

Champion of the 'underdog' named a Mule Days top dog

Downey's goal 'to be on top' translates well at Mule Days over last 22 years

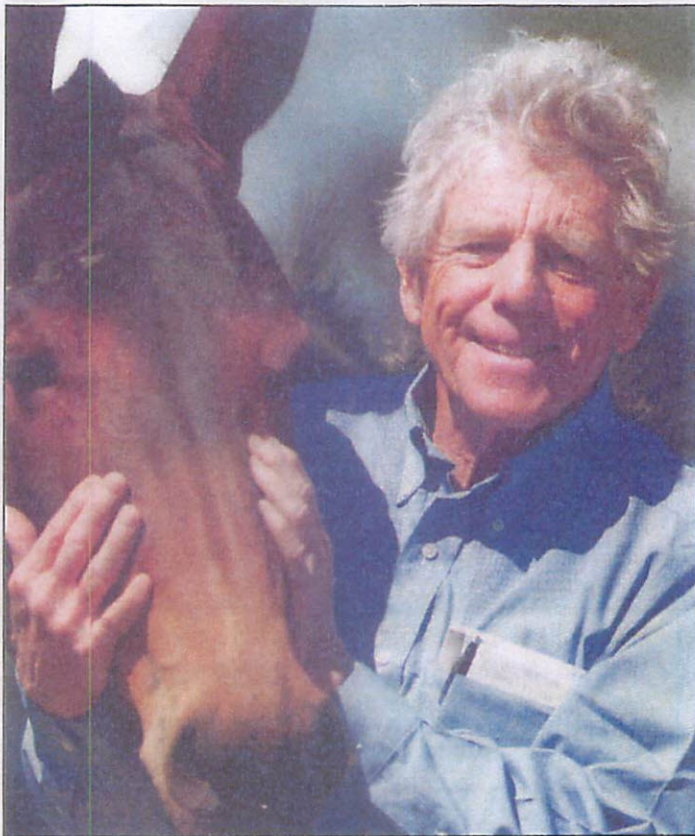
By Deb Murphy
Register Staff

This year's inductee into the Mule Days' Hall of Fame is Roger Downey, a one-of-a-kind mule breeder, trainer and endurance competitor. His claim to fame at Mule Days has been the mule races, that brief moment that combines adrenalin rush and chaos. Carl Lind describes him as a gentleman who thinks outside the box. Downey describes himself as a champion of the underdog, a lover of all things different.

Downey is a "city kid" raised in New York but retiring to Corrales, N.M. after a successful insurance career. Where did that passion for the mule hit him? "When I was 15, in 1955, I was driving a junk car in New York City and knew I needed to get a mule," he said. "No, that's not right." The passion really hit him in 1990 after he'd moved to Corrales and he got Jethro. "I'd had a few experiences with equines," he admitted, "but they'd all been negative" until he got on Jethro. "Jethro really raised me."

Downey attended his first Mule Days the following year then came back in 1992 as a participant. Downey was hooked; he'd found that one thing that combined his search for the "different," the underdog and his competitive nature. He worked on conditioning Jethro and entered the 200 yard Western Race at the 1993 Mule Days. Jethro won with Tiffany Bailey aboard. "I cried," he admitted. Since then, his leggy, hot mules have dominated the races.

"Bishop planted a seed," Downey said. That win in '93



Roger Downey has amassed quite a collection of world championships over the past two decades at Mule Days.

Photo by David Calvert

was his breakthrough. "I've gone every year and am very proud" to be the latest member of the Hall of Fame. All the energy Downey had once focused on his insurance business went into his mules. The goal of the effort was "to win, to be on top."

Over the past 22 Mule Days, Downey's mules have amassed 18 World Championships and seven Reserve World Championships.

He started a breeding program in 1999 and eventually took up endurance rides, competing in the Tevis Cup Ride, 100 miles through the western slopes of the Sierra, from Truckee to Auburn, against world-class Arabs. He added Sarah Nelson to his stable in 2002. She went on to best the then-queen of the track, Black Ruby. Sarah secured her spot in the archives of really fast racing mules going up against Smoking Joe at Grants Pass Downs in

2005; she came out the winner in true Downey style.

Downey acknowledges that most consider equine training an exercise in complexity. "That's mostly bulls**t," he said. "It's all really so simple." The key, according to Downey, is the initial imprinting, handling a foal almost as soon as it hits the ground. "When you create trust, you really have something. It's so beautiful, it's such a privilege." He notes the often-repeated fact that mules are "smarter and more self-preserving" than horses. "They have a reputation for being stubborn," he said. "If they are that stubbornness wasn't created by the mule; it was put into them along the way by somebody."

Downey's Stonewall Jackson will be participating in the donkey barrel races and, of course, he'll have entries in the arena races.