



## Mule Jumping Has Origins In Coon Hunting - By Terry Liddell

Although most of the residents of Pea Ridge are quite familiar with mule jumping, many other northwest Arkansas residents may still be in the dark concerning the unique sport.

According to Leah Patton, office manager for the American Donkey and Mule Society in Denton, Texas, the politically correct name for the sport is "Coon Hunter's Mule Jump," due to its historical connection with raccoon hunters.

"Raccoon hunters are believed to have invented the sport years ago when they rode their mules on nighttime hunts," explained Patton, who is also the editor of "The Brayer" magazine.

"They (raccoon hunters) trained their mules to jump fences when they were chasing after raccoons because it was a much simpler solution than having to ride up and down the fence line looking for a gate"

The raccoon hunters would dismount and throw a blanket over the fence in order to make it more visible to the mule. The hunter would then climb over the fence and with the lead rope in hand, encourage his mount to vault over and join him.

"Mules are special in their ability to jump an obstacle from a stand still position," Patton said. "A horse can't do it. A mule has unique muscular characteristics that it inherits from its donkey blood line that enables it to basically perform a standing high jump"

Unlike a horse, a mule won't normally jump an object over which it can't see. Yet some mules have been trained to jump as high as 72 inches, a record set at Pea Ridge several years ago.

Mule jumping competitions and expeditions are much more popular than most people would think. The sport is widespread throughout the Southern United States and California. According to Patton, there are usually no less than 10 events scheduled across the country every weekend, year round.

The events usually attempt to preserve the sport's historical past. During competitions, trainers are required to saddle their mules. In an expedition, a saddle does not have to be used.

The actual leap of faith works like this -- mules must come to a complete stop for one second before attempting a jump, standing in a box that is either 10 feet by 12 feet or 10 feet by 10 feet, depending on the size of the mule.

A trainer is not allowed to touch the mule in any way. Instead, he or she must coax the animal over the bar with the use of voice commands only. During competition, each mule is allowed two attempts at a particular height. When considering the stubborn nature of a mule, the task of achieving a successful jump is actually quite remarkable.