

# Blazin' Blue



## Champion of Champions

by Betty Robinson  
London, AR

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*Photos submitted by families Blazin' Blue has owned*

When I first started asking questions about Blazin' Blue I made a startling discovery. This little guy is part yak, part Angora goat, part donkey, all mule, more than a little tough, smarter than your average mule in the woods, and every bit a champion. Blue has been a member of only four families in his 26 years of toting kids around, which is the major statement for a 46" john mule.

I asked Loyd Hawley of Hawleywoods Mule Farm, Prairie Grove, AR why, when he had the choice of all the mules in the country, did he pick Blue?

"Well, first of all, Blue was the right size and the right age, which was the same age as my daughter, Rachel, nine. Brad Asher of Kansas, OK was already showing the mule and winning fairly consistently. Brad showed Blue almost every weekend, while his 250-pound father rode him coon hunting every night." (Like I said, Blue is tough.)

Loyd said, "I tried to buy him every weekend for three or four months, but Brad's Grandfather always said no. Finally, one morning Asher called and said the mule was for sale. I didn't hesitate. We lived about an hour and a half from their place, two hours later Blue was in my trailer on the way back to Arkansas. I've never regretted buying that little mule."

"Blue was not an easy mule to train," Loyd said. "He hates being ridden by adults. When Blue needed a tune up before a new show season or for some special event, I would get on him and run all the patterns. Without fail, Blue would buck between every barrel. Loyd said he thinks Blue has his own theory about 'pushy' adults. Blue believes big guys should ride taller mules. Blue telegraphs his message by tapping your boot heel with his hind hoof, when he feels like you have been on him too long, or when he is getting tired. He doesn't kick. It's just a tap, which sort of says, "I've enjoyed enough of this. Are you ready to get off now?"

"In 1986, Rachel competed on Blue in about seven states," Loyd said. "She won almost everywhere she went. That fall she won High Pont Novice Youth at the National ADMS show in Dallas, TX. At this same show, Rachel competed in the open speed events and placed top five in every class. This didn't make a little 11-year old girl a big favorite among open exhibitors. During the time Rachel competed on Blue she was a tough, consistent, competitor and a crowd pleaser. The crowd especially enjoyed Rachel's habit of explaining each obstacle to Blue as they worked their way through the trail class."

Blue went where Rachel went, which included trail rides and camping trips to Colorado. Loyd said sometimes the grasses in the meadows were taller than the pair of them. At deep creek crossings, Rachel would ride behind Loyd or her brother, Vince,

(starting top row, left to right) CORI BASHAM (1996), GREG ALLEN (1992), JOHN HIGGINS, JR. (1989), AND RACHEL, SARAH AND LOYD HAWLEY (1986) all riding Blazin' Blue

Blue in 2002



while Blazin' Blue struck out on his own for the swim to the other side. "Even though I might split the pair for a creek crossing," Loyd said, "Rachel and Blue had a tight bond. He would do things for her he wouldn't do for anyone else and deciding to sell him was no easy decision."

"I remember at the Boy's Town Mule Show in St. James, MO. Rachel and I watched a little boy compete on a small mule that wasn't very cooperative. The boy tried hard, but the mule just wouldn't do what he wanted. At the end of one particularly tough event you could see tears of frustration in the little boy's eyes. Rachel turned to me and whispered, "Daddy, when I get ready to sell Blue, I want that little boy to have him." That little boy just happened to be John Higgins, Jr. of Brashear, MO. and that is where Blue went when Rachel moved up to a taller mule.

John Higgins, Jr. living at Greentop, Mo., is 25-years old now (and just recently became the proud father of a daughter), but he still remembers Blue like riding him was yesterday. "I know I brag about Blue a lot," John said, "but I think he is the best kid's mule that has ever been in a show ring. Blue makes a perfect run every time. He just doesn't make mistakes."

"We bought Blue from Loyd in the winter of 1988," said John. Blue and I started our first show season in the spring of 1989 when I was 12. We made 13 shows that year and I won 12 High Points. Later that year, Blue was inducted into the ADMS Versatility Hall of Fame. I never will forget the lesson ole Blue taught me. Shortly after he made the Hall of Fame, we were down the road from the house taking photos for *The Brayer*. Of course, I really thought I was something. As I rode Blue back into the yard my dog ran out from under a bush, Blue shied and bucked me off right then and there. He has never bucked again since that I know of...I always thought that little mule figured I was getting a little too big for my britches and it was his job to bring me down a notch or two. And he did."

Greg Allen Higgins started riding Blue when he was six. At that time the family owned over 30 horses. Greg spent all his free time rounding up the horses and moving them back and forth across the pastures. Greg showed Blue in 4-H, rode him in parades and did about anything else he thought he could get Blue to do.

John's nephew, Zachary Sullivan, rode Blue at a few shows in 1992; he was only three at the time. When all the boys moved up to larger mules, Blue was semi-retired. He became a special volunteer for Easter pageants and Christmas plays.

"Blue has been to a dozen churches in Kansas City," said John, "and he always went in style. Dad loaded him in the motor home and off we went."

John sold Blue to the Basham family of Pair-A-Dice Mules, Belle, MO, in 1996. "We agreed to meet at a Cracker Barrel restaurant in Columbia, MO. Loren, his 9-year-old daughter Cori and I were there." John said, "but Dad was bringing the mule...

and he was late." When he finally did pull up, John Sr. jumped out of the van, walked over to Cori and asked, "Hey, where's your mule? I thought you were to get a new mule today."

"Cori looked pretty unhappy about that time since Dad was not pulling a trailer," said John. "Cori said, 'I thought you were bringing my mule,' and she looked like she might be clouding up for tears."

"My dad said, 'Oh yeah! That's right, I forgot,' and he opened the back door of the van and there stood Blue."

"We all cried when the Basham's loaded Blue into their trailer to leave. It was like selling part of the family." John said. "I justified selling him because his sale paid for my trip to the Nationals at Shelbyville, TN that year. To me, that was his way of teaching me more about showing and about mules. When I got Blue, I could have cared less if I ever rode again...he changed all that. And, because of him I have enjoyed riding and showing ever since. I now train horses and mules full time. To me, Blazin' Blue will always be more than a mule, he is a great teacher."

Up to this point, I've indicated Blue was a family mule, but we really haven't had a view from the female perspective, so I asked Loren's wife, Lenice what she thought about owning Blue.

"Loren traded my good (and her only) saddle and a bunch of cash for that little mule, but it was something none of us have ever regretted," she said. "I knew anytime we went out on the trail and one of the kids was riding Blue, they were safe. Blue always knew what to do and he never spooked and got a child in trouble."

"He has been perfect for our 10-year-old son, Cole in the show ring," Lenice said. "Cori has always loved showing, so she learned her patterns and knew what to do when she went in the ring. Cole is just the opposite...he doesn't really care. So learning the patterns is not a big deal to him. Once Cori started riding Sugar Gee, and Cole started competing on Blue I never had to worry again. Blue knew the patterns better than any of the kids. When he goes in the arena he checks the layout to see what event is up...then he runs the correct pattern, it's just like he does it on automatic pilot."

Cori Basham, now 15, said, "I'm probably proudest of the



**COLE BASHAM and Blue on a trail ride in 2000**

Iowa State High Point Youth award I won with Blue in 1996. I was showing against an older group of kids and that made me feel great. Blue was 20 years old that year.

Loren said it took him a while to switch Cori over to a taller mule because she was so successful with Blue. "I would haul two or three other mules, but I always had to take Blue too, as a backup."

Even though Cori was riding him in the ring, Cole was claiming Blue for trail rides. As Loren explained to me, Cole and Blue have a neat trick they do while they are out riding trail. Cole carries the top of an old boot that had been stitched shut at the bottom, whenever he spots a turtle, he leans down, picks it up and puts it in his turtle boot, upside down. Cole collects turtles for most of the ride and then turns them loose when he gets home. Blue has become a great turtle hunter and never seems to mind Cole hanging from the saddle to pick them up."

"I never thought I would pay so much money for a 19-year-old, 46" mule, but he was worth every cent," Loren said. Cole wouldn't still be riding if it weren't for Blue."

When you talk to anyone who knows Blue, they will swear he is the best mule ever. The only fault I could turn up was that Blue hates to be body clipped. Yet, he grows a monster winter coat that won't shed until August without the help of clippers. Loyd Hawley said Blue was probably part yak, which as you know is a long-haired wild ox from Tibet. John Higgins and Loren Basham believed Blue was three quarters Angora goat. But to the kids that love him, Blazin' Blue is a champion and a friend. I didn't try to count the trophies and ribbons Blue has won...easier to weigh them. I'm sure his kids have carried home a ton or more over Blue's long career. But I think John Higgins Jr. stated it best when he said, "it's not what Blue helped me win that I think about so much, it's what he taught me."

I asked Cole if he was going to sell Blue when he was ready for a taller mule. It didn't take one bit of hesitation, the answer came back quick. "NOPE!" I asked a couple more questions, but didn't get much further explanation; Cole is a man of few words. "I guess I'll just keep him till he dies," he said. This tribute was meant to be ready for Blazin' Blue's Quarter-Century Birthday, but the best laid plans of mule rides and writers sometimes go astray. Happy 26th Birthday Blazin' Blue!

## 2012 Update

by Cori Basham

After this article came out in 2002, Blue continued to teach children more about riding than they could ever learn from an instructor. Cole continued to ride Blue, and eventually moved up into the show ring. Still not great at memorizing patterns, I remember Cole trying to steer Blue around the wrong side of the second barrel, and Blue taking the bit in his mouth and plowing on to make the correct turn. This was actually a common occurrence. Cole is 20 now, and after numerous National Championships in gymkhana classes, we still somewhat jokingly ask him if he has the pattern memorized. I do think that Cole's love of speed stems from those moments riding Blue around the barrels and poles and racing him across hay fields. If it hadn't been so much fun, he might have never come to love this sport. This would have altered my childhood in so many ways... hauling and showing mules as a child shaped the values I have now as an adult, and I believe the same is for my brother. I couldn't imagine not showing as a family, and without Blue, I'm not sure if Cole would have joined us on all those trips to shows across the country.

After Cole, we loaned Blue to Kat Shauger of Junction City, Ohio for a while. "He gave us so many laughs, so many safe trips in the show ring and down the trail," said Candace Shauger, Kat's mother. "He was his own man. I have never met an animal of any kind that had such a clear concept of who he was and how the world fit into his plan. He had such a developed personality, and you either got along with the program or you got out of the way. Yes, he did have a shopping list of dislikes and quirks that had to be navigated but he made up for those aspects of his personality by being honest, dependable and bolder than mules ten times his size. He was a giant in all the right ways, and we were blessed to have gotten to share some of his life with him."

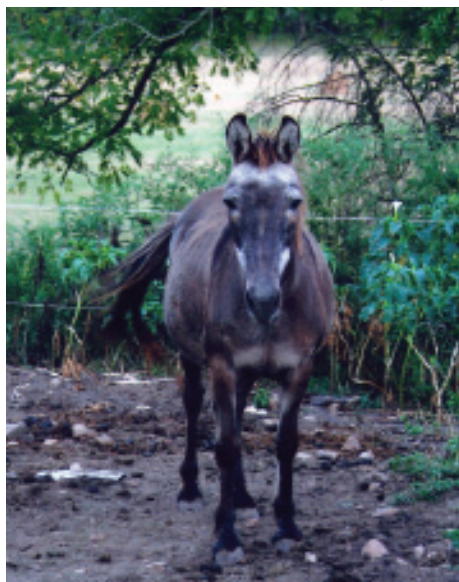
When Kat moved up to a bigger mount, it was time for Blue to come back to Missouri. Around 2003, when I was 16, both the Shuager's and I were going to a show in West Virginia, so they brought Blue along, and I was to haul him back. We had some downtime, and my friend was going for a ride in the



**MYCKENA SURBER, at age 5, at the All-Star Mule and Donkey Show in Columbia, Mo.**

warm up pen. I'm not very tall (I get confused for a student when I go to my daughter's elementary school...) so I thought I would just hop on Blue and go along. I might not be tall, but Blue had figured out that I was, in fact, now an adult an. He unceremoniously dumped my adult sized butt the second I got it planted up there bareback. Lesson learned: no more joy rides for me on ol' Blue.

Once settled back in Missouri, Blue taught my then five-year-old cousin, Myckena Surber, a little about mules. She is a "city girl" if I have ever seen one, but when she came out to the farm to brush, tack, and ride Blue, she turned as country as they come. She even showed him at the All-Star Mule and Donkey Show in Columbia, Mo. I remember taking her out to do a walk-trot barrel pattern, and giving Blue a little slap on the butt to head him off in the right direction. Apparently he didn't



**Blazin' Blue at age 35**

appreciate that, because he went ahead and took a few strides at a full run. Myckena was fine, she gathered up her reins and they finished the pattern at a perfectly controlled jog, but I think this was Blue's way of telling me, "Don't boss me around, I know what I'm doing."

When Myckena started kindergarten, the first thing she took for show and tell was the ribbon she won at the All-Star Show. In an article by Sue in the October 2004

issue of *Mules and More*, Sue said, "Myckena told Aunt Lenice that she and Blue would be the prettiest ones at the show. Myckena also believes that Blue is a fashion accessory...she spent several hours painting his 'toenails.' Blue took it all in stride. It's not every john mule who gets to have his toenails painted. Blue seems to take on each new child with pride and always ready to teach another youngster about the 'wonderful world of mules'."

After Myckena, Blue would make the occasional appearance to play Mary's donkey in the living nativity scene at my grandmother's church, or to take someone's little one on a Sunday morning trail ride, but life was pretty stress-free from then out.

When my daughter Camri was about two, she took a liking to Blue. We lived at my parents when I wasn't at college two hours away, and Blue had a permanent position in the lot outside my parents front door. I remember going into Blue's stall with Camri, and lifting her up to sit on him. Blue politely backed to the corner, as if to say, "Oh, no, not another one." Camri grew a little and rode Blue on many trail rides, and Blue seemed to enjoy the time he spent with her. She would spend hours brushing and bathing him, and as previously mentioned, he had quite the coat that needed heavy maintenance. I think he decided the time spent on the trail was a fair trade for all the



**CAMRI JONES, at age 3, and her grandpa LOREN BASHAM**

extra attention she lavished on him.

Camri switched to a different mule to ride the summer before she started kindergarten, and this past summer she rode another of my brother's old mules, Shedaisy, so Blue hasn't had to pack any little ones around the past few years. He spent his time in what we called "the Senior Citizen's Pen," with Shedaisy, and my grandmother's mule Star while she wintered in Arizona. He had the sight and hearing problems associated with old age, but would still nicker every morning for his grain.

My cousin Callen, who is currently four, comes out to help my dad do the chores every Monday and Thursday evening. Callen always had to be the one to let Blue out of the lot and feed him his evening grain. Callen, like all those other children before him, was drawn to Blue. Though he wasn't the most "cuddle-able," he had a way of teaching kids respect for animals, which is incredible important. He was just so interesting. Kids wanted to learn more about him, and if they were respectful and followed his rules, they were allowed to.

The week of Thanksgiving (2011), Blue passed away. He was 35 years old. I know we are so lucky to have spent 15 years with this little mule, but learning that he was gone was incredibly emotional. It was like a little part of my childhood was gone. I know it's still there, but that physical part that I could reach out and touch and brush was gone. There are so many memories interlaced with him, from winning high points to lessons learned the hard way. It sounds cliché, but I could fill this issue of the magazine with stories about Blue.

We are so thankful to the Higgin's family for Blue. Their generosity taught two little kids a lot about riding, competition, and life. Johnny Higgins, Jr., had a the following to say about Blue, and I think he said it perfectly: "Blue provided me with some of my favorite childhood memories. In 1989, I showed Blue at 13 shows and won 12 high points. That's not bad for a little kid that would not even ride the year before. My dad always said Blue was one of the cheapest mules he ever bought but he sure did cause him to spend a lot of money down the road, as he had to keep finding faster mules after that. None were anymore consistent though. Blue will forever be missed and remembered here at our house. Rest in peace, old buddy."