Training a New Donkey the Basics

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Intro: This is what works for me and it has worked very well, thus far. I am not an expert and I have only been doing this (with donkeys) for three years. Many others have been doing this for MUCH longer than I have and I try to learn from all of them! My main strengths are that I am a good listener, a good observer and I have patience with animals (not so much with people but I am working on that). Animals are easier because they deal ‘straight up’? They, too, are excellent listeners & observers and donkeys excel at patience.

When I adopted my first two donkeys, the only thing I knew about them is that I LOVED going to visit the SD wild donkeys on camping trips with my family as a child. That’s it. I rode ponies at my grandparents’ farm in Iowa as a child and then trail horses later, on camping trips, and horses belonging to my friends/family over the years. I never trained as this was already done. I have trained dogs/cats nearly my whole life. Some people have remarked that not ever having trained an equine before acquiring donkeys has helped. Maybe? I just know what works for me and that is what I hope to share in a way that make sense.

I wanted to get that stuff out of the way since the first thing people ask about is experience but I don’t want this to be about me. I want it to be about donkeys and them being treated kindly and trained in a kind and POSITIVE way. This matters to me a lot. I live in Central Texas and so many donkeys here have a miserable existence and are treated very much NOT in a kind manner. (Oh, the horror stories!)

If it is imperative that you have a well-trained donkey ASAP, please find one that has already been trained, preferably in a kind manner. As Alexandra Kurland says, “It takes as long as it takes.” Just like you and I are very different in our parentage, our environment and our personalities, so is each donkey. Please know that this is not a cookie-cutter thing. TRUST is everything and that takes time … just like between two humans. It is so much easier to take the time to build that trust from the beginning than trying to regain it once lost? Again, just like with humans.

Lastly, everyone wants to train their donkey to pick up feet. Feet are important as they are absolutely everything to any equine. FEET are a very big deal! Yep, that sounds silly but you should put that phrase in your head and keep it there; your mantra. FEET are a very big deal! Your donkey does not instinctively know that you are trying to help them with their foot health and it is most certainly not instinct for them
to hand them over to just anyone. Feet/legs are what predators go after. Without feet, donkeys cannot
lift their heavy bodies from the ground; without feet, donkeys cannot kick to defend themselves; without
feet, donkeys cannot run from danger. FEET are a very big deal! It’s listed in the middle above because it
should not be the first/only thing you attempt to do. You need to build the TRUST first, to show them that
you can be trusted to give their feet back to them. Yep, FEET are a very big deal!

*Note 1 – I do not train jacks and advise against it unless you have a LOT of experience and have a
reason for keeping an intact jack.

*Note 2 - I use clicker training now, but did not until I’d had my first two donkeys for about three
months. It’s a wonderful thing and I urge people to learn more about it. I am far from the expert on
teaching this but will tell you what has worked for me. There are many books, online courses, FB pages,
Yahoo Groups, etc. The basic premise is that you click to mark a behavior that you want to encourage –
at the EXACT moment that it occurs - and then reward for that behavior. Donkeys learn this VERY fast!
With known biters, you will want to teach this with a protective barrier between you and your donkey
and I won’t go into that too much here. I’ve had two biters here (one is still here as a foster) and they
both left bruises that took weeks to heal. Neither of them bites now. They both responded well to CT
and they both now take treats very, very gently from my hand and from their owner’s hand. You
click/praise/reward for every EFFORT made towards a request.

*Note 3 – It’s best to keep your training sessions short. I use 15-20 minutes and some others use even
less, 10-15 minutes. If you get frustrated, please walk away and come back later. Your donkey will
quickly pick up on frustration and especially anger so it’s best not to go there. Patience is key. Please
ALWAYS end on a positive note. Ask for something you are certain that they can do and then
click/praise/reward.

*Note 4 - You can use a training wand and I sometimes do, sometimes don’t. I made my own by taking
a 2’ long piece of 1” by 2” wood and wrapping soft cloth around the end and covering with an old
loofah mitt and then duct tape where it meets the stick. You can also cut open a tennis ball and put that
on the end of a stick. Just make sure the contact area is soft.

SET UP:
Vicki Abbott suggests using a small pen with shelter to train and that has definitely worked very well for
me. I use a pallet shelter that is roughly 10’ wide, so it works very well with this, but you can set up
anything that works for you. I extend two 5’ high by 10’ long panels from each side of the shelter and then
connect them with another such panel at the other end. You have one large rectangle training pen that is
10’ by 20’ with a shelter at the end. I also hang a halter & lead rope where they can inspect them at their
leisure. Wash the halter with a load of your clothing so that it smells like you. You are going to be their
new best friend so this will be a comfort to them. They are curious and will check them out. It’s ok if they
play with them and they will.

You want your donkey to trust you and not rely on his/her buddies for a bit. You will bring food, you will
provide positive reinforcement, and you will keep his/her area nice & clean. For my first two donkeys,
while bonding, I followed Vicki’s e-clinic (http://calkinsart.net/donkeyinfo/vldonkclinic.html) to a T. Magic. I pretty much do the same now, with a couple of changes.

**MAKING FRIENDS:**

I start outside the pen if I do not know the donkey at all, such as with my Eddie. He was so fearful that he wanted to turn and kick. We made friends through the panels first. I put a chair right next to the fence panel and his hay in a small pan right there between us and we got to know each other. I talked to him in a soft voice so that he would get used to the sound of my voice, I read to him, and I sang to him. I made up silly songs with his name in them. Any time he made any movement towards me, even with his eyes, I would click, praise and toss a treat right in front of him. Yep, it scared him at first, but he ‘got it’ pretty quickly.

*You can start offering the treats from the palm of your hand whenever YOU are comfortable doing so. If YOU are scared, though, it’s not going to go so well, as I have witnessed. Jerking your hand away too fast will result in a dropped treat and may also scare your donkey.*

After a couple of days, I would do the same inside the pen and I would lean over a bit or let my hand dangle where he could bump into it. ‘Click, praise and reward.’ I also let him inspect me. Eddie’s a short guy at 40” tall so a chair worked very well for both of us for longer than I use it for the taller guys/gals.

I made up busy work in his pen, moving very slowly, and talked to him while I did it so that he could get used to my moving around. I used/use this as training time, as well. I walk in circles around them. Keep in mind that this will take some time, usually; they are going to turn to keep you in sight.

I always have my pouch with treats. Any time out there is a teaching moment. ‘Back-up’ & ‘move over’ to yield space, ‘come’, ‘whoa’, ‘walk’ (follow you or beside you) … these things may seem advanced and a lot of people wait until they are on lead to do these things but I have had much more success teaching at liberty, before I even formally introduce them to the halter.

*Tip: when you are enjoying your meals together, after your donkey is used to your presence, open up that halter and place it over the hay. You can even leave it there on top of the hay when you leave. This is just another way for them to associate the halter with a good thing – hay/food – for later introduction. They will have to eat through it and around it and get used to it touching their face.*

**TOUCH & BODY PARTS:**

The first thing I offer for ‘touch’ is my hand or wand, like many other people, but you can also use a wand. I hold out my hand, back side up and ask the donkey to touch. (A very slight & slow movement to help this along is not cheating, if necessary.) Exactly when contact is made, ‘click, praise & reward’ … even if it startles them and even if you have to toss the treat.
‘Touch’ is one of the most valuable things you can teach, in my humble opinion. By touching things, your donkey will see that the item they touch does not bite. It is so handy for introducing new items, for a lifetime.

As I go along, I name body parts. I am building a foundation for later work. This will come in handy for SO many things. I also give a name to everything I use with or around them. I always tell them what I am doing, too. Yes, they are that intelligent; please don’t doubt that. When I hear someone say ‘dumb donkey’, I realize that they know absolutely nothing about donkeys and/or that they have been outsmarted by a donkey.

I start with ‘nose’, of course. So, you are actually teaching TWO things with this first thing – ‘touch’ and ‘nose’.

Your donkey will let you know how fast you can go. You can teach ‘proper’ names or keep it simple, like I do. I work the ‘top’ first. Even though the nose is first, I don’t bother with the rest of their head just yet. Heads are sensitive, just like legs & feet. They are a big deal.

Most donkeys are left-sided just like horses (I’ve had two here that are not) so I always start with that side. Your donkey will let you know which side he prefers. I begin with very light & quick touches and name as I go: left neck, left shoulder, left side, back, left hip, butt … and then do the right side, continuing my circle. I click, praise & reward for every touch.

Most donkeys are going to choose a favorite spot/name. You’ll quickly figure out what it is. I’ll stick to Eddie as an example: he chose ‘shoulder’. For him, it does not matter which side, but ‘shoulder’ is his safe or anchor spot. While sitting in my chair in the pen with him, it was the first body part that he offered to me without being asked. He would very, very slowly sidle over to touch me with his shoulder or place it right in front of me. It took great courage and I was honored. It is still his anchor spot after a year. If he’s wound up about something, I’ll say ‘shoulder’, he will go still, I’ll lay my hand on his shoulder and you can feel all the tension melt. He completely relaxes.

This sounds like a lengthy process, I know. It can be or it can go quickly; it just depends on the individual donkey. It is worth it, no matter how long it takes.

You leave your hand a bit longer each time. You can count out loud or others use sounds to ‘count off’. DO click/praise/reward to maintain the contact. This is reinforcing. As your donkey learns his ‘parts’, you should see him/her start to offer the parts (like Eddie did with his shoulder) as you say/ask for that part. Hold your hand just a bit away and let them touch YOU with the part asked for. If offered, say the name of that part and thank them. Just keep everything positive and show them that you are grateful for the trust and that you recognize both their intelligence and willingness to work with you.

I do legs next, again starting with the left side: front left leg, back left leg, back right leg and then front right leg. I start at the top. Then I go to knees. Then I do feet. I am just touching and naming right now; not attempting to lift, unless they ‘offer’.
Always take advantage of a desirable OFFERED behavior and put it on cue. You may miss some but it’s a great opportunity; just make sure you click at the exact minute they do something as you can easily reinforce the wrong behavior. (Eddie’s great smile? That was something I caught & clicked/treated at just the right moment. Yes, it can be taught, but those ‘captures’ can be great.)

*An example of reinforcing the wrong behavior: clicking after something happens but not WHEN it happens. Say you are teaching to lift feet but you click when they are pulling a foot away or setting the foot down. You’ve just reinforced them taking it away rather than lifting. It just takes some practice and you will, I promise, make some mistakes when starting out.

Lastly, I do their heads and all of the ‘parts’ there: cheeks, bridge (of nose), eyes, chin, jaw and then ears very last. I start with one hand only touching one ‘part’ and using the right/left in front of it. I work up to using both hands on opposite sides at the same time and using the singular word (without left or right). I promise this is not as complicated as it sounds; nor does it take as long as it might sound because by this time they have GOT the way the ‘game’ works. Really, it is a game. It’s a fun learning game. A puzzle game. Donkeys LOVE puzzles! Donkeys are very intelligent. Any donkey that comes here knows this because I have a ‘donkey affirmation wall’ on the pallet shelter which reads “Donkeys are Very Intelligent” in several different languages.

It’s pretty cool to hold your hand up and ask for ‘left ear’ and have them flick it forward to touch your hand? Later, you can also ask for teeth, lips, etc. … we had Vesicular Stomatitis here in our county earlier this year (actually, right down the road) so I did daily mouth checks for blisters and sores. This REALLY came in handy for a few months.

The more communication you have, the easier everything will be later on, which leads us to …

**PICKING UP FEET:**
This is assuming that you have taught the way that I do which is a huge assumption so I’ll cover both scenarios.

If you’ve done things as I do, this *should* be fairly easy but not always, depending on level of fear/past experiences. Eddie did NOT want his left front touched. He was adamant that it was glued to the ground. I went to the other side and no issues so I just worked backwards (for me). Luckily, once he learned the other three, he decided that the left front was ok to lift.

When you are touching their legs, gently pinch the big tendon above his/her fetlock. (Some also use the chestnut area.) At first, this is enough. When they lift the hoof, click/praise/reward. Get this going with all four feet. Pretty soon, you should be able to just point and ask and it should come up. (Not always, but usually.) I do NOT lean into them. I have seen too many people get hurt by encouraging equines to lean on them in this manner and then having a large equine fall on them. I want them to stand square and support their own weight. After they are lifting their own hooves consistently when asked, I slip my hand under the hoof to support it. I do not ever encircle their legs with my hands at this point as it can set off a panic. You want to show them that you can be trusted to give their leg/foot back so set it down quickly but gently at first, working up to longer times. When they are comfortable with this, you can start using a
pick and a brush. I truly love the brush because the motion and the feel prepares them for rasping later on. (I have a palm-sized stiff nylon-bristled brush that I adore. It’s also great at clearing out loose pieces of debris that the pick misses.)

For donkeys that have already had bad experiences with humans (impatient trimmers or abusive previous owners/trainers/trimmers, or used for roping), you may need to try a few other things. Please respect their feet. This is not to scare you but to caution you to be AWARE of body language. Not only do you need confidence but you want to give them confidence, as well.

If I cannot safely lift a foot by hand, I use a very soft hoof rope. You want something that will not burn them. The rope goes around their fetlock. You gently tug upwards. You do not jerk. You do not hold it until they stop fighting. You simply lift and set it back down. Click & reward. “THIS is what I want from you and I am always going to give you your foot back.” It is not a battle. It is not about who is in charge. It is not about who is the boss. It’s showing them what you want and showing them that you can be trusted with their very important asset. If you make it a battle, you are not going to have trust. That’s pretty dangerous with an animal that is deadly accurate with a kick in any direction and has complete control as to how hard/soft they want to deliver that blow. “You are my friend and I care about you. I only want to make sure your feet are healthy.” Talk to them. Your tone carries a lot of information.

Next step up is Dormosedan Gel. This you can get from your vet or have a vet present for trimming. I like it because they remember the experience so, if everyone is very gentle and their feet get fixed up, it is usually much easier to handle feet the next time around. “Hey! This was not so bad the last time. Everyone was nice, showed me respect and my feet feel awesome!” There are some that will fight it but not too many. Make sure you ask your vet about dosage and what the max dosage for YOUR animal is and when/if you can give more, if needed. I have had great luck with giving 40 minutes ahead of time but others have said at least an hour. The gel MUST go under the tongue! You want to administer when the donkey is CALM ... nice relaxed setting and preferably before the trimmer arrives with all of the scary new tools. Sometimes, it may take more than once with the gel. I’ve had one jenny that needed it twice before she finally figured it out. There was another gelding who I believe would have benefitted from a second time with gel, as well.

The last resort is to have your vet lay the donkey down with a cocktail. In my opinion, this should only be used as a last resort. They generally do not remember this as a pleasant experience but it can get the job done if absolutely necessary.

I prefer to take as long as it takes to earn the trust. There are some true emergencies but not all that many. Their feet being a tad too long is not going to kill them. It is worth the time spent to get them to work in partnership with you.

Make sure you let them touch anything you will be using on their feet. I introduce everything by name and I tell them what I will be doing. For trims, I do the same. Let them inspect ALL equipment and ask your trimmer/farrier to do the same. It does not take much time and it makes the whole trimming process much less scary. Let your trimmer make friends with your donkey. Don’t forget to make an introduction there, as well. Have your trimmer hold out the back of their hand for a nose touch and they can do a click/reward or you can do the click/reward part yourself. Just because your donkey trusts YOU does not
mean that they will immediately trust others right away. It’s a huge assumption that can have bad consequences. A new person with an apron and all kinds of jangly equipment is scary! For Eddie (keeping with the same for illustration), my trimmer went out to meet him while she was here to do my others. No trim; just a meet and greet. She laid out all of her tools so that Eddie could inspect them, too, then picked them all up and left without using a single one on him. Just a ‘getting-to-know-you’ meeting? He watched all of them get their feet trimmed and saw their reaction to Holly who is well-loved here by everyone. It makes a difference.

The trim ... if not doing yourself, please be a part of the process. You should be at their head, holding the lead rope. Don’t just turn your donkey over to your farrier/trimmer. Both your donkey and your trimmer will appreciate this. You should be doing CT the entire time. This lets your donkey know that he/she is doing the correct thing and that this is still part of the game ... another piece of the puzzle. Explain to your trimmer the way that you’ve trained and any cues you use. You may want to interview your trimmer prior to arrival. I’ve had one bad experience here and another with a client’s donkey at her place. Impatience, disregard for your training methods/cues, grabbing at legs, threats of violence are all valid reasons for not hiring or firing a trimmer. Ask questions about hoof health from your trimmer and ask them to guide you in what you should be doing to maintain hooves in between trims.

Learning to pick up feet is not a One & Done thing. They need to be handled on a regular basis. Again, FEET are a very big deal! I do what I call ‘pop quizzes’ on anyone here, be it one of my six, a foster or a trainee. Out in the pasture? “Can I please look at that foot?”

**HALTERING**

You probably think that I should have trained this way before now. I’ve found that it works better this way for two reasons:

1 – The head is sensitive, so you are still working with all of the touching and naming while working on feet and getting your donkey used to the feel of your hands touching. You are still desensitizing.

2 – You are giving your donkey more time to work on foot lifting and handling while we work on haltering.

I’ve found that if people train the haltering part first and then the feet, they try to jump to the trimming part way too fast. Donkey is simply not ready. Again, it’s not a one and done thing. You are still building trust. You can also introduce your donkey to other people once you’ve become friends. This will help him/her learn that other people are kind, as well.

By now, your donkey has learned his head parts and has become familiar with the halter & lead rope smell and feel because we hung that up for them to inspect at the beginning. Donkey has played with it a bit, maybe. It does not bite.

Now, we take the halter and ask the donkey to ‘touch’ and then click/reward. Do this a few times until consistent. Make sure to use the word ‘halter’ when doing this. It’s a formal introduction. Then, holding the halter so that the nose piece is open, do some hand touches or other tasks such as backing or coming forward or whatever you have been working on and deliver the reward through the nose opening of the halter. I find this easiest and least awkward to just let the halter hang from my wrist for easy access. The
donkey gets used to the halter encircling his nose. After a few times, hold the halter in place and click reward to reinforce that this is what you want him/her to do. The clicking and reward becomes about the halter as soon as he/she is easily taking the threat through the nose piece and then you can change your request/word to ‘halter’. It’s a pretty seamless switch and you have a new game called Halter.

Gently & slowly, work upwards. Break it up into increments stopping at the bridge of the nose, then the cheeks, then the eyes. Take your time. Click & reward for each time his nose/face goes through that halter. You may get all the way to the top and he/she may still panic a bit when you try to buckle or tie the halter (depending on which type of halter you use). That’s ok … just back up a bit. I will usually do the all the way up part by just laying the strap (with a buckle halter) behind their ears so that they get used to the feel of it there. Yep, it will fall off if they move. That’s ok, too. It may take a few tries before you can secure the halter. Make sure, at this point to not leave it on. All of these are just on/off, on/off, on/off. You want this game to be fun! It’s about them not being afraid of you putting this contraption on their head and removing it which is much scarier than actually wearing it once on.

This may all be done in a short while or it may take a couple of days. It takes as long as it takes. Calm voice, gentleness and click/reward. Do not advance until comfortable with each position. Once consistent and enjoying this new game, leave the halter on for just a bit in the pen while you are there to observe. Do a few clicks/rewards to let them know this is a great thing they are doing. Please don’t leave it on while not under supervision.

Eddie was terrified of the halter. It was foreign to him and his previous foster family could not get anywhere near him with one. Now, I only say the word halter and in goes the nose. I call this self-haltering, even though they cannot secure it. Really, they are now doing all the work? I say ‘halter’ around here and mine all line up. “Pick me! I want a halter!”

**Leading**

If you’ve worked on the walk, whoa, back-up stuff while in the pen with your donkey (see Making Friends), this will be even easier.

They’ve had the lead rope there to inspect at their leisure, so it should not be scary but, as always, name it and introduce it. Ask them to touch and click/reward. I touch them in all of their named spots using the rope. Does not hurt.

Then, I drape it over their backs and let them walk around with it a bit. It may scare them if it falls. It’s ok. Get that out of the way. When calm, click/reward.

Then, I attach the lead rope to the halter and do the same; drape it over their backs and let them walk around. It’s going to fall and it is going to touch their legs and it may scare them to have the snaky rope ‘chasing’ them. That’s ok, too. When calm, click/reward.

They will teach themselves to stop when they step on it.

I go through all of the tasks with it draped … it’s just there but they are doing everything at liberty. Walk, whoa, back-up, etc. are all done while not even touching the rope.
Eventually, I will take the rope in my hands and do the same. Small circles around the pen using ‘walk’ and ‘whoa’ and ‘back-up’. We do not graduate to a larger pen until we are both comfortable with this and I move to gradually larger sized pens.

**NOTES:** Written in spurts during breaks from a project that I am working on. I am sure there are errors in here and I’ll go back & correct them this weekend – grammar, spelling, etc. Sorry! Feel free to point anything out. I am good at taking criticism (military).

*This is what works for me. There are a billion ways to train. I have found that this order and method work very well. I go as slow/fast as the donkey wants to learn. The time varies depending on the donkey and his/her past experiences with humans and their individual personalities.*

*If someone else trains your donkey, please ask lots of questions and be involved. Please follow up at home if trained elsewhere and you should be advised how best to do that.*

*I did not put in each time that you should click/praise/reward. This would have been even longer. You’ll get used to it and it will become second nature. ANY effort made toward a request should be click/praise/reward. You are communicating that your donkey is doing what you want. You are not using it just to teach a single thing but using it to further ‘shape’ the behavior, as well.*

*The training isolation seems to really bother some people. I’ve given in once and put a buddy with a trainee. It does not work well. You want the donkey to trust YOU and become your friend; not rely on a buddy or a herd. You are building a donkey/human relationship and dialogue. Even side-by-side pens work well; just not more than one donkey in the same training pen. Having said that, if there is a super good buddy that your donkey is close to, having that buddy present when it comes time to do the actual trim can be very calming for a donkey.*

*There IS no such thing as training just for feet. Does not work like that. FEET are a very big deal. You need to build the TRUST first and that takes time. It’s just not a good idea to start/end there.*

**FEET ARE A VERY BIG DEAL!**