

By Peter Chew

## 'Mules is born in a man; you ain't gonna get it out of him'

*Long bad-mouthed for cussedness, mules are in fact tough, smart, strong—and making a fast comeback today because they are fun*

Has a secret colony of mules seized control of our destiny from somewhere in outer space?

NBC-TV's *Saturday Night Live* once posed this question. Well, television gag writers aside, the mules are having the last laugh these days. Consigned to the "killer man" for slaughter when tractors growled across the landscape in the late 1940s, the mule has come back from cast-off beast of burden to popular beast of pleasure.

More intelligent than the horse and far tougher physically, the long-eared, shave-tailed mule is sharing at last in the nation's wealth, which mules of yesteryear did so much to create by what was often brutal, life-shortening toil.

A mule is the sterile, hybrid offspring of a male donkey—or jackass—and a female horse, which was once bred selectively for work in the cotton fields of Mississippi, the sugar plantations of Louisiana, the coal mines of West Virginia and every imaginable form of heavy draft work. Today, hobbyists modify the animal's breeding to produce riding, driving and racing mules. Ways of having fun with the New Mule are limited, it appears, only by the human imagination.

"The modern mule is being asked to do everything a horse does, and he does some things better than a

The classic mule: matched pairs are judged for color, size and conformation at Missouri State Fair.



The old mule: wearing blinders, a team of draft mules does field work in San Marcos, Texas.

horse," notes Betsy Hutchins, editor of *The Brayer*, published by the 2,000-member American Donkey & Mule Society in Denton, Texas, which boasts 40-odd affiliates such as Montana's American Council of Spotted Asses and the Oregon Mr. Longears Club.

Trail riding and trail driving in covered wagons are popular mule activities. Mules are competing in their own rodeos, gymkhanas, hunter-hack and Western classes modeled after horse shows. They take part in multiple-hitch classes and weight-pulling contests; they race with jockeys up; they race with chariots behind. They jump fences with riders aboard; they jump riderless. Mules have become skilled at working cattle on ranches.

Mrs. Edith Harrison-Conyers of Winchester, Kentucky, rides to hounds on Kit, her five-year-old mule (p.100), a fearless jumper that finished seventh in the Mumford Farms Horse Trials in Evansville, Indiana, last May, clearing every cross-country and stadium jump, scoring well in dressage and finishing ahead of 11 of the 18 horses in the grueling three-phase event. But people also buy mules just to have them around. They want to see their long ears sticking up in the near distance and to hear the music of their braying.

At the big Reese Horse & Mule Company auction last winter in Columbia, Tennessee, when 800 mules and jacks went under the hammer, an aging mule man in bib overalls talked about the mystique of mules during a break in the bidding. "Years ago, every little farmer with half an acre of tobacco would have a one-