

Miniature Donkey Conformation, for performance

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Teaching people about training miniature donkeys is one of the most fun things I do, but the most important thing in training is having an animal that is able to perform the tasks we are asking them to do. For example, a donkey cannot pull a cart well in deep dirt if he (or she) is only 28" tall. Common sense tells us that. This article is not about size differences, but about the different types of animals we encounter, and what they are best suited for. So, what other attributes are necessary to a performance donkey? And, are there any differences between a halter donkey and a performance donkey?



The answer to the second question is a definite YES! The first question will be answered throughout this article. So, let's talk about halter donkeys first, and get that out of the way.

The most important feature of a halter donkey is whether they have eye appeal. They need to be pretty. So, first they need to have a pretty head, and have that "show presence" everyone looks for. They need to catch the judge's eye, in a sea of donkeys. They need to have a balanced profile, with a straight topline. They should have a pretty head, that ties in well at the neck, and the neck should be of adequate length to the body, and tie in well at the shoulder. The body parts should blend together in an appealing way. The body should not be long, and it should be well balanced. The legs should be set fairly wide, and should not have any deviations in any of the joints; in the knees, ankles, or hocks. The legs should be set under the animal in a way that he or she stands naturally square, and the tail should be set properly. They should appear to have a good disposition (although this one can be impossible to know while they are standing in a line-up). Bone and muscling should be adequate. That's about it. Or is it? Well, no, not actually. They also need to have a nice haircoat, and be very well groomed. You really need to have a nice clip job if you want to win...oh, and you had better know how to show if you want to win! How you handle your animal is very important in the ring! I'm trying to be a bit humorous, but all of these things are true. So, now that we have halter out of the way, let's talk about performance.

The following statement is copied (in part) directly from the NMDA (National Miniature Donkey Association) Breed Standard.

GENERAL APPEARANCE

The Miniature Donkey should be attractive, sound, strong and sturdy. The animal should be well-balanced as the various parts blend together in a nicely coupled, compact picture. It should have an alert expression and "presence;" Jennets should look feminine and slightly more refined and jacks should be relatively stocky and masculine. A maximum height of 36" at the withers, measured at 3 years, is accepted by the Miniature Donkey Registry. Overall bone should be strong and in proportion to the size of the Donkey and muscle development.

Rationale:

Overall balance in conformation and adequate bone is necessary for work, such as carrying packs and pulling carts efficiently.

While the NMDA Breed Standard is there for the purpose of setting a general "type" of animal we should be breeding for, there are some things that are not discussed in the Breed Standard, and I think they are important points. Please bear in mind that some of my ideas may actually conflict a bit with the Breed Standard, and some may merely expand on their statements. The Breed Standard is not a thorough lesson in conformation, but simply a guideline for breeders. The ideas presented in this article are based on my opinion, and you may do with them as you wish.

Note that in the “Rationale” of General Appearance, it says that the overall conformation of a miniature donkey should be such that they will be able to carry a pack, referring to a significant weight, and/or pull a cart, also of significant weight. But not all donkeys will ever pull a cart, and many breeders will never train their donkeys to do anything except go into a halter class. And most breeders don’t actually even show. So why should it be written that a donkey should be able to pull a cart, or carry a pack? Because that is what they have been used for, historically. In today’s world, in Columbus, TX, I do not drive my donkeys to town to buy my groceries. I drive a car. I also don’t go up and down mountains with a pack on my donkey. But when I train a donkey to pull a cart, for recreation, I certainly want the animal to be able to do it with ease. The easier it is for my donkey, the more fun he or she will have, and that means I’ll have more fun also.

When we show our animals in the ring, in the cart, the judge is looking for the donkey that pulls with ease, in a collected way, with nice extension. Good manners are instilled during training, but a good disposition makes the trainer’s job a lot easier. It just makes good sense to try to select animals that are best suited for the job at hand, and are readily able and willing to learn. All of these points improve the final result.

Everyone likes to see a pretty head. But, what role does the head play in the area of performance? In fact, a larger head may act as a ballast to help propel the animal forward; thus improving their ability to pull a cart, but an oversized head isn’t going to help you in halter. Why? Because halter is about PRETTY! So, should you breed for big heads? Well, that’s up to you, I suppose, if you are a breeder. The Breed Standard refers to a “shorter” head, and a “dished” face. Those attributes are definitely more attractive, but how short does a head have to be? Is shorter always better? Does a larger head always indicate dwarfism? The answer to both questions is NO. You need to decide the purpose of your animal in order to know how you want to breed, or select. And one more point here is that in the process of evolution the head can be bred down in size, with each generation, but the teeth do not “shrink” in just a few generations. It takes centuries for this to occur. So, breeding down to smaller heads could mean inviting teeth problems. This is where many overbites and underbites come from.

So, what about legs? I spent a long time talking to several veterinarians about this subject, and it’s almost comical when we learn the truth. We are told from the beginning of our association with miniature donkeys that the legs must be perfectly straight, but would it shock you to know that most veterinarians would agree that an animal that is a “little” cow-hocked and a “little” pidgin toed is going to be stronger at pulling? It certainly shocked me! I say “most” veterinarians, because I have certainly not interviewed all of them, but I have not yet found one that disagreed. It was, in fact, one of my regular veterinarians that told me this, and he is known to be one of the best lameness vets in Texas. So, why do we want perfectly straight legs? Does it really help the donkey to perform? We want them because they are prettier. It’s that simple. And no, they do not necessarily help them perform. Then, does it help them to stay sound? It might, but not necessarily. Remember that miniature donkeys are not really weight bearing. I don’t know of anyone that packs heavy weights on their donkeys in this country, but I know a lot of folks that drive them. If the animal is weight bearing, lameness could occur if they have a serious deviation in the knee, or the ankle, but very few actual lameness issues occur within this breed due to deviations. Most lameness issues are due to founder and other management problems, or neglect. My best driving donkey has horribly “incorrect” legs, and he is old, and he is perfectly sound. Hoof problems would be much more likely to occur in a driving donkey, due to wear and tear, so the size of the hoof is actually more important than the straightness of the leg. The size of the hoof also indicates the size of the bone, which is important for strength. Strength is very important in driving, and jumping. But now, going back to halter, if you plan to show your donkey in both halter and performance, then a straighter leg suddenly becomes important. But does it mean the animal will be better at pulling? Not really. One point that I want to mention before we leave the subject of leg conformation is the pastern. A correct pastern has a nice angle to it; about 45 degrees would be ideal. This helps the donkey to have more spring and a smoother way of going. If the pastern is longer, it will help the donkey with flexion also. It is an important point to remember, since many donkeys tend to have short, upright pasterns.

The slope of the shoulder is important also. Again, 45 degrees is ideal, but we rarely find this in miniature donkeys. Donkeys tend to have very upright shoulders, which gives them a sort of a “piston” stride in the front end. This is very bad for performance.

And what about a level topline? In halter it is indispensable! But if you look at the conformation of a trotting horse, they are lower in the withers than the croup, or “downhill”, as we call it. This helps them move forward with more speed at the trot. So, does it make sense that donkeys should be the same? I think so. Does speed matter with a cart donkey? It does to me! Slow donkeys are boring. Faster donkeys are a lot more fun to drive. We don’t go fast all the time, but it’s nice to be able to when we want. A typical donkey does not have speed, so this is something we have to look for in a driving donkey if we want it.

Now, as a breeder, I do want to be able to market my animals, so let me say that I definitely breed animals that fit the breed standard. My donkeys have gorgeous heads, and they do have very straight legs. But I breed for these traits because that is what most breeders want. When someone comes to me, however, to purchase a performance animal, the head and legs are not really the first things I look at. What is important to me in the selection of a performance

animal is the way they move, and their trainability. I like a pretty donkey as much as anyone, but a donkey needs to have extension, ease of movement, speed, willingness and intelligence in order to be a performance animal. If you can get all this in one package, and that same donkey can win in halter, then you really have something special. But an animal that is “pretty”, but can’t move well, is not going to be any fun to drive.

An additional point to consider is that one conformation trait may be compensated for by another. This can be very confusing if you try to bring the whole picture together, but the easiest way to sort this out is to watch the animal move. We like to put our donkeys in the round pen and watch them very closely at the trot. Some donkeys are just natural movers, and others are very poor movers. You can certainly tell more by watching them move, than trying to figure them out while they are standing still.

Driving isn’t the only thing these animals do, but it’s probably the most important role of a performance animal. Most donkeys are pretty good jumpers, but they have to have a trainable disposition in order to get them to want to do it consistently.

The subject of conformation is one that can be studied in depth, and I’m not really trying to cover every point in this article. It may suffice to say that when we consider a donkey for a particular task, it may be wise to try to figure out if the donkey is suited for the task at hand. If he/she is not, then we may want to look further. It does not mean that the donkey is useless, or that he/she will not be well suited to another task, but learning the differences is surely your key to success.