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TRAINING AND RIDING TIPS FOR SADDLE DONKEYS

It's always best to follow the advice of professionals like Meredith Hodges when starting a donkey under saddle. However, the following tips may prove helpful after you're already riding your donkey. They're based on my experience after being involved in saddle breaking one Large Standard and two Mammoth donkeys and participating in a wide variety of shows, demonstrations, and trail rides. Although more experienced trainers may have other methods, these are a few solutions and observations that worked for me.

Once you begin riding, if your donkey outright refuses to do something, sharper spurs are never the answer. It's up to the rider to somehow trick the donkey into thinking the required movement is in his own best interest. Donkeys have a low tolerance for repetitious ring work, and these sessions should be limited to 20 minutes or so. If you're trying a certain movement – e.g., a small circle to the right – and your donkey rebels after a circle or two, insisting on one good circle before you quit may not be possible, unlike working a horse. You may have to give up on the circle and do a completely different movement just to show that you're still in charge. You might have to avoid the problem movement for days, weeks, or even months, but eventually your donkey will forget about resisting and you'll be able to go back to it.

For the first four or five years that I rode my Large Standard gelding, Spider, in our riding ring, he would try to veer off almost every time I circled past the hitching post where he was unsaddled, even though he was NEVER allowed to return to the post. There was no way I could straighten him out and continue in the direction I had been going, thanks to a donkey's limber neck. However, if I just reversed, he would change direction with the lightest pull on the reins and continue circling the other way. As long as I kept him moving, I was still the boss. When he finally gave up on this misbehaviour, he gave up completely and never regressed. At about the same time, he stopped trying to turn around and go home when I was out riding by myself.

Loping can sometimes be a problem. The best way to get your donkey used to loping is to follow behind another cantering equine. I found that trying to lope up a slight rise often worked better, probably because my seat felt more secure and I would use my aids more forcefully. Although this is something to avoid with horses, loping toward your home barn or corral is often an easier way to get a lope started. Donkeys sometimes like to run with their head down and to kick out with their back legs, making you think they're going to start bucking, although this is rarely the case.

Donkeys often run this way when out in pasture, but if you gently pull his head up each time, he'll eventually stop doing this.

It's harder to fine-tune a donkey than a horse or mule. Rollbacks, sidepassing, backing and similar movements aren't on a donkey's want-to-do list, although all animals should at least be schooled to back and move their hindquarters over (a turn on the forehand). Even the experts agree that not many donkeys are willing to neck rein, but they usually respond very well to voice and leg aids. Moving the hindquarters over is easy to teach, starting on the ground. If you pull your animal's head toward you while applying pressure to the side where your heel will press when mounted, he'll have no choice except to move if he wants to keep his balance. You may have to use an assistant to help you start backing and sidepassing, someone strong enough to actually push your donkey if he won't respond to the tap of a whip. Use different voice commands for each movement. Sidepassing over to a mailbox, a common trail course obstacle, or over a log will give your donkey some reason to want to move sideways, but be prepared for a wait of years before you accomplish a few sidepass steps. If you've ever tried giving a needle, you'll realize that a donkey's skin is thicker than a horse's, so don't feel guilty if you have to use spurs for all these exercises.

Donkeys are very quick to pick up on patterns. If you want to be able to lope several large circles for a donkey pleasure class or a games class, don't start letting your longears stop after six or eight good lope strides or else that may become all he's willing to do. If you want to be able to back through an "L" in a trail class, don't let your donkey always stop after four or five backing steps.

You may want to do some sharp turns ("sharpish" turns, in donkey terminology) if you're going to enter gymkhana or games classes. Most donkeys will definitely require spurs for this movement, and a voice command, such as a loud "Whisshht," noise at the start of a turn, can be a big help.

SAFETY CONCERNS

Even though donkeys have the reputation for being very sure-footed, some riders report stumbling, even to the knees, while loping. This usually happens to donkeys with large, heavy heads and smaller hooves, especially if they haven't been ridden too much. Building up strength in the hindquarters through stops and starts and hill climbing can help, as well as making sure you're not leaning forward while travelling at speed. To be on the safe side, lope only on level ground.

Unfortunately, finding a saddle or even a bridle to fit a larger donkey can be a long process of trial and error. Because of their lack of withers, a crupper or breeching is necessary. It's also a good idea to use a thin Tacky Too pad under your main saddle pad. These are made in a waffle pattern from a soft, rubbery material and really help a saddle stay in place. You can even make your own by sewing anti-slip carpet underlay to a thin felt pad.

I've had good luck using a snaffle bit with a fairly thin mouthpiece and very short shanks which swivel and also provide a mild gag action. Although it's often

said that donkeys will freeze rather than run when spooked, the larger donkeys know they can go fast enough to try running away from danger. I've had a number of bolting sessions, so I like a bit that gives me some control, which my current bit provides.

It's worthwhile to take extra time and care while saddling and mounting. Make sure your saddle is in exactly the right spot, and if possible have a helper hold the saddle in position while you're tightening the cinch so it isn't pulled toward you. Even if your donkey is short, you should use a mounting block because it's very easy for the saddle to slip on a round donkey back. A tool box with a handle from a hardware store is excellent for this and can also hold your brushes, hoof picks, etc. If you have a helper, have her apply weight to the stirrup on the off-side as you mount. By following these steps, in over 15 years of donkey riding, I've never had a saddle slip.

Training a donkey will take much longer than training a horse because of the fact that you can only do ring work for 20 minutes or so at a time, unless you want to have a sullen, unco-operative donkey. You may hit roadblocks now and then, but don't give up. Your donkey may surprise you and suddenly start doing what you want all on his own, if not this year then maybe next year. If you remember that donkey time is different than human time, you'll both be much happier.