

PORTRAIT OF THE WEST



ZACK TOBERER

WORDS BY MELINDA FLEMING. PHOTO BY MICHELE TOBERER.

When Zachary Toberer was just a toddler, his parents, Mike and Michele, would bring his little stuffed rocking horse JoJo to mule-packing competitions. Zack would spend hours on end packing anything he could find in the little pack bags his grandma made for him. Always starting on one knee, he would wait for the yell: “Timers ready, packers ready. GO!”

For his third birthday, he received a little pony mule named Lulu. At five, Zack competed in youth packing in Oakdale, Calif. At six, he took home third place in the Diamond Hitch at Bishop Mule Days.

His focus then turned to the 2006 Bishop contest. He wanted to enter all the packing classes, so he could have a chance at winning the World Champion Youth Packer award. He was six or seven years younger than the others he would be competing against.

Zack’s team included Sadie and Lulu (shown in photo with Zack and three-year-old brother Jake, who calls himself “a packer kid”). By the end of the week, Zack was named Reserve World

Champion Youth Packer. His parents were both surprised and proud, saying that Zack stayed “remarkably calm and focused.”

Since Bishop, Zack has been accruing more points at American Mule Association-sanctioned shows so that he can compete for the Youth Packer division high-point award. He’s placed first in most of his competitions. Mike, Zack’s dad, is a professional packer for Aspen Meadows Pack Station. He holds various World Champion Packer titles. Mike and Michele own and operate a guided trail-riding business, Copper Valley Trail Company in Copperopolis, Calif. Horses and mules are a huge part of their family, in business and in play. They believe it is important for Zack to have respect for the wilderness, and for the horses and mules.

“We’re real happy to see that our son has developed a love and passion for something that is quickly becoming a part of the past.” They hope someday Zack will be teaching their grandchildren the very same lessons. ■