

Starting Your Miniature Horse In Harness



The Miniature Horsemanship Way!

But there are many roads to Rome ...



Primary Goals

A safe, sane & happy driving horse.

1. Confident in cues and communication.
2. Balanced and strong enough for the job.
3. Comfortable with the cart.



Secondary Goals

Winning in the show ring.

or

Competitive in combined driving.

or

Ready for fun on the trails.

or

???



Michael Gale



First, Find a Horse

- At least two years of age, three before pulling weight.
- Physically and mentally mature.
- Sound and healthy.
- Comfortable with general handling.



One Size Does Not Fit All

- Know your horse and tailor your plan from the start.
- Listen to your horse – tension is the enemy! Watch for any sign and back up or slow down until they are comfortable, calm and relaxed again.
- Learn all you can from everyone and every opportunity. Every horse is different – fill your toolbox with lots of reasonable, well thought out options



Timing Your Training for Success

Choose to work your horse when they are best capable of being focused and engaged.

- Not just before feeding time.
- Not when they've spent 12 hours in a stall.



Stage One: Harnessing & Bitting



What You Need

1. An open bridle with a non-pinching, single or double jointed bit.
2. A surcingle with crupper or harness saddle with tugs tied/buckled down.
3. A length of string or twine about 8 feet long.
4. A halter and lead rope.
5. A safe, enclosed area that the horse is comfortable in. A large stall or their usual paddock with any hazards removed would work well.



What You Do

1. Allow horse to get accustomed to surcingle and crupper.
2. Allow horse to get accustomed to bridle and bit.
3. Put on sliding sidereins.
4. Turn them loose in a safe, closely supervised environment.



Why It Works

- Removes the element of human error. Timing of the release is everything. With this approach, the second the horse releases, so does the pressure.
- Horses learn best by problem solving. Skills they have worked out on their own make more sense to them and are more solidly understood.
- Allows them to move their feet of their own accord.



Allow Horse to Get Accustomed to Surcingle and Crupper

- Might take 5 minutes, might take 5 days – listen to your horse.
- Don't tie your horse. Claustrophobia is a common cause of tension. If they're not comfortable enough to stand for harnessing without being restrained then they're not ready to move on.
- Allow the reaction – let them figure it out. The harness is sticking with them and not hurting them.
- Walk them around. If they trot well in hand, ask for a trot. Work on other skills (ground work, obstacles.)



Allow Horse to Get Accustomed to Bridle and Bit

- Again, don't tie your horse. Leave the halter and leadrope on, and put the open bridle on over top.
- Don't try to lead your horse from the bit until much farther into their training.
- Hold the crownpiece of the bridle in one hand and the bit in the other. Use the thumb of your bit hand to open the horse's mouth and the fingers to guide the bit in gently as you lift it with the right hand. Once the bit is in their mouth, switch hands and use the right to cover each ear and bend it forward. Bridle your whole hand. Fit the bridle – it's easier to put it on for the first time quite loose and then adjust.
- Once the bridle is on and adjusted, lead the horse (by the halter) around and let them think things through for a bit.



Put on Sliding Sidereins

- Sliding sidereins run from the girth, between the horse's front legs, through the bit on either side and tie to the rein turrets.
- They should be adjusted so that the horse can put his head in nearly every normal comfortable position.
- Sliding sidereins allow much more freedom of movement than standing sidereins and through encouraging a forward down stretching of the head and neck help create a foundation for correct movement.
- Never adjust sliding sidereins so that they pull the horse's nose in or so that he is unable to release the pressure on his mouth.





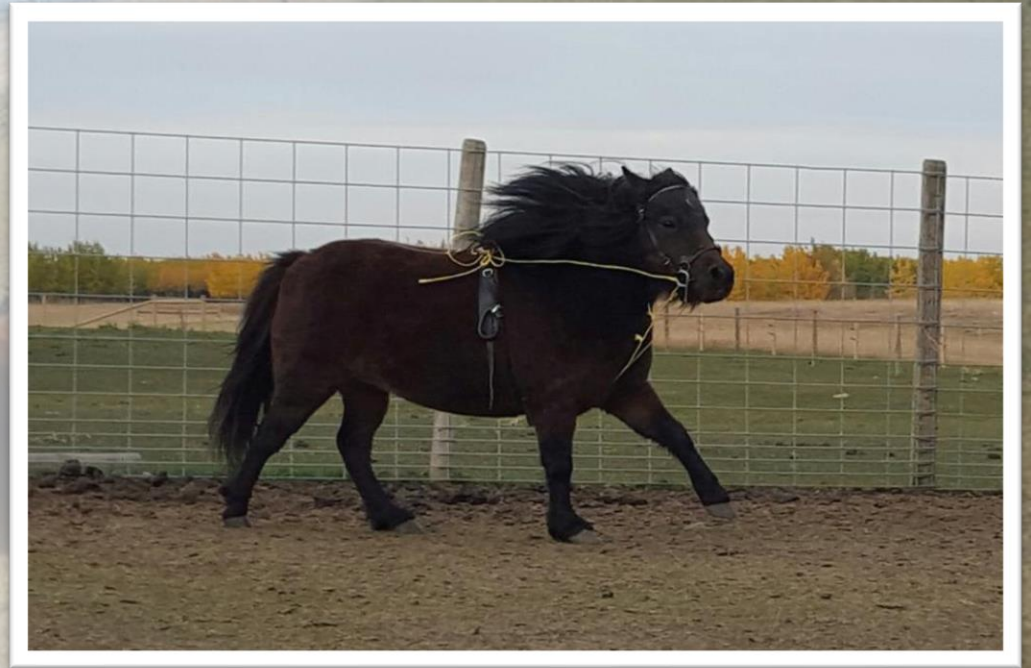
Turn them Loose and Let Them “Problem Solve”

- Choose a safe enclosure where they feel comfortable – their usual pen with any hazards and herdmates removed works well.
- If you choose to work in a round pen or arena, ensure that your horse is comfortable and relaxed in that environment. Keeping a friend in sight can make a big difference.
- Don't leave them unsupervised, but initially don't interfere unless necessary. They will back up, turn in circles, test the sidereins. Let them work it out on their own.
- Once they are comfortable and moving on their own, can encourage them to trot as well.



Other Things You Can Introduce At This Stage:

1. Movement away from you.
2. Introduction of transitions.
3. General handling and relaxations.



When To Move on To Stage 2:

1. Comfortable carrying the bit.
2. Relaxed about harnessing.
3. Willing to move without tension.



Alternative Approach

Well fitted halter with lead ropes/reins on side rings. (Or a sidepull.)

Gentle, intermittent pressure (“wiggles”), releasing as soon as you get a response.

Ground drive from halter, letting them carry the bit, until they are completely comfortable, and responding well to halter pressure, then switch to the bit.



“Go Slow, You’ll Get There Faster”

Building a solid foundation of understanding before progressing to ground driving will support ever subsequent step of driving training.

