

# **CHAPTER 2. HARNESSING AND TRAINING**

## **2.4 TRAINING OF DONKEYS**

### **2.4.2 TRAINING THE DONKEY TO USE THE HARNESS**

#### **SUMMARY OF THE TRAINING PROVIDED IN STEP 1**

The First Step in training the donkeys has been described above in **Module 2.4.1**. This will normally have occupied a period of 2 or 3 days and covered the following items:

- catching the animal, placing a rope loop and calming the animal
- the use of voice commands to make it walk
- the use of voice commands to make it stop, whilst tugging on the rope
- approaching the donkey cautiously, calming it with the voice

The continuation of the training exercise is described below, making use of more of the voice commands which have now been decided upon by the trainers during Step I in **Module 2.4.1**.

### **STEP 2 - HARNESSING AND WALKING**

#### **PLACING THE HALTER ON THE DONKEY**

The untrained donkey should first be caught and the rope loop placed around its neck as described in Step 1. It is calmed down sufficiently for the halter to be placed over the head and a lead rope about 2 metres long is attached to the chin ring. Calm the animal again and remove the rope loop before starting the walking exercise.

#### **WALKING THE DONKEY**

Hold the lead rope close to the halter. Now, standing in front and slightly to one side, give the command "**Walk!**" and lead the animal forward. An assistant may be required to lightly whip its rump but do not abuse the animal.

Once it has walked some distance, give the command "**Stop!**" and make it halt with the lead rope. Repeat the exercise, rewarding the animal with a rest each time it is correctly done.

It helps considerably if a trained donkey follows the same exercise alongside the untrained animal - a young donkey should be trained when walking alongside its mother.

### INTRODUCING TURNS

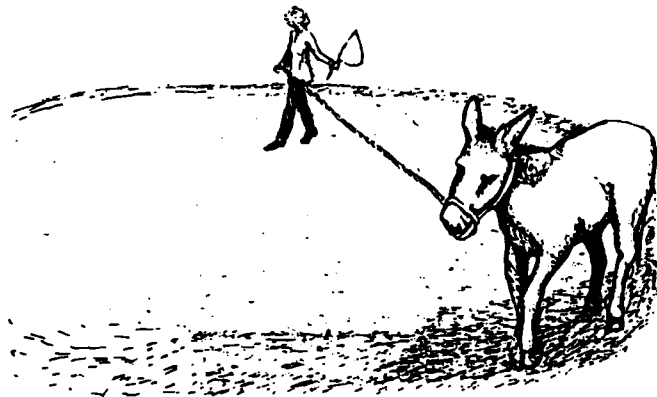
Continue practising the "Walk!" and "Stop!" commands and eventually introduce "Turn right!" and "Turn Left!". When turning, still hold the lead rope close to the halter and pull the donkey's head to the side where the turn is to be made.

These walking exercises on a closely held lead rope should extend over 3 to 4 days in two sessions of about an hour and a half.

### EXTENDING THE LEAD ROPE

As the above exercises are repeated, gradually the lead rope should be held further from the animal's head so that it becomes more accustomed to obeying the voice commands than being led.

The trainer can eventually stand still, holding the donkey at the end of about 5 metres of lead rope, whilst the animal circles him obeying the commands to "Walk!" and "Stop!" (Fig.1).



*Fig. 1 Training the donkey at the end of a lead rope*

*Source: Watson 1983*

### **FITTING THE HARNESS**

The full harness should not be fitted at this stage. Only the breast band and straps or the collar and straps (depending on the harness adopted) should be fitted.

The harness is fitted only after the halter is already in place. The animal will need to be calmed before it becomes used to the new harness.

The walking exercises on a closely held lead rope should be repeated until the animal accepts the harness. Gradually the training can return to walking in circles on the long lead rope as before.

It will probably take between one and two weeks until all the exercises described above, are performed with the harness fitted.

## **STEP 3 - PULLING LOADS**

### **DRIVING THE DONKEY FROM BEHIND**

Before the donkey starts to pull a load, it must learn to be driven from behind. The halter and part harness are fitted as in Step 2 and the reins fitted to the halter (and a bit fitted, in the rare event that it is decided that this is to be used).

Repeat the walking exercises using the voice commands for "**Walk!**", "**Stop!**", "**Turn Left!**" and "**Turn Right!**" until the donkey is fully controlled from behind. This will probably take several days of patient exercise.

A new command "**Reverse!**" should also be introduced at this stage. An assistant may be required to stand in front of the animal and persuade it to move backwards by holding its halter and pushing.

### ATTACHING THE TRACES AND SWINGLETREE

Harness the donkey as usual and attach both traces together with the steering reins. The right-hand trace should first be tied to the harness so that it does not drag on the ground but the left-hand one is allowed to trail, pulling the swingletree.

Drive the donkey in a left-hand circle from behind, but with an assistant holding a lead rope on the halter so that it is well controlled and is forced to the left. The objective is to accustom the animal to the new sounds made as the hitch system drags over the ground.

After some time, the other trace may be attached to the swingletree and the exercise repeated. It is safer to also attach a rope to the centre of the swingletree to hold it clear of the animal's feet in case it becomes frightened and risks to become tangled in the traces.

Normally a day or two is sufficient for the animal to become used to the new sensations and noises, after which a load may be attached.

### PULLING A LOG

Although some trainers use a single size of log as an introduction to pulling loads, it is preferable to start this stage of the training with a light log weighing only about 10 kg.

Lead the animal to the front of the log and attach the swingletree so that it will be dragged along its length. Drive the animal from behind and practise the commands to "Walk!", "Stop!", "Turn Right!" and "Turn Left!".

After a couple of days, a larger log weighing about 20 kg should be used for the exercise.

### DURATION OF THE TRAINING IN STEP 3

Training requirements can vary greatly and depend upon both the ability of the trainer and the temperament of the animal. A time of between 7 and 10 days will normally be sufficient for the exercises described above for Step 3 and before the animal starts to work in a pair and with implements.