



A Guide To Training Your Donkey To Harness



photo David Matthews photography

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Training Your Donkey to Harness

Donkeys enjoy having something to do and working them in harness is an excellent way of exercising both their bodies and their minds. While they are not as fast as ponies they should still be encouraged to be forward going and free-moving. They have tremendous stamina and, when fit, can cover many kilometres at a steady pace.



photo David Matthews photography

It is recommended that your donkey is at least 4 years old before he is asked to do any serious harness work but his education can begin much earlier than this. To ensure he is completely 'bomb-proof' he should be exposed to as many new experiences as possible. Once he is happy to be tied up and led, take him out and about as much as you can. Lead him on the road, across the white and yellow lines, across ditches, on gravel, through puddles, any different surfaces you can find. A & P Shows or field days are great places for encountering new things – lead him all around the showgrounds if you can so that he can see other animals, noisy machinery, ferris wheels and the like. Let him stop and investigate if he needs to but don't force him if he becomes worried. Just walk on confidently, talking to him all the time. It is helpful to introduce the commands you intend to use for turning left and right and backing up at this stage as these will be necessary when you start long-reining.

A donkey's upbringing can be very varied and unless you have owned your animal from birth you may inherit problems which result from inadequate basic training so this stage may take some time. However, always remain firm and positive as he will learn to take his cue from you.

In his paddock or yard you can tie non-edible things such as tin cans to the fence so that he learns to ignore them. Get him used to a sack or cloth being placed on his back and rubbed over him as well as down his legs. Use your imagination but always be aware of your donkey's reaction and don't allow him to become frightened.

Your tone of voice is your greatest training aid. It should be calm and confident even when things go wrong, as they will at times. Use a firm tone to give a command, a lighter tone to praise. Be prepared to go back a step if your donkey is having difficulty with something new and always finish your training session on a positive note. If he doesn't seem to understand what you want, **DON'T BLAME THE DONKEY**. Look at **what** you are asking him to do and **how** you are asking him. He doesn't speak English so you have to try to speak Donkey. Imagine he is an immigrant from a foreign country who only speaks a language of which you have absolutely no knowledge – you have to find other ways to communicate.

Step 1: Introduction to long-reining

It is not necessary to rush out and buy a lot of expensive harness before you start your training. All you need is a well-fitting halter, a surcingle with a D on either side, and 2 long reins or two pieces of soft rope, or cotton webbing, about 2 metres long with a clip on the end. It is recommended that you get into the habit of wearing gloves and carrying your driving whip.

Fit the halter snugly with the noseband approximately 6-8 cms above the nostrils and attach the reins to the rings on either side. Get your assistant to attach a lead rope to the halter and stand at the donkey's head facing forward. Pass the reins through the Ds on the surcingle and stand directly behind the donkey. Make sure the reins are not joined together and gather up the excess in each hand.



Give the command 'Walk on' and at the same time your assistant should encourage the donkey to move forward with a gentle tug on the lead rope. As soon as the donkey responds, encourage him with a 'Good boy' and continue walking forward. If he slows down or stops, repeat the 'Walk

on' command in a firm voice and have your assistant reinforce it with a gentle reminder on the lead rope.

When you want to stop, it helps to give a warning such as 'Steady' followed immediately by 'Stand' (or whatever command you have decided on). As you give the command apply gentle pressure on the reins, which your assistant can reinforce if necessary with the lead rope. As soon as there is any response, however slight, remember to praise and encourage with a 'Good boy' or 'Well done'. Remember that the donkey should stop when YOU decide and not when he thinks he should. If he stops before he is told, push him on even if only for a few steps, and then give him the command to halt.

Because you want your donkey to be forward going it pays to avoid doing too many halts during the first few lessons, but do ensure that a command to halt is obeyed.

As the training progresses, the assistant should move further back until she is by the donkey's shoulder just holding the very end of the lead rope and the donkey is moving forward and stopping on your commands.

Use your word commands for turning right and left while you still have your assistant to help. Keep the training sessions short, about 15 minutes is enough. Try to vary them as much as possible – donkeys have a low boredom threshold – and always end on a positive note.

Your driving whip can also be used as an extension of your arm as an aid to turning. When you ask him to turn left, extend the whip and tap him on the right shoulder, to turn right give a tap on the left shoulder. This all helps to reinforce your voice commands and also helps him realise that the whip is not to be feared.



Young donkey learning to drive and walking over a mat between poles.

Put a line of electric fence standards in the paddock and practice weaving through them. To add variety tie on some rustling plastic bags or balloons. Put a couple of logs on the ground for the donkey to step over.

Park the wheelbarrow or a couple of metal drums and manoeuvre round them. As always, use your imagination.

If you live in a quiet road you can take him out and long-rein along the grass verge. Take an assistant with you until you are confident that you have complete control. Practise moving from the grass to the road and back again – some donkeys are unsure of changes in footing, particularly if they have spent most of their lives in a paddock.

The groundwork has paid off for this well trained donkey, shown here after he had trotted calmly over matting (under cart) during an obstacle course.



Teach your donkey to back up with a helper. Give the command 'Back', apply gentle pressure on the reins and get your helper to encourage a step backwards by placing a hand on the donkey's chest. Be satisfied with one or two steps initially and release the pressure on the reins as soon as there is a response. Don't attempt to drag him backwards with the reins. This is an exercise that many donkeys find difficult, so be patient.

At this stage the bit can be introduced.

Horses are traditionally mouthed using side reins but donkeys are more usually worked by voice command. A driving bit should have an unjointed bar, possibly with a small port or a mullen mouth to discourage the donkey from getting his tongue over the bit. A Kimblewick is often used for donkeys, as is the traditional Liverpool. For this initial mouthing stage it is possible to use a nylon or sweet apple bit (anything simple with a straight bar) as the main purpose is to get the donkey used to having something in his mouth. Because of the donkey's head shape it is necessary to use comparatively large bit. For a standard donkey a five and a half inch is usually about right. It is not even necessary to have a complete bridle – just a head piece attached to the bit will suffice. Put it on over his halter and leave him tied up for 10 minutes, keeping an eye on him, and let him chew and mouth on it.



A Kimblewick bit

The next day, walk him round wearing his bit but make sure you attach the lead rope to the halter and not to the bit. Once he accepts this, carry on with your long-reining, once again still working from the halter. Once the donkey is working

photo David Matthews photography



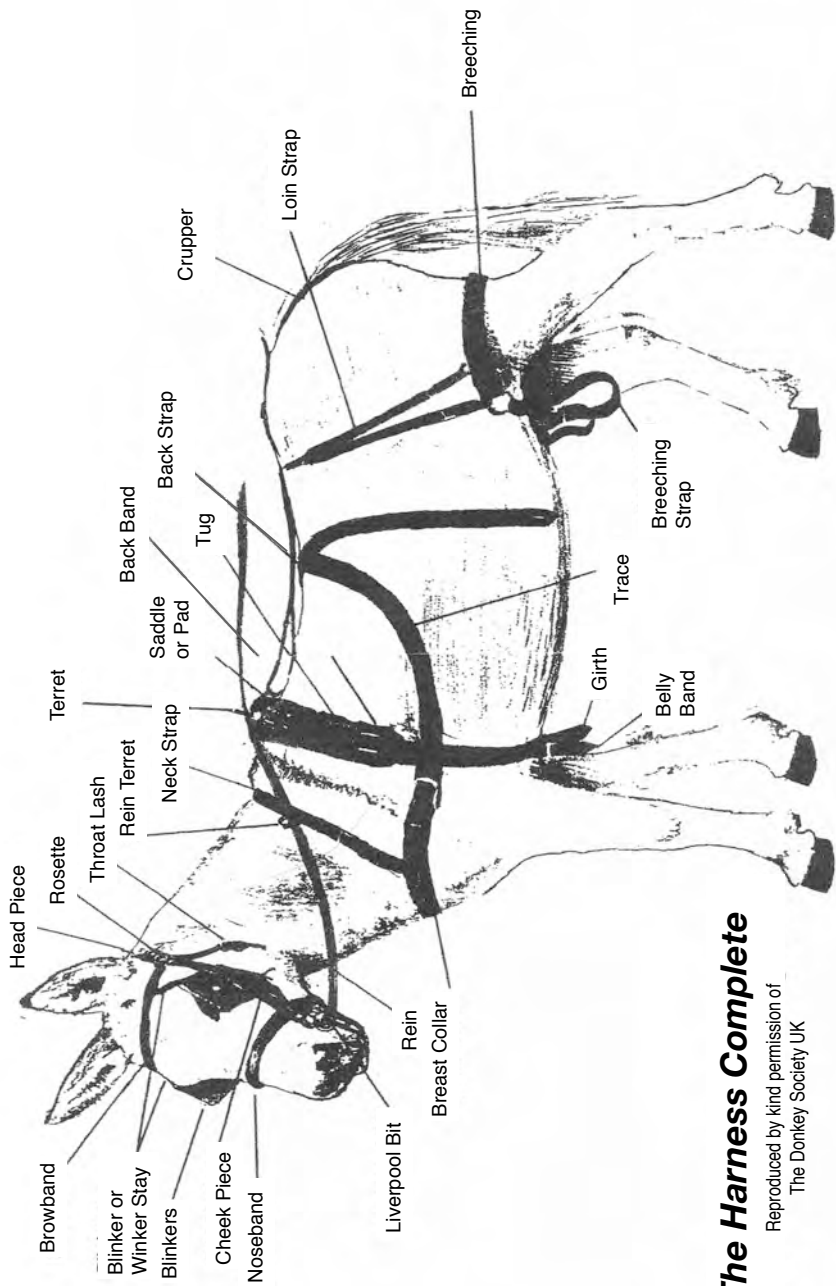
confidently and obediently long-reined from the halter, transfer the reins to the bit and continue your long-reining practice.

A word of caution. From the outset the donkey should learn that when he has a bit in his mouth he does NOT eat. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to drive (or ride) an animal that keeps putting its head down and snatching at the grass, and so don't allow this habit to form.

left A driving bridle fitted with a Liverpool bit, noseband and blinkers.

right A Liverpool bit and a dropped noseband.





The Harness Complete

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Step 2: Introducing the harness

Harness can be made of leather, synthetic or webbing, or a combination of these. If you can afford to do so, have your harness made to measure by a qualified and reputable person. He or she will ensure that it is safe, strong and fits correctly. You may wish to buy secondhand harness but if so, seek the advice of an experienced driver to check soundness and fit. Pony harness will usually need to be altered as donkeys are longer in the back and have a different body shape from ponies.

It is important to have an experienced person with you when trying harness for the first time to ensure that it is fitted correctly.

Tie the donkey securely to a fixed ring or post, making sure that the lead rope is short so he can't wander back and forth. Allow him to see and smell the harness before proceeding.

Standing on the donkey's near (left) side, take the saddle and place it on his back, just behind the wither. Do up the girth, not too tightly, likewise the bellyband. Donkeys develop girth galls very easily and it is important to make sure that the girth area is kept clean and dry. Various girth covers are available but the easiest remedy seems to be to keep the girth reasonably loose. There is not a lot of pressure on it so it does not need to be nearly as tight as the girth on a riding saddle.

Place the breeching over the back with the crupper undone. Run the backband through the D on the back of the saddle and buckle loosely. Lift the tail with your left hand, pass the crupper underneath and buckle up. Now you can adjust the backband. You should be able to fit your hand at right angles between the donkey and the backband.

Adjust the breeching so that it sits about halfway down the donkey's buttock – too high and it will catch him under the tail, and too low it can pull his legs underneath him.

The next step is to fit the breast collar. This should be reasonably wide and nicely padded so that it doesn't rub. Undo the neck strap, place the breast collar round the chest, then bring the neck strap over the neck and fasten. Adjust the height so that it sits just above the point of the shoulder but below the windpipe. Attach the traces and cross the ends over the donkey's back while you fit the bridle.

This donkey is wearing an Empathy Collar. It is a broad, shaped breast collar that accommodates the low-set neck of the donkey and leaves the shoulders plenty of room.



Traditionally a driving bridle is fitted with blinkers (or winkers as they are sometimes known). Some donkeys go well in them while others are happy in an open bridle. If you aspire to driving a pair, blinkers will probably be necessary but for a single animal the choice is up to you. Similarly, there is a choice of bits. Those most commonly used for driving are a Liverpool or a Kimblewick and once again it depends on which one suits your animal best. However, a driving bridle should be fitted with a noseband which fits snugly about 4-5 cm above the bottom of the cheek strap.

Adjust the cheek straps so that the centre of the blinker is at eye level and the blinker stay strap is neither too tight nor too loose, and fasten the throat lash so that you can get two fingers comfortably underneath it. Attach the reins to the bit and pass them through the terrets on the driving saddle.

The first time you harness up and make all the necessary adjustments, leave the donkey tied up for five minutes or so to let him get used to the feel of all the gear, then take it all off and let him go. The next time, lead him round and if he is comfortable with that, try long-reining him round the paddock. For this exercise it is advisable to either remove the breast collar and traces, or secure them in some way to the breeching (just one of a 1001 uses for binder twine). It also helps to tie the breeching loosely to either the tugs or the breast collar. Run the reins through the tugs on either side rather than through the terrets as this will give a more direct line of contact to the bit.



Note: The breast collar and traces have been removed and breeching loosely secured to the tugs.
photo David Matthews photography

Practise long reining as previously, and gradually introduce new sounds. Start by scuffing your feet in the gravel and progress to dragging things behind you such as a plastic container of stones so that the donkey learns to accept strange noises behind him.

Attach a couple of lead ropes to the ends of the traces and get your assistant to put some pressure on these to get him used to pulling into the breast collar. Allow the traces to slide down his legs and even between them so that, in the event of something going wrong when you are driving, he won't panic if he gets a leg over the trace. If you want him to drag a tyre you must have the traces attached to a swingletree and the tyre, in turn, attached to the swingletree with a quick release knot. Your assistant should control this so that if anything goes wrong she can release the tyre while you concentrate on controlling the donkey. As always, if the donkey becomes frightened or apprehensive, go back to something he is comfortable with and try another day.

When you are both feeling confident it is time for the next step:

Step 3: Introducing the cart



The best sort of cart to start with is a light two-wheeled jogger. It can be built of scrap materials on motor bike wheels or it can be a state of the art vehicle with all the 'bells and whistles' but whatever your budget dictates there is one rule which cannot be ignored. The vehicle must be well-constructed and safe and it must be balanced and be the correct size for your animal. Once again,

seek advice from an experienced person before buying.

To test the balance of a cart the assistant should hold the shafts in her hands while the driver gets in and sits down. If the vehicle is properly balanced the assistant should be able to rest the shafts on one finger. If your cart has an adjustable seat this should be moved forward or back until the balance is correct. A cart which is 'heavy on' in driving parlance will lean heavily in the tugs and pull down on the animal's back making him very sore and one which pulls upwards is equally bad. Ideally the shafts should 'float' in the tugs giving a smooth and comfortable ride to all concerned.

Introducing the cart or 'putting to' should be done like all other steps of training – quietly, slowly and calmly. It should be done in a yard or very small paddock and you will need a helper, and preferably two. Harness up as usual and do some long-reining. Have the cart in the yard and let the donkey have a good look at it. He may be suspicious and take a long time inspecting it carefully or he may totally ignore it. While you hold him, have a helper wheel the cart all round him, starting some distance away if he is at all apprehensive and gradually getting closer. If he is quite relaxed about it all, tie him up on a fairly short rope (you don't want him swinging around) and get someone to stand at his head to give him reassurance.

Undo the bellyband. With helper #2 on one side and you on the other lift the shafts well above the donkey's back and bring the cart forward into position. Talk quietly and lower the shafts gently on either side of the donkey's back. Let them touch



him on either side and rub them gently up and down. If he is obviously unhappy, lift the shafts and move the cart back. Give him time to settle and then try again. If you have laid the groundwork carefully it is more likely that he will accept this as just another of your idiosyncrasies.

Carefully put the shafts into the tugs but don't connect the traces at this stage. Just let him stand and feel the cart attached. If he is calm and accepting you can jiggle the cart a bit so that he feels the shafts moving against his side. Give him five minutes of this then carefully remove the shafts from the tugs, lift the shafts and back the vehicle away. Tell the donkey what a clever boy he is, unharness, and turn him out.



The next day repeat the exercise but this time attach the traces, do up the belly-band and the breeching straps. Once again, jiggle the cart behind him and if he is relaxed, take up the reins, climb into the cart and out again. Make sure before you attempt this that there is an assistant standing at his head. Climb into the cart again and this time sit down. Practise getting in and out from both sides and all the time remember to talk in a calm and reassuring tone of voice. Once again, lots of praise when you finish.

It is important to remember the order for putting to:

- shafts in tugs
- attach traces
- do up bellyband
- do up breeching straps

Reverse the order when taking the donkey out of the vehicle.

Now that he is quite relaxed with all that try untying his lead rope and moving him a few feet along the fence line so that he feels the cart coming with him and the shafts pushing against his sides. From there you can progress to leading him, again with the assistance of a helper so that you have a lead rope on either side. At this stage there is no driver in the cart.

Now comes the moment you have been working towards. Once again you want an enclosed area and two helpers. With the donkey still tied to the post, put on your safety helmet, take up the reins and climb into the cart. When you are seated comfortably ask one of your helpers to unhook the tie rope but keep a lead rope on either side. Sit quietly for a moment or two and then ask your donkey to 'Walk on!'. It is best if the helpers just stand quietly and let him respond to your command – they are only there as a safety precaution. Walk him quietly round the area while he gets used to the extra weight in the cart and try some changes of rein. Don't be tempted to overdo this first drive – five to ten minutes is enough but remember to keep talking and keep up the praise.

From here the next step is to dispense with one of your helpers and move into a bigger area and then finally that exciting moment when you can say to your helper, "Just unclip the lead rope thanks" and you are driving on your own.



Driving a pair

A pair of donkeys is conventionally put to a four-wheeled vehicle which has a central pole instead of shafts. For this reason the harness is a little different. Driving a pair can be twice as much fun but it is recommended that all donkeys are trained and driven regularly as singles before you embark on this next step.



There are numerous ways to enjoy your donkey driving either socially or competitively. Local driving clubs organise pleasure drives on farm land, forests and beaches. Many A&P shows have harness classes that include donkeys. Driving competitions such as combined drives (CDs), precision and obstacle driving (PODs) and distance and obstacle driving (DODs) are held in most areas.

Details are available from the Society's driving representative.



SAFETY 'DOs & DON'Ts'

DO make sure the donkey has his bridle and reins on and is firmly tied up before the cart is attached.

DON'T ever leave the donkey tied up and unattended with the cart still attached.

DO wear a hard hat when driving.

DON'T allow passengers to get into the cart before the driver is seated and in control.

Donkeys come in many sizes from the horse sized Mammoth, through to Standard (left & below left) and down to miniatures (below right).



SOME POINTS TO REMEMBER



~ It doesn't matter how long you take over the process – you can take 6 weeks or 6 months or even longer – do things at the rate at which you and your donkey are comfortable. The partnership is between the two of you.

~ If something isn't working for you go back a step and try another approach. We, and our animals, are all individuals

and what works for one doesn't necessarily work for another.

- ~ In training, praise the attempt. Ignore mistakes but be very positive and encouraging about any success, however small.
- ~ Before buying secondhand harness or cart seek advice.
- ~ For information on suppliers of harness and makers of carts check the Donkey and Mule Society website or contact the Society's Driving Representative.
- ~ The New Zealand Carriage Driving Society is another good source of help. It has clubs all around the country and welcomes new members. The Donkey Society Driving representative can help with contact details.

RECOMMENDED READING

Donkey Business III, Christine Berry and Jo-Anne Kokas, NSW Australia

Donkey Driving, Vivian and Richard Ellis and Joy Claxton, London

Harnessing Up, Anne Norris and Nancy Pethick, London

If you need help, please ask us. The Donkey and Mule Society have experienced driving people who are happy to help with any problems you may have.

We can be contacted through our website at

www.donkey-mule.org.nz

Happy Driving



