

Horse, mule, tractor have inspired much debate

By JERRY WEBB
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NEWARK, Del. — One of the surest ways to start an argument among today's farm boys is to issue a challenging statement about which farm tractor is best. They'll debate the merits of the big green ones versus the big red ones until the sun goes down. Each being totally sure that the brand of tractor his father prefers is by far the best.

Such debates have gone on as long as there have been tractors. I can remember arguing the power and ease of handling of a Farmall compared to the unique hand clutch and horizontal pistons of a John Deere. As farm boys, we were faithful to the tractors of the day without

benefit of the knowledge required to make a meaningful comparison.

When the first little Ford tractor came along with its cute little three point hitch, we rejected it without another thought. After seeing an inexperienced operator set his field cultivator so deep he couldn't pull it, we decided the concept would never work. Thus we, in our teenage wisdom, excused a concept that was ahead of its time. The three point hitch has been accepted—in fact adapted—by every major tractor manufacturer in the world. Meanwhile, the hand clutch and horizontal piston engines we defended so stoutly are museum items. Maybe that tells something

of what farm boys know about predicting the future.

We were able to foresee the rise of tractor power and the demise of horsepower. That happened during my youth and those of us who spent some time following a team of horses and then got to drive a tractor knew that horses were on the way out. But they weren't dead yet. And while the farmers of the future argued the merits of green and red tractors, the older generation was still trying to decide whether a horse was a better worker than a mule. Believe me, that was a hot topic in the Missouri Ozarks prior to World War II. It's an issue that to my knowledge was never really settled. For every good reason one

farmer had to work mules, another had even better reasons in favor of horses.

Curt Williams was perhaps the only farmer in our neighborhood in a position to decide such an important question. You see, he kept both horses and mules and was known to work them side by side. Some of the oddest-looking hitches ever seen were put together by old Curt each Spring.

He was a mule trader by profession—that is he bought and sold mules and some horses for a living. His farming was done to provide feed for the mules and to give them some work. So on the first warm day of March when the ground was finally dry enough to plow, Curt

could be found breaking young mules to work.

His favorite technique was to put one wild, unbroken mule between two large, predictable draft horses. The three of them would then be hitched to a sulky plow.

It was a high risk business to say the least—there's nothing wilder than a three-year-old mule that has never even seen a set of harness. So the mule would be cross-tied in the barn hallway and the harness lowered gently in place from a large hole in the loft floor. Then, if all went well it would be fastened in place through some careful maneuvering. If all didn't go well, the mule would be virtually hog-tied and after much struggling

and cursing would be harnessed anyway.

Once secured between two big horses and anchored to a heavy plow, there wasn't much chance of a runaway. The mule would usually lunge forward and then lay back until he figured out the plan. By the end of the day he'd be doing his share. With luck Curt could get all of his mules broken to harness and his ground tilled at the same time. Then he would start pairing up the good ones—matching them as to size, color, characteristics and work habits, and begin looking for buyers.

While most farmers in that neighborhood clung steadfastly to the merits of

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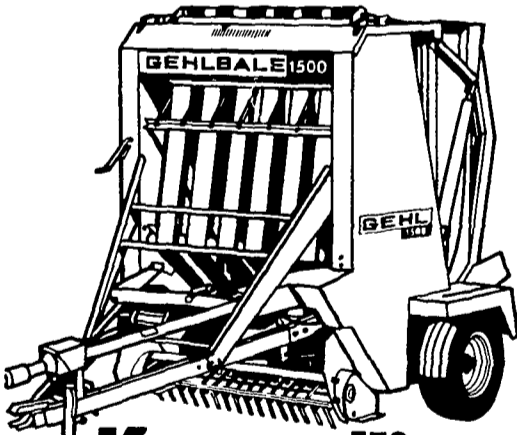
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