

Showmanship at Halter vs. Halter

By: Lynn Podesta

L bar L Ranch Miniature Donkeys

Jackson, CA.

(lbarlranchminidonks.com)

What is halter and what is showmanship? What's the difference? This can be confusing to some people, especially newcomers to the show ring, so I'll explain the difference between the two classes but my main goal in this article is to educate donkey owners/exhibitors in showmanship at halter. I'll start with the main difference between the two classes, starting with halter.

The Halter Class:

A halter class is defined as a class where your donkey is being judged on his or her conformation. Your handling ability is not judged. An example of how a judge may score the donkey may be: 60 percent on conformation and 40 percent on way of going.

I am going to assume that you already have a basic knowledge of what is good conformation, if not, here is the "NMDA" ruling on a donkey's conformation:

"Donkeys to be judged on the priority of conformation, quality, presence and way of going, disposition and manners will also be considered.

A donkey's general appearances are described as attractive, well balanced, sound, strong and sturdy. The animal should be pleasing to the eye as the various parts blend together in a nicely coupled picture.

It should have an alert expression and presence. Jennet's to look more feminine and slightly more refined while jacks should be more stocky and masculine. Donkeys must be serviceably sound, in good condition, and well groomed.

Class disqualification's include: cryptorchidism in mature jacks ages three years and older, excess over bites, and under bites that exceed 1/4 inch, height in excess of 36in." (NMDA rule books)

The Showmanship Class:

“The showmanship class itself originated as a way to teach a handler how to best show a horse at halter, the horse itself is not judged. The horse is merely a prop that you use to demonstrate your ability to show a horse to his best advantage.” (AQHA rule books)

This same principle applies to donkeys. The object of showmanship for you the handler is to learn to move in such a manner that the judge always has a clear and unobstructed view of your donkey. You will do a series of maneuvers in the class as well as setting your donkey up for inspection. The other considerations you will need to learn before you show your donkey, are how to fit and condition your donkey, grooming, as well as on your ability to present yourself professionally and properly and how to show your donkey as you would in a halter class.

You are also judged on your neatness & attire, the cleanliness of your tack, and the execution of your pattern. Remember you are being judged on your ability to show your donkey. Your donkey is where you need to aim most of your attention. You need to be aware at all times of where the judge is in the ring and where the judge is in relation to you and your donkey. Be sure that your donkey is standing correctly and square at all times, tracks in a straight line and keeps trotting straight until dismissed. You also want him to look alert and at his best at all times.

The following information is a guideline to follow for training your donkey for his or her showmanship class. It is both physical and learned. This list is what you need to do with your donkey in order to prepare him and yourself for the class:

- 1. Conformation**
- 2. Showmanship maneuvers**
- 3. Conditioning**
- 4. Grooming**
- 5. The art of showing**
- 6. Showmanship scoring**
- 7. Faults on the exhibitor**

Conformation:

While your showmanship donkey does not need to have perfect conformation as in a halter class, a well- conformed donkeys that have an eye-catching presence, impeccable grooming and one that perform perfect maneuvers are what will make the difference between a first and second place in a large class.

Showmanship maneuvers:

You need to begin with teaching your donkey showmanship maneuvers. It doesn't require a lot of your time, just a few minutes per day.

I work on these maneuvers daily as I am turning them out or when I bring them in. They will need to learn to lead well in a straight line, halt, square up, trot off in a straight line and a pivot (a pivot is not stated in the rule book, however this is what most judges in my area want to see). In my opinion a 360 turn as stated in the NMDA rule book and a pivot is two different things, I feel strongly our current ruling on this may need to have an additional clarification on this matter. I have seen half the people turn their donkeys in 360 circle, some can't turn them at all, and a fraction of donkeys that can do a pivot at all. Some donkeys are going to be naturals at learning these maneuvers more than others, by that I mean, some donkeys respond to your lead pressure, body language and pivots better than others, choosing this type of individual makes your job in training them easier for a showmanship class.

Begin with teaching your donkey to lead correctly. Make him take his first step forward from your body language, you don't take a step forward until he is committed to moving forward first. Stay at his throat latch and make him follow your shoulder. Never let him fall behind your shoulder or move ahead of it. If he does move ahead, stop him and back him up a few steps. Also when moving forward, keep him a little distance away from you and try to keep him tracking on a straight line, this also helps to prevent him from bumping into you when you both have to trot off. When you do trot your donkey try not to drag him behind you, he must stay at your shoulder. Dragging him in the ring behind you tells a judge that you have not done your homework in his training. This seems to be a big problem with a lot of donkeys in the show ring and hard to cure. I personally have had this happen to me with one of the jacks I show. But if you have done your training and the necessary preparation with him, he may still at times when

you least expect it slips into the donkey NO zone. (No, I won't or No I can't) sounds a little like our kid's behavior. There is nothing more frustrating to a handler than to have your donkey shut down with you in a class for no apparent reason. Therefore you are pretty much left to get through the class with doing the best job you can despite the error's your donkey will make. The lesson here is to never give up showing your donkey even when they don't fully cooperate with your wishes.

The next maneuver is walking to a halt and is not as easy as it may sound. You will be teaching your donkey to pay attention to your body language and follow your shoulder while walking in a forward motion. To get him to pay attention to your shoulder, walk several feet and come to an abrupt stop. If he takes a few steps ahead of you, immediately stop and back him up. Repeat this several times until he gets the idea of stopping when you do. Your end goal here is teaching him to stop when you stop with all four of his feet square underneath him.

The pivot is probably the more complex maneuver to teach a donkey. They have a harder time learning this for some reason, I realized in short order that when working with them they tend to cling to people when being handled individually, and they seem not to pay particular notice of stepping on your foot or bumping into you if they feel insecure about something, so getting them to move out of your space is made a little harder because of their mind set on not moving away from pressure. I approach it is by walking him in a straight line for several strides, stop him. I then turn my body toward him facing the middle of his shoulder and put the pressure of my body into his shoulder. You are trying to get him to respond to moving out of your space, remember this is hard for a donkey to learn. If my donkey doesn't move out of my space, I use my right hand or knee to bump him lightly a quarter of a turn at first, then once he does I release the pressure of my hand or knee when he steps and crosses over his left front leg over his right leg as he turns. He must also be planting his inside hind leg in the turn. This maneuver takes time to teach, so just do 1/4 of a turn at a time until you complete a full 360 turns. In your mind picture the 360 like a circle, divide it into quarters. When he can complete 1/4 turn at a time perfectly, make him do half, when he does that perfectly, do 3/4 etc. Break it down in steps so it's easier for the donkey to accomplish your request to turn and it will not confuse him as much as trying to do it all at once. When asking your donkey to do this maneuver always keep his body straight, (head, neck, shoulders and body) while turning. Repeat several times over the weeks or longer until he moves freely from your body language alone

and keeps his inside hind leg planted in the ground and his front leg crossing over.

Teaching your donkey to square up is by far the hardest maneuver to get a donkey to do correctly in a timely manner. The difficulty in asking your donkey to square up is two folds, the first problem you will encounter is their unwillingness to back up on lead pressure and set one hind leg at a time in the correct position, the second reason for difficulty is with donkeys that are cow hocked, if you were to stand directly behind your donkey and look at his hocks down to his feet, the distance between these two points needs to be the same. When trying to set up a donkey that is cow hocked you can't get their legs set going in a straight line pointing forward, their toes point out and their hocks are in.

If you have worked on halting your donkey this is where it is going to make it a little easier teaching him to square up. Walk him into a halt, with luck he will have at least one of his hind legs in a correct position, then all you need to do is ask him with your lead to either come forward with his other hind leg or move it back in line with his other foot. You will only be working on his back legs until he is setting them without any difficulty. Ask him to stand set for just a few minutes at a time and praise him for doing so. Next move to the front legs which you approach in the same manner as the hinds except that you will lift his head a bit more when you ask him to halt, this will lighten his front end and send his weight rearward. Use your lead again to ask him to correct either one of his front legs if he did not place them correctly, do it in the same manner as you did with his hind feet placement. Donkeys become very bored with repeating this exercise too many times in one session so limit the time spent practicing it and reward him for at least trying to comply with what you want him to do.

Conditioning:

Conditioning plays a large part in your donkeys appearance and shows a judge that you care enough about him to want to place well in the class. A well-conditioned donkey always looks better than one that is out-of-conditioned and it does not come about the day before your show. It takes me at least 90 days to get my donkeys conditioned for their first show. I spend six to 15 minutes per day with a minimum of four days being worked to a maximum of six days per week. I start them slowly at first for the first 30 days, then I increase the time by additional minutes until I reach the maximum amount of time being worked. I do not however work my young donkeys to the maximum amount of time, you do not want to stress their

muscles or legs, and if your donkey is not in relatively good shape you might want to start a conditioning program earlier in the year and always start them with a minimum amount of minutes being worked. After they are worked, tie them up to cool off for at least 20-30 minutes. Do not put away a hot donkey. Tying them up also teaches them patience another helpful lesson for them to learn.

Nevertheless if you have done your training and preparation with your donkey there are still those times and days when you take them to a show and your donkey decides to go into the donkey NO zone, you are pretty much left to get through the class with doing the best job you can despite the error's your donkey has made. The lesson here is to never give up showing your donkey even when they don't fully cooperate with your wishes. There is nothing more frustrating to a handler than to have your donkey that is trained and they shut down with you in a class. For obvious reasons you surely cannot reprimand him in the class so you have no choice but to finish it the best you can.

Grooming:

I could write several pages on this topic alone but I have decided not to at this time, I'll save it for a later article. Everyone has their own way of preparing their donkeys before a show and before their classes. By this point you should be aware of the fact that you need to body clip, bathe and apply grooming products to enhance your donkey's appearance. I have my favorite clippers I use, my favorite products I apply when bathing, and my favorite finishing products I use before my donkeys showmanship and halter classes.

The art of Showing:

After you have a well conditioned and a well-trained donkey in his maneuvers, the last thing to learn is the art of showing in a showmanship class. Your attitude and your presentation of your donkey will help you to win or lose the class. In the presentation of your donkey you will also need to learn how to poise yourself correctly (this includes your crossovers) when handling him through the various maneuvers, you must be proud of your donkey to show him, confident in your showing, and never give up when things go wrong.

Showmanship scoring:

According to the “NMDA rule book” this is how your showmanship scores are going to be broke down by points, with a total possible score of 100% .

1. Appearance of a donkey in an arena - 40%

This is: Overall cleanliness, grooming, condition of hooves, halter and lead should be neat, clean in good repair

2. Appearance of Competitor - 10%

Refer to page 11, #51, A-1 for Handlers Attire

3. Presentation of the Donkey in an arena - 50%

This is: ability to lead, posing the donkey, following posted pattern, alertness of Competitor

Showmanship faults:

NMDA does not have a list faults in their rule book, however most other equine breed associations do, so I have compiled a list of faults from three different associations. Faults can be classified as minor, major or severe, these faults should be noted by all donkey exhibitor’s whether they are youth, open or green.

Faults against the exhibitor:

- Poorly groomed, conditioned, or trimmed animal.
- Dirty, ragged, or improper fitting halter or lead.
- Poor or improper position of the exhibitor.
- Changing hands on the lead line.
- Failure to recognize and correct the faults of the animal.
- Visiting or conversing with other exhibitors.
- Kicking or placing the animals leg into position (actual contact with the animals's leg).
- Failure of the animal to lead properly.
- Over showing through unnecessary actions.
- Blocking the judges view of the animal.
- Turning the animal in the wrong direction.

- Causing the judge to move to avoid being bumped or stepped on by the animal.
- Continuous holding of the chain portion of the lead, or the lead shank tightly coiled around hand or dragging on the ground.
- Animal not set up squarely or excessive time required to set up.
- Failure to maintain pivot foot during turns or stepping behind right front leg with left front leg when turning to the right.
- Omission or addition of maneuvers.
- Severe disobedience including rearing or pawing, animal kicking at other animals, exhibitors or judge, circling the exhibitor.
- Loss of control of the animal that endangers exhibitors, other animals or judge including the animal escaping from the exhibitor.
- Failure to wear the correct number in a visible manner.
- Willful abuse
- Excessive schooling or training, or the use of artificial aids.

In conclusion with this article I hope I have given you the necessary information to compete successfully with your donkey in a showmanship class and I look forward to writing more articles on training donkeys and educating owners/exhibitors in the showing.