easy introduction to mules for the beginner students. Near the end of August, the mule team went to Kemper Arena in Kansas City for the Development Council’s Animal Health Homecoming. Dodam likes to say they never know what to expect at an event until they arrive. On this particular night, the mules were expected to drive the keynote speakers to the stage, drop them off and exit. Plain and simple.

This time, however, plain and simple involved dozens of dinner tables where 2,000 people were seated, clinking their glasses and jostling their silverware. The band was playing, and the lights were off. The mules were blind except for the spotlight on them that cast intimidating shadows in every direction. The students were just as scared as the mules, so Dodam drove the mules onto the arena floor. The mules walked across the slippery cement floor only to be thrown off by carpet squares covering electrical wiring running along the ground. As a security blanket for the mules and a control mechanism for the team, students walked near Tim and Terry’s heads. “It was crazy,” Dodam says. “And the thing is, the people saw us for maybe two minutes. Most of them might not have even realized where the mules came from or what they did.” Loud music, no lights and strange textures on the ground — much less has caused a mule to freeze. Tim and Terry dealt with all three.

MULE COUNTRY

George Washington was judicious in his assessment that America could not succeed if it were powered by horses. He said that horses “ate too much, worked too little and died too young.” Knowing Washington’s affinity for mules, King Charles III of Spain sent him a jack in 1785, who was in turn named Royal Gift. When Washington died in 1799, he had 42 working mules and 15 young ones. These mules, the first from a quality European jack, had offspring throughout the country.

As the U.S. advanced West, Missouri was in an opportune position. When the Santa Fe Trail was first navigated in 1821, it linked Independence, Mo., with Santa Fe. It gave Southwestern traders a market for their mules and goods. Missouri became the home for Eastern mules going West and Southwestern mules coming back East.

Traders on the Santa Fe Trail learned to appreciate the mule’s self-preservation instinct. James Josiah Webb, who navigated part of the trail that descended at a 45-degree angle with four-foot vertical drops in between rocks, found that his mule would line up each
**SURE-FOOTED MULES** Tim tends to lead Terry when they are hooked up to the wagon together. The jingling sound of their harnesses and the clip clop of their hooves on the pavement alert onlookers to their presence. *Photograph by JEREMY JARDINE*

**GENTLE GIANTS** Tim and Terry were a main attraction at the Shepherd Elementary Fall Fair this year. Children and their parents were eager to greet and pet the massive beasts. The brothers were happy to oblige their adoring fans. *Photograph by JEREMY JARDINE*

jump and land with its four feet close together. The mule was able to navigate terrain inaccessible to horses. In 1857, another trader, Mae Humphreys Stacey, came across a small creek that turned into a raging torrent after a thunderstorm. Frontiersman and author Floyd F. Ewing Jr. wrote about the encounter: “The mule absolutely refused to enter the water, and when Stacey changed to a horse and plunged into the torrent, he learned the soundness of the mule’s judgment. Only after a close call in the turbulent water did Stacey and his horse survive.”

**BUILDING A MULE EMPIRE**

Because of Missouri’s central location, many residents made a living off the mule trade. J.D. Guyton and W.R. Harrington moved from Alabama and Mississippi to Lathrop, Mo., in the 1890s and created a mule empire. They started with 10 acres and grew to be the largest mule-buying firm in the world. By 1918, they owned 4,700 acres and had room for 50,000 animals. They sent up to 500 buyers out to buy mules and ship them back to the Lathrop farm for six weeks of good food and conditioning.

Guyton and Harrington’s biggest client soon became the British Army. It contracted with Guyton and Harrington to provide 110,000 to 115,000 mules from 1901 to 1902 for the Boer War in South Africa. The English were desperate for mules as W.B. Tegetmeier and C.L. Sutherland wrote in 1895, “Our military operations when on active service cannot be carried on in foreign countries without the aid of mules, inasmuch as horses are utterly unable to endure the severe work that the animals are called upon to perform.”

After seeing the Missouri mules in action, the British Army signed an exclusive contract with Guyton and Harrington to provide horses and mules during World War I. They sent 170,000 horses and 180,000 mules to the front lines. Despite their aversion to danger, mules were useful pack animals to carry supplies and artillery to the front lines. *The Leather Workers’ Journal* from September 1915 noted that the average life span of a horse or mule on the front lines could be fewer than 10 days. But the mule out-survived the horse five-to-one during wartime, according to the late Dr. Melvin Bradley, the foremost Missouri mule scholar.

In 1941, the U.S. Army purchased 23,496 horses and only 4,279 mules for World War II. Once abroad, the soldiers realized that mules were much better suited for the job than horses. After 1941, the army bought about 3,000 horses and more than 26,000 mules. The most famous account of mules in World War II comes from Ernie Pyle’s 1944 description from Italy: “Dead men had been coming down the mountain all evening, lashed onto the backs of mules. They came lying belly-down across the wooden pack-saddles, their heads hanging down on the left side of the mule, their stiffened legs sticking out awkwardly from the other side, bobbing up and down as the mule walked. The Italian mule-skinners were afraid to walk beside dead men, so Americans had to lead the mules down that night.”

**LEADING THE WAY**

Tim and Terry are ready for anything on the morning of this year’s Homecoming parade. Dodam is supervising the student driver; other students walk next to Tim and Terry. In the middle of the parade, the mules walk up Ninth Street past the Cavalry Episcopal Church and the row of bars that were filled eight hours before. It’s a little before 9 a.m. on Saturday morning, and directly in front of the mules is Marching Mizzou playing “Fight Tigers!” as the crowd sings along. “Mizzou, Mizzou, hooyay, hurrah!” Behind the mules is the Boone County Fire Protection District Pipes and Drums. As soon as the fight song fades out of hearing range, the bagpipes begin to sound. The mules serve as a silent interlude.

On Broadway, the mules are announced to an average smattering of applause. No one whoops or shouts like they did for the Homecoming Steering Committee. The mules finish their trip down Broadway by turning left with the parade on to Sixth Street. As they pass the invisible finish line, the mules keep going. The team walks past the fastest Marching Mizzou members who are already loading their instruments onto the truck. Over a slight rise in the pavement, the mules disappear. The mules, all at once homely and noble, don’t stick around for the fanfare. Leave that to the Homecoming queen. ▶