

A One-Man Diamond Hitch

With Suggestions on Saddling and Loading a Pack Animal

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Judging by Mr. Brower's article "Far from the Madding Mules" in the last magazine number of the Sierra Club Bulletin, our High Sierra mules add anything but pleasure to a high mountain trip. But to the many of us who know at least a few mules well, the behavior of Mr. Brower's "Jiggs" was no cause for condemnation of his species.

It is true that mules are often slow, ornery, mean, lazy, dirty, noisy, bothersome, peripatetic, and stubborn. And yet they are comical, friendly, dependable, smart, uncomplaining, hard working, sure footed, easy keeping, and long lived. To the traditional "salt grass tourist" of our California High Sierra, pack mules are not only indispensable for transportation purposes, but their mere presence adds greatly to the enjoyment of a trip. Few "packtrippers" fail to remember at least some of the mules that pack them in, and they ask for the same ones year after year.

Perhaps my views are narrow because I'm not a knapsacker. Like most of my fellow packers, "I ain't lost nothin' on any o' them high peaks." But so far, at least, I'll stick to my mules.

Pardon the sentimentality. I was asked to describe a diamond hitch, so here goes:

There are almost as many different ways of throwing a diamond as there are packers who throw them, but the one pictured in photograph and sketch on these pages is the most satisfactory in my experience. It can be thrown faster than any good hitch I know; it is easily thrown by one man; and it holds as well or better than any. This particular hitch is used almost exclusively by the packers of the Kaweah River region on the west slope of the Sierra.

As indicated in the sketches, the hitch can be summarized in six moves. More than six photographs are shown, however, so as to give as good an idea as possible of the details of the operation.

I. *Saddling*. In saddling a pack mule, there are three things to remember: First, the saddle and breeching must fit; second, the blankets must be *clean*, and properly placed on the mule's back; third, the saddle must be made to sit correctly.

As to fit, this should be done by the professional packer. It is his mule, so be sure and ask him if the outfit fits correctly before you leave his camp. As to blankets, they should be cleaned if they are not already so. (Tie them in a swift stream and tramp on them for an hour or so, then rinse and dry them on a taut pack rope.) Turning a fresh clean blanket side to the mule every traveling day is a good idea.

In placing the saddle, most "salt grassers" get it correctly front to back, but few give it the slight off-side tilt necessary to make it set evenly after the near-side cinches have been pulled taut.¹ After placing the saddle over the blankets and threading the latigoes through cinches and rigging, shove the sawbuck over about two inches out of plumb to the off-side. Then, when friend mule is given the final cinch-up (it is a good idea to cinch only medium-tight at first, and complete the job a few minutes later), the saddle will be drawn back into line. Before

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loading, always check up to see if the saddle sits square, and see that your judgment is not influenced by a mule who is standing unevenly, due either to uneven terrain, or "just plain orneriness," as some people would opine.

2. *Loading.* Having saddled the animal, he should be loaded and started on his way as soon as possible. If loads are figured out scientifically in advance, this is an easy matter. If not, it causes much delay.

The only special thing to remember in loading a mule is always to load the off-side kyack first.² This is to facilitate unpacking at the end of the day, when the hitch is thrown off from the near side and the near-side kyack is removed without having to go around the mule to take off the off-side kyack first. (Which would be necessary if the off-side kyack were loaded last, because its ears would overlap and prevent the prior removal of the near-side kyack.)³

Other than this, common sense is the only requirement. The less topheavy a pack, the better it rides; the more convenient the articles of the top pack, the better for the mule. Some people take anything to the mountains from a rubber bathtub to an eight-foot casting pole or a suitcase. In placing such unhandy articles on a mule's pack, care must be taken to see that they balance correctly and will ride well under the hitch. In specially difficult cases, different hitches are often used, but it would be superfluous to describe them here because they are the exception rather than the rule.

In general, the most important thing is to have evenly balanced kyacks, and not too heavy. Any time the total load goes over 175 pounds, the danger sign is up as far as the mule's back is concerned. The kyacks or slings should balance evenly at not over 70 pounds apiece and the top pack should be limited to an additional 35 pounds of bedding, chairs, furniture, etc. In practice, of course, animals are often loaded a great deal heavier. "Bogus," one of my favorite mules, packed a 360-pound stove up to Cahoon lookout in Sequoia National Park. In the early days, a mule packed a 600-pound piece of machinery in to Mineral King But these cases are exceptions. No packer likes to load his mules heavily. In Wyoming, where they pack horses instead of mules, and the country is not as rough, they rarely put over 150 pounds on an animal.

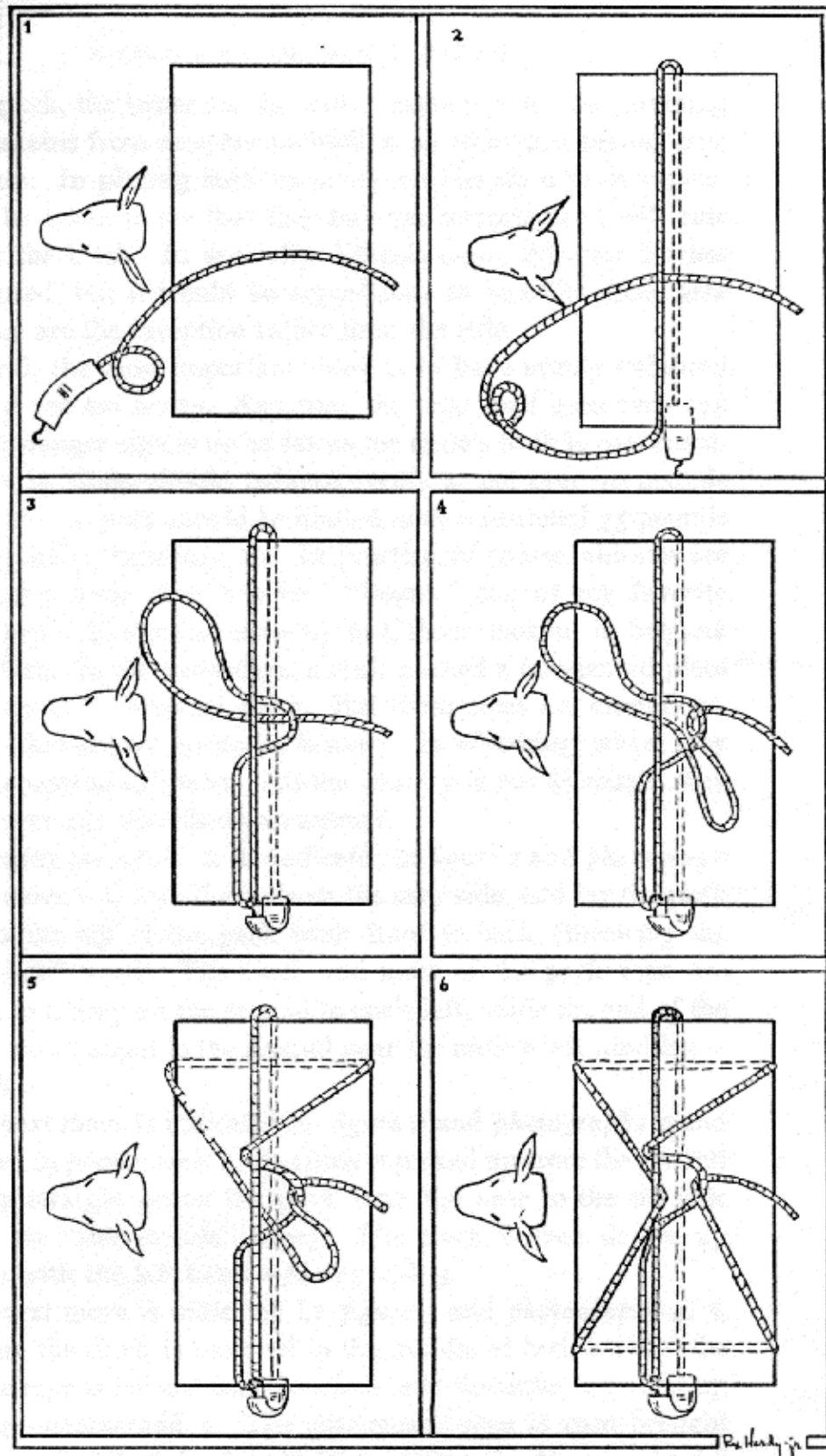
3. *Throwing the hitch.* I. As indicated in *figure 1* and *photograph 1*, the first move is to face the mule on the near side, and lay the pack rope across the top of the pack from front to back (throwing the "front-to-back" rope). The cinch and most of the pack rope are simply left in a heap on the ground to one's left, while the end of the rope hangs down about to the ground near the mule's left hind leg—*photograph 2*.

2. The next move is indicated by *figure 2* and *photographs 2* and *3*. As shown in *photograph 2* the cinch is picked up from the ground and thrown straight across the pack from the near to the off side (throwing the "side-to-side" rope). The cinch is then drawn up underneath with the left hand—*photograph 3*

3. The next move is indicated by *figure 3* and *photographs 4, 5, and 6*. Here the cinch is centered in the middle of both kyacks, the side-to-side rope is hooked into the cinch, and the latter is pulled up fairly snug—*photograph 4*. The side-to-side rope is then brought up and doubled to the left of itself till it reaches the "front-to-back" rope, where it is tucked under itself—*photographs 5 and 6*.

4. The fourth move—*figure 4* and *photographs 7 and 8*—consists of pulling the "front-to-back" rope up from under the loop formed by the double "side-to-side" rope. This is perhaps the hardest step to master. Remember to pull the underlying "front-to-back" rope up, through, and towards you as you face the mule's near side.

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Diagrams Explanatory of the One-Man Diamond Hitch
Sketches by Rex Hardy

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5. Fifth—*figure 5* and *photograph 9* -- the off-side part of the loop formed in step 4 is passed around the off-side kyack.

6. Finally—*figure 6* and *photographs 10, 11, and 12* -- the offside loop is held taut while going under the mule's neck in order to place and tighten the near side loop—*photograph 10*.

Having "snugged up" the hitch all around, a final hearty heave is given in the manner pictured in photograph 12, featuring the packer's leg and arms as lever, and the mule's posterior as fulcrum.⁴

While it is very hard to describe a hitch clearly, I hope this attempt will prove helpful to those who are interested in doing their own packing. I have used the hitch to pack not only the regular tourist stuff, but eight-foot lumber, window frames, glass, dynamite, crates of cantaloupes, and what not. Seldom has it proved unsatisfactory, and I hope you like it.

As a so-called professional packer, I feel somewhat traitorous to my profession in broadcasting all this valuable (?) information. However, those who know will readily agree with me that throwing the hitch is by far the smallest part of the packer's work, so I think my fellow packers will forgive me.

¹ The "near-side" is the mule's left, the "off-side" the mule's right side. All operations are performed as much as possible on the "near-side."

² "Kyacks" are the stiff bags generally made of heavy leather-reinforced canvas which are hung on each side of the pack animal, and in which the main part of the load is carried.

³ The "ears" of a kyack are two leather loops riveted to the kyack, which are used to hang it onto the "sawbuck" tree of the pack saddle.

⁴ Not to be recommended for short people packing tall mules, or uninitiated people packing wild mules.

Excerpt taken from the *Sierra Club Bulletin* of 1936