

“Suck it up it’s only a bridge!”

I’ve had to tell myself that many a time, as I crooned a calming tone of “its ok” to my mount and pack string, as we have approached a new or odd looking bridge. A bridge is a long way from anything in the natural world of a mule or horse. In other words, it is not going to normally have its own page in their standard picture book. This is the picture book they constantly flip through to decide what is safe to deal with. A bridge adventure does not have to begin a million feet in the air to get an “oh!” “It can eat me” response. Lizzy had one heck of a time crossing a road culvert that she could not see either end of, but could hear the water gurgling through and under her feet.

A mule or horse will observe and hear more than the rider will or can. They will hear water running under the bridge span. They will see this narrow path over some kind of abyss. They will feel the planking give under their weight. They will hear a strange sound as their feet fall when they step onto the planking. If you are leading a pack string now, that sound is coming up behind them to boot. According to the Mule Survival Manual, in the chapter under Bridge Dangers, “You all know something could be hiding under there to jump out and eat a careless mule or horse!”

The only way I believe one can train for this kind of environment is to find a number of different kinds of bridges, then cross them over and over again. We were having a problem with a young mule involving bridge sounds. We dug a small ditch and put a scrap piece of 1” plywood across it. Over and over it we went with her, until she would cross it on her own, as a game. Problem solved! Once we get one critter over their bridge phobia, then we will use this one as a training aid. In a horse or, especially a mule’s eyes, to follow is a whole lot safer than to lead. “It did not hurt Maudie; then it may not hurt me.” “Hmmm!” That may have been a good idea. I wish I had applied it to myself a few times.

The first thing to do is to sit back in the saddle and look at that old bridge between their ears and wonder what they are going to see. A bridge can offer some real dangers. It can be wet and slippery with moss or pine needles. They may be old or worn out, with broken or missing planking on them. They may be narrow with no bull rails to encourage a centered step. They can be all of the above together and high in the air as a bonus.

If any bridge is a safety concern, then by all means do not cross it. If you must deal with it, you may be able to settle down some of the problems a bit. A slimy bridge can have dirt thrown on it to add needed traction. Low bridges with broken planks can have a rock or blank of timber thrown into the hole so they will step over it, instead of into it.

Bridge crossing training for you, the rider, is even more important than the training of your ride. If you are overly concerned about crossing a bridge, your mount will feel and believe in your fear. The best way to train your fears away, again, is more bridge crossings. Start by walking across alone, then lead old Dan, and finally ride across. You can do it. You'll make a mountain-man yet.

This photo is of a narrow low bridge over a small stream or swampy area.

This kind of bridge one may need to fill holes in with rocks. Note the bull rails on the side. These rails encourage the animals to step into the middle of the bridge. They also offer security from slipping off of the planking. Also note the leaves on the planking. If this bridge deck gets wet they will reduce traction.



This is a smooth planked bridge deck built out of treated lumber. When a bridge is built out of this kind of material, it can be slick even on a dry day. Also note: the fir needles all over this bridge deck. Boy'o can they get slippery when wet. On crossing this bridge, Maudie gets her nose down and eyeballs each step she takes. This is the kind of bridge that the clumping sounds can cause the pack string to rush forward. In

addition, there are no bull rails to assist a downed animal in regaining their footing.



This is a bridge to train the rider for, the High Dose bridge, it is 150 feet tall and about 100 feet long. The next photo is a neat view down from this bridge.



Reality check, it is just a bridge. That's where the "suck it up" comes in. If a bridge like this sets me back, then I'll get off and walk it first to get a feel for what I must do next. If I still have the willies, I can always lead the gang across on foot. Be warned, it is safer to ride, just in case they decide to rush over you. This is no place to try to stop a rushing animal or outrun them on foot. An additional consideration is that the

bottom rail on this bridge could trap a fallen animal's foot or leg.



The week before the photo above was taken, Moby who was the lead pack animal, slipped and fell on this bridge. The following week the trail crew had sanded the bridge for me and Moby was fine with the crossing. Not so fine with the idea of this crossing was our Josie mule. She had been in the pack string watching the prior mishap and decided that what had gotten Moby could still get her. I broke her out of the string and gently but firmly worked on convincing her, all was safe. I softly crooned my mantra “that’s ok”, rubbed her forehead, walked out to the end of the lead rope and tugged. A few times of starting and stopping, she gave in and believed I would not get her hurt. She’s a brave soul. (Note: I had taken the rest of the gang across and tied them up. This tended to discourage her from pulling away and breaking for the gang, had they been tied behind her). She got over it in more than one way. Now she will even lead the string across under-saddle.

I hope this gives you some ideas on how to begin working out your training needs, prior to dealing with bridge crossings. I have found, once a horse or mule gets comfortable with a bridge crossing, they become old professionals at it. This may not be the same for the riders. A good friend of mine, who

works a lot with me, suffers from vertigo in high places, his tool to deal with high bridge crossings is to look only between his mule's ears, while crossing said bridge and avoid any skylarking (looking around). Bless those cool mules.

Ed Haeffliger

www.mtcanaryco.com

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