

# Training Donkeys

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## Part I

Training your donkey is really not much different from training horses and mules, though there are differences in instinct and attitude that will determine your approach in given situations. The mechanics and techniques, however, remain the same.

The donkey foal needs to begin his life of training with imprinting. Imprinting is simply getting your donkey accustomed to your touch, your voice, your smell, the way you look, and the way you interact with him. These are all the things he learns from his mother that will determine the design of his character as he grows older. If he is to be a trainable and tractable individual, you and his mother must teach him to be accepting and willing from the day he is born. This also implies that you and the mother cannot be at odds. She needs to possess the traits you wish to instill in the foal. A well-trained mother will help to produce a well-trained foal. If your jennet is not easy to handle, then she needs this training as well, and should be started with imprinting and progress through the steps of training before the foal is born.

When imprinting the foal, think of the kind of attitude you want to cultivate in him. Do not come at him with the idea that he must accept you. This is a forceful and intrusive attitude and can foster resistance. Come at him with love, patience and kindness and these are the things he will learn. Give him respect and ask that he respect you and he will begin to learn about behavioral limitations. If he were in a herd, the adults would demand that he respect their space with well-placed discipline. You must learn to do the same without overdoing. If he bits, or kicks, a well-placed slap on the side of the mouth or rump, will do the trick. Rewarding his good behaviors consistently will reinforce repetition of what you desire from him and will foster understanding between you and him. This is the beginning of a long lasting bond of friendship.

Friendships would not be complete without a good balance of work and play. Teachers who make learning fun for children make it easier for the child to learn what he needs to and encourage a good attitude towards life in general that can carry them through the most trying of situations. The donkey is no different. If learning is fun and non-threatening, he will enjoy his time with you and you will discover his innate desire to please and to serve. The best teachers are those who realize that they too can learn from the child in this process. Each individual is different in their own way and it is important to recognize the difference in order to foster confidence and self assurance. The donkey will appreciate that you not only wish to teach him, but to learn from him as well. This will encourage his enthusiasm for learning and will assure that he learns well and

confidently. He will learn, right from the beginning, to want to follow you anywhere...cause it's the best place to be!

Don't get in a hurry with your donkey! Horses have a very quick response time as a rule, with minimal comprehension and memory retention; mules' response time is slightly slower than the horse, but their comprehension and memory retention is very keen. A donkey's response time is measurably slower (they appear to be in deep thought for what seems like an eternity to you or I), but their comprehension and memory retention is the keenest. When training each of these different equines, you need to learn to gauge your body language and expectations accordingly.

Whether your donkey is a young foal, an older animal, begin with imprinting and do the steps in sequence. Learn how to put on the halter properly, let him wear it for awhile, then take it off as he could get caught and injure himself. When he is not bothered by you putting on and taking off the halter, you can teach him to be tied. Put on the halter and tie him to a safe post. Come by to see him every ten, or fifteen minutes, untie him and ask him to "Come". If he does not take a step toward you, just retie him and leave. Come back in ten minutes and try again. When he takes a step toward you, reward him with a treat and lots of praise. Stroke him on the neck and shoulder, on the poll between the ears or scratch his chest or rump...whichever he finds most pleasing. Then try a few more steps. Don't ask for any more steps each day than he is willing to give. Save them for the next time and soon he will lead easily.

When he is leading easily, you can start taking walks around the farm and begin to introduce him to things he may find frightening. Lead him as close as he will go at your shoulder, then step toward the obstacle as close as the lead will allow and coax him to you. Offer a reward if necessary to entice him and be sure to reward him when he comes forward. When he is confident about investigating "things" with you, you can progress to an obstacle course.

At first try over logs, a bridge, tires, or other such obstacles. You may find your donkey reluctant to pick up his feet to negotiate an obstacle. He will probably try to go around it any way he can! Stand close to his head and hold him on a shorter lead and ask him to "Come". If he moves only one foot over a log, tire, or onto the bridge, stop, hold him there and give him a reward for his effort. Then ask for the next foot and if he is willing, let him walk off the obstacle, then reward him again. If he only moves one foot more...reward that, and proceed...slowly! We don't want him to just run through it. We want him to come when we say "Come" and to whoa when we say "Whoa". You are beginning to establish a verbal communication with your donkey, so keep it simple and consistent. Do all obstacles the same way.

Donkeys like to get crooked over obstacles. When he has learned to step through, or over an obstacle, but is not going straight, you can step directly in front of him, holding the halter on both sides and ask for straightness as he negotiates the obstacle.

Once he has learned to follow you over and around obstacles, he will be ready to begin the fundamentals of showmanship. Hold your lead in your left hand, keeping your right free and straight out in front of you. He should learn to lead with slack in the lead and to follow your shoulder. If he gets too close, you can use your right hand to push him back into position. Once you have begun showmanship training, ALWAYS lead him this way! Teach him to stand squarely on all fours every time he stops. We are not just teaching him to setup, but to carry his body in a balanced fashion so he will develop good posture and balance. When you want to teach him to trot on the lead, give the verbal command to "Trot" and slowly move your own legs into a very slow trot. If he is difficult, do not go to the whip. Try to find something toward which he wants to trot. Above all, don't get discouraged if he won't trot the first few times, just slow back down and do something he already knows, quit that day and try again the next. Eventually, he WILL get it!

Do the same exercises outlined in my video training series Tape #1 with your donkey as you would with your horse or mule, only be prepared to be much slower, calmer and supportive when he complies. Learn to reward even the slightest movement in the direction of compliance and allow him to progress at his own speed, not yours. Soon he will be wearing his halter and lead, standing tied quietly while you brush him and clean his feet, following you around and over obstacles, loading into a trailer and learning the beginning stages of showmanship. You will have a good, solid foundation on which to begin his formal training.

## **Part II**

If you have followed the steps outlined in Part I, your donkey should now be easy to catch and put on his halter and lead, stand quietly while being groomed, allow you pick up and clean his feet, follow you on the lead both over and around obstacles, load into a trailer and should follow your shoulder and your verbal commands. He should be happy and willing to be with you. It is also a good idea to let him watch other animals being worked if at all possible. Donkeys and mules really can learn the purpose of their training when they see other equines being worked. When they are watching, you can almost see them saying, "When is it going to be my turn?" They may actually be jealous of time spend with someone other than themselves. They see others tacked up in bridles and saddles and handling it well. When it is their turn to be saddled, or bridled, they are not as afraid as they might have been if they had never watched.

Another good idea is to lead them around the area in which you will be working and "inspect" it together. This allows them time to see if there is anything to which they may take exception before you start asking them to do anything. They will appreciate your consideration and be more willing to work for you. Don't think that just because they were there the day before that they will remember that it was alright. Begin each new day with a brief walk around the schooling area. After all, things do have a way of changing form day to day, even if it is as slight as a new plant, or a stick, or anything that wasn't there before. You may not remember things in such minute detail, but they definitely do!

This is one way you can minimize distraction and resistance during the actual training process.

Now we will begin his training in a round pen, or a small pen that has been modified such that the corners are rounded. Take him into the round pen with only his halter and lead. The first thing he will need to learn is to move away from pressure. Donkeys naturally move into pressure and are terrific crowders! They always seem to want to be as close to you as possible. I would suspect this is a defense tactic. Horses and mules have the natural instinct to flee when they think they are in danger. Donkeys are just the opposite and will freeze. If a donkey is attacked, he will move his body into the predator in hopes of knocking him to the ground where he can then use his hooves and teeth for defense. It is important that you teach him right from the beginning that you are not a predator and that he must not move into you. If he does knock you down, it could be very dangerous, especially if he is a jack!

Take your donkey into the middle of the pen and ask him to whoa. Reward him for whoa, and step toward his shoulder, pulling his head toward you and tap him on the flank and stifle and ask him to "Move over". Do not move your body unless you absolutely have to. We want him to keep his front end bent toward you and step under with his near hind leg and begin to execute a turn on the forehand. This means his front legs will stay stationary while the hind legs move around them and away from you. We want him to take only one step each time you tap him, so don't get carried away and tap him too hard. We are laying the foundation for hindquarter control and it is easier to let him move slowly, one step at a time in the beginning than it is to ask him to slow down from too many steps later! Watch his hind legs to make sure he crosses in front of the offside hind and stop and reward him after each tap and step. He will probably double in the barrel and move his front legs as well in the beginning. As long as he moves his hindquarters away from you, reward him and repeat. We can perfect his style as he learns what is expected. The first few times, only ask for one or two steps. When he has done it on the near side, repeat on the off side. Each session you can ask for a few more steps each direction.

When he is doing the turn on the forehand fairly easily (doesn't have to be perfect), you can begin to teach him to move his shoulders away from you with a turn on the haunches. This is a lot more difficult since donkeys love to "glue" their front feet to the ground! Take the side of his halter in your left hand, ask him for one step forward, push his face away from you as far as your arm will reach; then in the right hand with the end of the lead, tap him firmly on the shoulder and give the command, "Over." If his hindquarters come around, leave your left hand on the halter, take your right hand and use your body weight to shove him over one step, then stop, praise and reward him for moving his shoulders (even if you had to do all the work!!!). Try again, tapping him with the end of the lead. If he still won't move his shoulders, repeat as before. If he does not begin to try to move his shoulders after three tries, use a riding crop in your right hand and tap the shoulders sharply with that....only once! He will probably be so surprised that he will step over quickly. Be ready to reward him when he does. Then stop your lesson there. You can

ask for two steps each direction the next session. If you try to do any more, you will encounter resistance and he will be unwilling to perform, so be patient and be ready to take all the time HE needs.

Next, we will teach him to back. Hold the lead in your left hand, pull down and back, release, down and back, and release while you give the command, "Back". If he doesn't take a step back, use your right hand to push and release on the middle of his chest. It is most effective if you only use one finger and you may have to push hard before you release to get the desired response. When he takes one step back, no matter how small the step is, reward him with a treat, praise and stroke him on the shoulder, wither, or pull, or scratch his chest, whichever pleases him most. Do this no more than three times, then end your lesson. You can ask for a better response the next time.

Do these three exercises until he begins to move easily away when you ask. It may take three or four sessions. When he does comply easily, you can begin to teach him to lunge. Review these exercises every time you begin your training session. Then, release the lead from the halter. Hold the lunge whip in your left hand and use your right to point to the right (the direction you wish him to go), raise both your arms in unison and tell him to, "Walk-on". If he doesn't move away, lower both arms and raise them again, repeating the command. If he still won't move out, give the verbal command again and give him a firm tap on the gaskin, just below the tail and above the hock, then take a step back and wait for him to comply (donkeys need time to think). If he still won't move, repeat until he does. Once he does start moving away, follow behind and to the side at a distance that he will tolerate. This distance will vary with the individual.

You can determine the distance you need to keep from your donkey to get the desired response by watching his reaction to you. When you are too close, he will stop and tuck his tail. If you are too far away, he will slow his gait and begin to wander. When you are the correct distance, he will walk forward though in the beginning he will hesitate after every step or two. Practice moving into him and away to get him to move. Try to stay out of his space and keep him moving forward after the initial tap of the whip. If he stops and doesn't seem to want to move, strike the fence behind him once you have him on the rail. Try NOT to hit him if at all possible! Remember, donkeys freeze when they are confused, for frightened and you will get nowhere with him at that point. He needs to learn, but he also needs to enjoy what he is doing! Don't forget to reward him frequently, but be careful that you ask him to go further each time, or you may find yourself training him to only walk so many steps at a time! In the beginning, only ask him to go one direction and change directions each session. We will teach him to reverse and go forward later, once he has learned what we are asking.

When training your donkey, make sure you have plenty of time. You never want to get in a hurry. You want your time together to be a fun and enjoyable experience, each of you learning about the other. Most of us today are on fast-forward....remember, your donkey is on slo-mo!

### **Part III**

Each training session with your donkey, review all he has previously learned: always lead him to and from the work station in a showmanship manner, holding the lead in your left hand with your right arm extended forward; groom him and clean his feet; review the turn on the forehand and turn on the hindquarters in the roundpen; and send him forward to the rail in the roundpen at the walk. You may have discovered that you need to follow him more closely than you would a horse, or mule. Staying in the middle of the roundpen while you lunge him may not be practical to keep him moving. Just stay behind him and to the side while driving him forward with your lunge whip, touching him with it only when absolutely necessary. Match your steps with his; walk only as fast as HE chooses. If you get in a hurry, he will stop. Be sure to give the command to "whoa" each time you want him to stop and reward him.

Now that he is moving out well at the walk, we can teach him a reverse. As he is walking forward easily around the roundpen, turn away from him, completely around until you are in front of him. Step toward him, lay the whip ahead of him and give the command to "reverse." Be aware of his space. Do not rush at him, or he may turn improperly. We want him to turn into the rail and resume the opposite direction. Give him plenty of time to make the turn and ask him to "walk-on." If he has difficulty, take a few steps forward and with the whip, tap him gently on the shoulder to encourage him to turn. There is a purpose to turning away from him rather than just running ahead of him to turn him. By turning back the opposite way that he is travelling, you are establishing a new direction of travel as well as giving him time to see that there will be a change in his movement. Most donkeys learn this very quickly.

So far, your donkey has worked only in his halter. At this point is where mules and donkeys may differ. He has learned the walk and the reverse. Now he needs to learn the command to "trot." Some donkeys will take exception to this command if they do not see a purpose. It is at this point that I introduce the saddle, and/or driving harness (if he is too small to ride). I will also introduce him to the bridle at the same time. Let him see the harness, or saddle, then slowly put it on. Most donkeys will let you do this quite easily.

Once he is tacked up, send him to the rail of the roundpen against the walk. Then give the command to "trot" and move towards his hindquarters with the whip, shuffling your feet in the dirt to make some noise. If he trots at this point, do not strike him with the whip or he will stop. If he isn't trotting, you make strike him with the whip once again at the gaskin, above the hock. Then keep shuffling your feet and move forward as he does, maintaining the same distance between you. Move your arms up and down in big motions to encourage him forward. You can strike the fence behind him if needed. If you invade his space, he will stop. If he trots, even a few steps, stop him with the command to whoa and reward him for his compliance. Do this one more time to clarify that you DO want him to trot. Then end the lesson here. The next session he will be better. Each session he will offer more steps of trot. Each time ask him only to go as far as he is

comfortable as long as it is just a little farther than the time before. Each time, only ask him to trot twice in each direction. Donkeys don't appreciate too much repetition.

After his first lesson of trot, you can begin to integrate rein cues. The second trot lesson, you will review all that he has learned before up to the trot. Before you go to his trot lesson, you can attach your drivelines and ground drive him through the walk and reverse while on the lines. He should have no trouble with you at his rear since you have been lunging him from a close proximity from the beginning. Use your whip as you did for the turn on the haunches, at the shoulder, for his turns and at the gaskin to encourage him forward, but just touch him with it to remind him, don't strike him. We want his movements smooth and correct, not abrupt. Pull as lightly as you can with a squeeze/release on the lines to encourage the turns; make him move off more from your body language and the ship than you do with the lines. If he does well, stop, remove the lines and send him back to the rail for his trot work, twice each direction. This means twice with trotting steps, not twice around the pen! Then stop. Reward him and tell him school's out until the next time! Whether you come back tomorrow, or a week later, rest assured your donkey will be right where you left him in his training. They have an incredible memory!

The next lesson with your donkey, we will review all we did before and add turning through the middle of the pen, and turning both into the rail and away from the rail on the drivelines using your body language and whip cues as light as possible. Be clear with your verbal commands. For instance, tell him to walk-on, and repeat the words as he walks on. When you wish to turn, give the command to "whoa", then "Gee" for a right turn and "walk-on" to continue forward. When you wish to turn left, ask him to "whoa" then use the command "haw" for the left turn and "walk-on" to continue forward. Be very careful not to pull too hard as this will cause an over reaction. After his ground driving lesson, take off the drivelines and resume his lesson on lunging at the trot. Remember not to overdo any one stage of training. Two times seems to be the magic number. Then go on to the next step. In other words, lunge at the walk twice each way, ground drive straight twice each way, ground drive reverse twice each way, ground drive turns twice each way, and lunge at the trot twice each way. This will keep him from becoming bored and resistant.

When he ground drives fairly well at the walk, you can mount him if he is a large enough donkey to ride. Mount him from both sides and dismount a few times at first. When he seems calm, you can stay aboard. Take a treat in your hand and encourage him to bend his head and neck around to each side and take the treat from your hand. At the same time, give short, light tugs on the rein on that side. This will encourage lightness in the bridle later. Now we are ready to move with you aboard.

It is best to use an assistant at this stage. Have your assistant lead your donkey forward a few steps with you aboard. Both of you give the command to "walk-on" and squeeze with your legs once or twice then the assistant will lead him off. Have a riding crop in your

hand to use if he does not comply. This will take the place of the lunge whip. Use it only if you have to and only tap him once lightly for every command you give. After just a few steps, say "whoa" and reward him, even if it is just two steps! You can continue this lesson until he has completed one rotation of the roundpen each way. Then stop him with "whoa," and ask him to back a step or two. Give light pulls on both reins in a squeeze release fashion to start, then as he begins to move his feet backwards, alternate your pressure on the reins with the front foot that is forward. If he does not wish to back, your assistant can help with pressure to his chest as you did on the lead. Always end your riding, or ground driving lesson with a back and don't pull so hard on the reins that he resists by jutting his head out. Encourage him to stay light in the bridle! Then finish your lesson with lunging at the trot.

Donkeys learn a little differently than do mules, or horses. Their responses are much slower initially, but they learn completely, if you are clear with your intent. In halter training, your donkey learned to walk when you pull and move away when you apply pressure to a certain area of his body. In the roundpen, he learned to walk away from you and to walk and turn on the drivelines. He learned to walk with you on his back with someone leading him to help reinforce the cues you were giving him. You and your assistant must be in tune with each other so as not to confuse the donkey. He learns that the verbal command comes first, the legs come second when you ride, and the crop, or whip last. As he learns, he will begin to respond closer to the initial verbal command. Ground driving is the same with the reins in place of the legs. At first, you may need the voice, reins and whip, but as he learns, you will find him reacting sooner and sooner, until he is actually complying on the verbal command alone! Yes, donkeys and mules are that smart!

You may have been having trouble with the trot on the lead up to this point, but now he should be ready to do that as well. After your trotting lesson in the roundpen, leave the area in a showmanship fashion with the lead in your left hand and a treat in your extended right hand. Give the command to "trot" and slowly move into trot yourself. If he still does not wish to trot, have your assistant move up from behind just as you did when you were lunging him at the trot in the roundpen. He should comply. Take a few steps of trot, then ask him to "whoa," give him his treat and "walk-on." It won't take but a few lessons before he begins to understand the verbal commands. You just need to take it slowly enough and be consistent enough so that he has the opportunity to understand. Don't get in a hurry, or you will find yourself in a sea of confusion!