

GUS  
by  
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Founder of The Western Challenge

Gus packed a string of mules over the backcountry of Yosemite National Park for more than forty years. He taught me to tie a double diamond and trust a box hitch to hold a building tight on a mule's back. He moved gracefully over the Sierras in an easy partnership with his mules never in a hurry, but always arriving at the next camp just as planned.

Packers, like cowboys, love to sit around telling stories about all the "wrecks" they've survived. Not Gus. "Can't remember a wreck," he would say. "Nope, don't believe I can remember any." He was a legend among packers in those mountains so the "wreck" cowboys would be disappointed when he'd crawl down into his bedroll without saying another word.

I packed with Gus in the Yosemite backcountry for one season. I was constantly waiting for the "wreck" I knew had to come. After all, mules and horses were forever getting in wrecks. If you ride trails enough, it's only a matter of time. Five months passed and the first snows of October had finally settled on the high country when we put up our gear in the pack station at Monmouth Mountain. The "wreck" had never come.

"First, ya gotta think like a Mule," he said when I asked Gus how he and his mules got along so well. "Anticipate his needs once in a while. Get yer mind off yerself. That's all," he concluded with a snuff and a nod of his head.

That wasn't enough for me so I kept after him as we cleaned and repaired the pack outfits for next season. "How does a mule think, Gus?" I asked.

"Just like you and me," he said. "He doesn't like to be uncomfortable and he's pretty suspicious. Figures something might get after him along the trail. Only goes out there in the first place cause I say so. Wouldn't do it without me."

"Ya got these mules to trust you? Is that it? Is that the whole thing?"

"The whole thing is safety and survival. The mule's looking for it, and you're looking for it. Don't forget that. Once the mule thinks you're smart enough to keep him safe he looks to go along with ya. He watches yer every twitch, every nod, every sigh and reads yer mind by computing every move ya make. He's a sort of genius from that point-of-view. I just make what I want obvious to my mules and they figure out what we're up to all by themselves. Heck, once they see me take one trail over another, they know exactly where I'm going and would lead me there if I let them."

I learned that it was one thing to hear Gus describe his state of mind and quite another to adopt it. For many months after that summer in Yosemite I struggled with my horses and mules trying to *break* them and *train* them with little success. I just couldn't become Gus and my horses knew it.

Five years passed before I saw Gus again. While passing through I stopped off at Red's Meadow Pack Station on the chance Gus might be in from the backcountry and I could visit with him.

"Well, I think you might have it backwards," he said after I talked at him for two hours in front of the fire in his cabin. "Ya see, it's not what you know and are trying to teach your horses. It's about you learning to respect what they know. If you let them, they'll teach

you to compute their motives in the same way they already compute yours. Then... they'll have *you* trained."