

# Donkeys in Cattle Halter Breaking

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Preparations for the Sydney Royal Easter Show are well under way in the Hunter Valley and one of mankind's oldest friends and workhands – the donkey – is continuing its quiet and indispensable role in preparing stud beef cattle to lead with stately style in the show ring.

The intelligence, great strength and placid nature of the trained donkey has long been a useful aid to beef cattle studmasters in teaching bulls to lead. That usefulness has since been taken up on goat farms and on some thoroughbred bloodstock studs.

The donkeys – jacks (or ungelded males), or jennies (females) and geldings – are in steady demand on stud properties in the Hunter and elsewhere for their particular qualities in helping to educate showing bulls, to calm and quieten racing thoroughbreds and in minding flocks of breeding goats.

Beef cattle breeders in New Zealand use lone jacks to stand between aggressive bulls to prevent them fighting and help the bulls gain weight by keeping them placid before being sent to the saleyards. It is not a simple exercise. The donkeys are carefully selected to work either with beef cattle, thoroughbreds or goats according to their gender and individual temperaments. Correct choice of donkey and temperaments is of crucial significance.

Studmaster at the Pine Creek Angus Stud at "Glenalister", Stanhope, Mr. Greg Fuller, is a longtime practitioner in this field of animal handling. He has used the skills and intelligence of two gelded donkeys in the preparation of his pen of Stud Angus for the Royal Easter Show and values them in the same way as cattlemen and sheepmen regard intelligent working dogs.

Mr. Fuller is emphatic that a donkey must first be educated to undertake its work role with stud cattle to enable it to function effectively in teaching bulls how to lead quietly. "Donkeys are supremely intelligent in the animal world", Mr. Fuller said. They have immense strength for their size, are capable of thinking for themselves and have a calming and pacifying effect on cattle and horse. But, it's not a simple matter of going out to buy a donkey and thinking this will do the job of calming a bull or showing it how to lead. You have to teach the donkey so it can do its work effectively in the pen and in the paddock. If the bulls are taught to lead quietly in their home paddocks, they will lead with quiet style in the show ring, and it's essential for stud cattle to lead easily when they're being shown. The two donkeys here are real family pets. They get the best feed and the same regular attention as horse for worming, teeth and hooves. The donkeys are employed, they have work to do, and they know how to do it well.

In the initial training phase, a donkey is fitted with a broad leather collar and this in turn is attached to a halter headrope on the young bull while in the stall. (The donkey is always placed on the bull's nearside). The trained donkey will remain calm and confident while the young bull exhibits nervousness and uncertainty about the next move.

With the studmaster in charge, the donkey is then turned firmly to lead the bull around the pen before going to the paddock. From about this point onwards, the donkey is firmly in command of the situation – if the donkey walks, the bull walks; if the donkey stands still, they both stand still; if the donkey grazes, they both graze. Usually after about three days of being with the donkey, the young bull can be led by the studmaster or attendant.

Donkey breeder, Christine Berry, of Duns Creek confirmed that thoroughbred studmasters and goat breeders had also found donkeys to be of considerable help in calming nervous young bloodstock and looking after flocks of goats.

The donkeys are incredibly intelligent animals. Christine said. "We've seen them at the race track being used to pacify flighty young racehorses before going into the saddling paddock and some studmasters keep them on thoroughbred studs to calm the yearlings. Donkeys are also usefully at work with flocks of goats throughout the Hunter Valley and from the lower North Coast through to Cooranbong.

Jennies are doing good work with the goat flocks and they become a much-loved family pet. But it's essential to have the right donkey for the particular job – jacks usually work with bulls, but two geldings will work in harmony together; jennies are used to work with goats, and jennies and gelding can be used to work with thoroughbred horses.

There is a big responsibility in keeping donkeys. They need a high roughage diet with plenty of straw, and they have to be dewormed and de-loused regularly with the correct equine preparations. Their hooves and teeth have to be done regularly, and the visiting farrier usually does the donkeys as well as the horses.