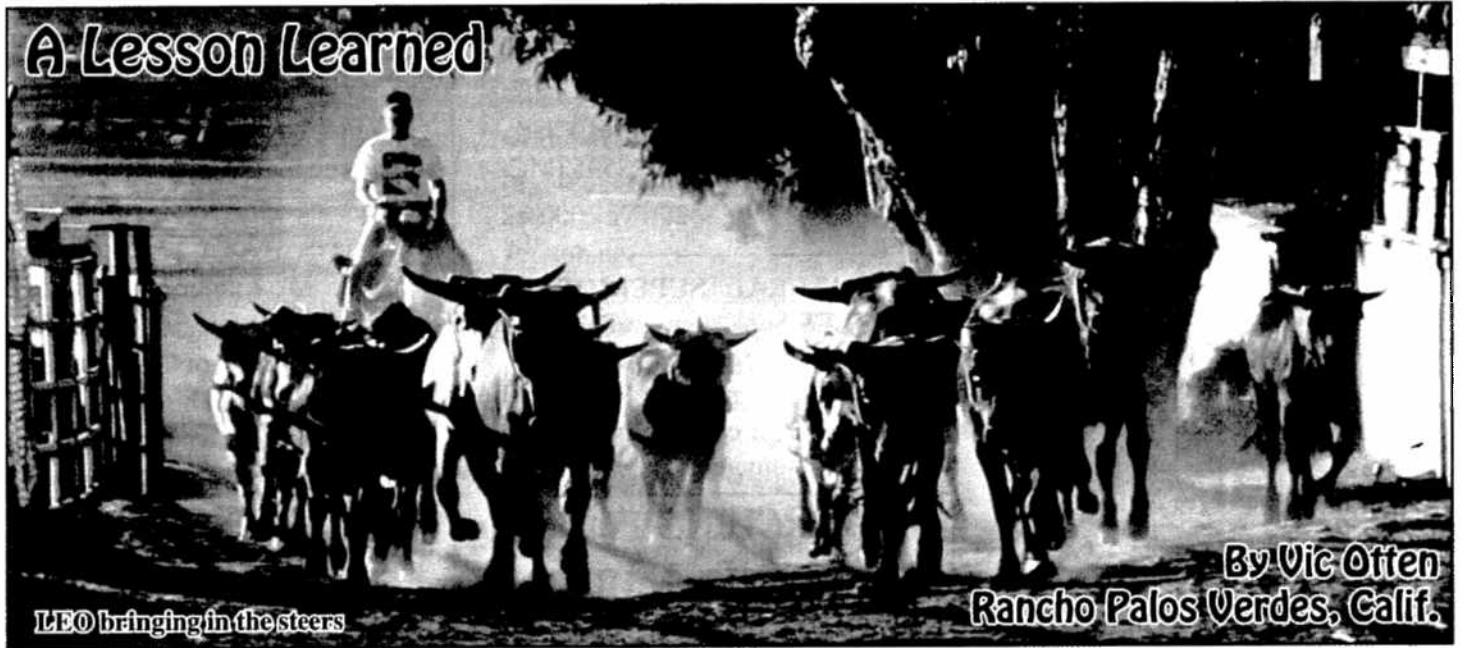


## A Lesson Learned



LEO bringing in the steers

By Vic Offen  
Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.

Who knows what was I thinking. I had put my trusted mule in a situation in which no one could blame him for bolting. What mule would hang around under such stressful conditions? The madness that ensued was not my mule's fault; it was an attempted training lesson gone terribly wrong. In less than ten seconds, my mule, Jessie, had become the teacher and I the student. Fortunately, neither of us ended up getting injured in the lesson.

I purchased Jessie in August 2008 and we have become buddies. He is one flashy mule, black with four white socks and a skunk tail, and well trained. He is full of attitude but always kind.

Jessie and I have spent many hours riding the magnificent hills of Palos Verdes, Calif. Despite the numerous dogs, peacocks, goats, joggers, obnoxious crows, cars, motorcycles and other stimuli that comes with life in Los Angeles, there have only been minor incidents on the trail. I really could not expect more from a mule.

Jessie and I had recently started taking cutting lessons from Shelly Martin. I had waited several months to play with the cows because the people who sold me Jessie said that he was not really fond of cattle and he seemed a little spooky around them. Nonetheless, things were progressing wonderfully. Jessie showed little fear of cows and he really seemed interested in cut-

ting.

After a Thursday afternoon lesson in mid-August, I figured we would take a short ride around the grounds. It was getting near dark and I probably should have called it a night. In fact, I remember thinking to myself that we should just quit. Ultimately, however, we headed out into the evening. This was my first mistake, I should have trusted my instincts.

The Empty Saddle Club is around 14 acres and in the middle of the residential neighborhood of Rolling Hills Estates, Calif. The land is basically square in shape and surrounded by homes on three sides and a nature preserve on the remaining side. There is a path that runs along the perimeter of the club, so we took a small road that runs along the north-

east boundary of the club. There is a nice canyon view along this section of the property. In the northeast corner of the property, there is a round pen. This is basically a blind curve as you pass the round pen and head down to the northwest end of the property.

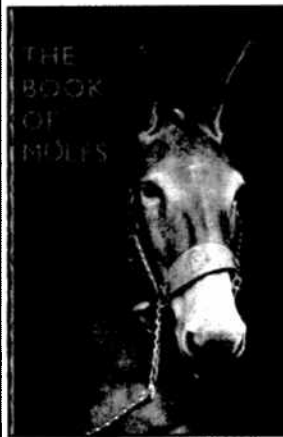
As we rounded the corner, to my

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horror, in the distance I saw Leo on horseback driving a herd of about 30 steers towards the round pen where we were standing. They were about 100 yards away but moving at a brisk pace. Usually, when the cows are being moved, there are people standing guard to make sure everything is safe. Because there are fences on each side of the road, there is nowhere for the heard to go but forward.

In the past, I would have turned the mule around and high tailed it out of there. But not this time. I was going to give the mule a training lesson. After all, he sure was not scared in the cutting arena. We were gonna kick back and watch the herd run by and follow them into the pen. This was my second mistake.

I backed Jessie off to the side and watched as the steers approached (see photo below). "Good Boy," I told my mule as the roar of 120 hooves pounded the ground and headed directly towards us. Jessie's ears were fixed on those steers as they approached, Jes-

sie's neck stiffened and I think he let out a little snort: "It's ok boy," I said as I gave Jessie a pat.

Seconds later, Jessie spun 180 degrees to his left and was out of there. My mind was surprisingly lucid as I thought about what to do next. I remembered something that I had read or been taught about making an "emergency stop." So I loosened the pressure on my left rein and tried to pull the right rein back attempting to bring Jessie's nose around. Jessie's neck, however, is far stronger than my arm, and he showed no inclination of bending. The emergency stop did not work.

As Jessie raced to the corner by the round pen, I was hoping that he would not run me under the tree limb. I recall looking down at the ground, noticing how hard it looked, and thinking to myself that I cannot fall. At that point, I dropped into my saddle, lightly placed one hand on the saddle horn and decided to ride it out.

When Jessie felt like he was out of harm's way, he came to a stop. I turned

Jessie around and, keeping a safe distance behind Leo, we followed the herd into the pen. I asked Leo how fast Jessie was moving when he took off and he stated: "About 60 miles per hour; your eyes were stretched so far open that I could see the whites of your eyes just like a cartoon; as you rounded the corner out of my line of sight all I could hear was 'whoa, whoa, whoa...'"

About a week later, I returned to the area to take some photos for this article. This time I left Jessie in his stall. As Leo was bringing the steers down the road, all I could see was those sharp horns and the determination of those steers to get to the dinner waiting in their pen. The closer they got, the more intimidating it was. I snapped a few photos and got the heck out of the way.

I guess the moral to this story is to think about what you are asking your mule to do. In this case, I was lucky that Jessie stopped once he was out of harm's way. This is not always the case.

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