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Donkeys and Mules Are the Stars of This Show

By ANNA HANKS

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This weekend's 17th annual Donkey and Mule Show at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo features some of the most unusual events in equine competition.

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Coon Hunters Jumping is one. Beginning from a dead stop, a mule or a donkey tries to jump over a bar 10 feet away. The bar is raised four inches at a time, and the last animal clearing the bar wins.

Another unusual event is Donkey Snigging, in which a donkey must drag an eight-foot log between several sets of cones around an obstacle course. "It represents the working donkey and mule culture," said Kathryn Bradley, one of the founders of the show in Houston.

The Championship Mule Pull, in which mules can pull twice their weight, is a sellout every year. Participants, many dressed in silk hats and overalls, are allowed to whistle, yell and jump up and down to encourage their teams. This year, the pull has a \$10,000 purse.

Most of the events at the show are far less unusual, taking a page from the horse show or the rodeo: riding events using English or Western saddle; barrel racing around a cloverleaf pattern of barrels; and calf-roping. On Sunday, the show has many donkey and mule driving competitions in which animals, alone and in teams, pull either carts (two wheels) or buggies (four wheels).

Of the more than 250 American donkey and mule shows each year, the Houston show is one of the biggest, along with shows in Bishop, Calif.; Columbia, Mo.; and Shelbyville, Tenn.

"Houston is the premier mule show in the United States," said Dianne Smith, who has worked with mules and donkeys for 25 years. "There may be more entries at the other shows, but not more quality," Smith and her husband, Bob, operate Monogram Farms, a mule breeding and training center in Smithville, Tex.

Donkeys and mules, the sterile cross between a donkey and a horse, are the neglected second-class citizens of the equine world. But donkey aficionados praise the animal's sure-footedness, hardiness and instinct for self-preservation. And mule fanciers say more people are discovering the abilities of mules.

"Some mules are smoother than the horses I have," said Kallee McClinton, 16, who has been showing mules since she was 9. She is one of eight Central Texas students, from ages 2 to 16, competing in Houston from Monogram Farms.

While many Monogram Farms competitors are under 18, junior show participants are rare. Bradley estimates that 35 of the 400 entrants at the Houston show will be under 18. Most junior competitors are female, while most adult competitors are male.

Mule breeding is becoming an art. Previously, any old mare and donkey would do to produce a work animal. The goal now is to develop a mule with the larger size and speed of a horse and the calm disposition and surefootedness of a donkey. A top show mule costs about \$20,000.

Bob Smith is currently breeding retired racing mares to a prize 3-year-old jack, or male

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donkey. With straight legs, round joints, a broad chest and an uncommon temperament that lends itself to training, the 3-year-old is a mule jack, meaning he is bred only with mares to produce mules. If a mule jack is bred with a female donkey, it is hard to persuade him to continue mating with mares.

The show, strictly for amateurs, is held in the 6,000-seat Reliant Arena, while the Houston Rodeo, with professional riders and professional musical acts, is held in the Astrodome, which can accommodate 57,000 fans.

One of the most popular awards at the show is the Ear of the Year, a contest to honor the donkey and the mule with the longest side-to-side wingspan. "I discovered that if your personality will draw you to donkeys and mules, you may be a little bit different yourself," Bradley said.

The Houston show has come a long way since the first competition in 1984. Back then, the donkey and mule brigade was allowed to use the show facilities from 7 p.m. Friday to 7 a.m. Saturday. Occasionally, the judge had to be prodded awake.

But with center stage theirs in prime time this weekend in the Reliant Arena, there are those in the donkey and mule world who think they are just a whisker from the Astrodome.

"The Donkey and Mule show will be the in thing in the next few years," Dianne Smith said.

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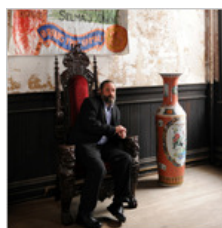
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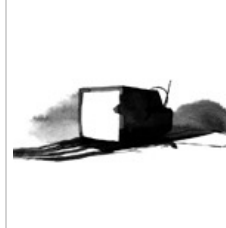
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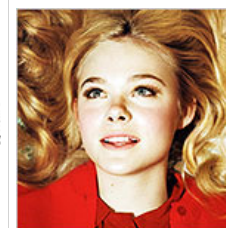
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