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Selection & Training of a Driving Horse

**Selection:**

Driving a miniature horse is both fun and rewarding, whether for show or pleasure. Driving your miniature can be a great way to condition your horse, muscling up both the front and rear end. The majority of miniatures that I have trained to drive over the years really enjoy driving. We use a system for training that has worked on most all of the horses, starting with some basic training and gradually developing them as they complete each step, never rushing a horse before he is ready to do the next step in training.

When selecting a driving prospect, look at the horse's overall conformation, his neck should fit well onto his shoulders in such a way that he naturally can hold his head and neck in a good driving position, coming up high out of the shoulders. A horse with a very low neck set, that the neck comes out straight from the withers, will have a harder time bringing his head and neck up into a pretty headset. The horse should have a fairly clean throatlatch for ease in flexing his neck. I like to see a laid back shoulder on a driving prospect, with a pretty neck coming out nice and high. Watch the horse move at the trot, he should bring his hocks well up under him, flexing both front and rear and moving free in the shoulder. Short trappy strides will not make a competitive driving prospect. The length and angle of the pastern also greatly affects the stride of a horse. A horse that is really straight up and down in the pasterns will normally have a shorter choppy stride. I look for a horse that is consistently light on his feet when on the move and naturally carries himself with a nice head and neck position. I like a horse that drives off his hocks really well, engaging them up under him; this is where the power is in your driving horse. A horse with a lot of natural talent can be developed into a good driving horse by training him slowly and consistently. Developing a great headset and developing good manners and consistency in the gaits will take time and patience. The horse you choose for driving should have a balance trot in the front and back, lifting his hocks and knees equally. Some horses can be helped to some extent by training, but they need a good foundation of natural talent to excel in the show ring.

I would recommend that if you are new to showing or just wanting to learn to drive your horse for pleasure, it would benefit you greatly to watch some classes at a show. You can compare the different types of driving horses, pleasure, country pleasure and roadster horses and see the difference in their gaits, headset, and speed. If you have a horse that has previously been trained and you want to show him, get advice from an experienced trainer or show person and have them help you decide which classes your horse is best suited for according to his manners, gait, headset and speed and your level of capability in driving.

### **Early Basic Training:**

I begin to train our horses to drive as late two year olds, in the fall of the two year old year, or OLDER.

This gives the horse more time to mature, both mentally and physically. It is best if the horse is already trained to lead, tie, stand quietly to be groomed, and work on a lunge line. I do a lot of the early training in a round pen, as the horse is confined and I have more control, with all of his attention being on me when being worked. When leading your horse, stay at the left side, keep the horse walking willingly, keeping even with your shoulder, practice saying whoa in a calm voice and ask the horse to stop and stand. Cluck to the horse each time you ask your horse to walk on with you. When you have accomplished this and the horse is use to the signals, go ahead and teach your horse to lunge if he has not already been taught.

You will need a lunge line about 15 to 20 feet in length with a snap on the end. Attach the lunge line to the ring of the halter and have your excess line neatly coiled in your left hand. Have a lunge whip in your right hand and gradually let your horse out on the line some, keeping the whip aimed at the rear or slight behind the rear of the horse. Keep your body in line with the whip, keeping the horse propelled in forward motion by rolling the whip or snapping it and clucking. It is best to teach the horse to lunge in an enclosed area, if possible; a small paddock or round pen will work. Start him out on a bit shorter line and as he gets the idea of what you want you can let out the line more and give him a larger circumference. When you ask your horse to stop, say whoa, pulling him a bit to get his attention, hold the whip straight up with your hand around the lash and whip base, and slightly pull him in to face you, but when he stops, he should stay in his spot, not coming forward. Then you can switch hands and reverse him. He will learn what the whip is for and respect it, and also he will be use to stopping at your command. This will also be a good foundation for teaching your horse manners and respect. If your horse doesn't stop very well at first, you may need to wind in the lunge line some making a tighter circle until he does stop and face you. It may take a few times to teach your horse what you are asking of him. Start your workouts at about 10 to 12 minutes if the horse is not already in working condition, and then gradually increase the time of his workouts. I normally increase the time of the workouts until they reach 20 to 30 minutes depending on the type of workout we are doing.

When your horse feels comfortable with the leading, standing for grooming, lunging and is consistently doing what you are asking, it is time for the next step in training. You will need to have an equine dentist or veterinarian check your horse's teeth to see if he has wolf teeth or any other problems prior to putting a bit in his mouth. If he has teeth that are bothering him it will cause him a lot of pain when driving and can be the start of some very bad habits. I begin to put a snaffle bit in the horse's mouth by attaching small D snaps on the bit and hooking them to his halter. I let him wear the halter and bit for a couple of hours for three or four days, making sure the bit is up high enough in his mouth to create a wrinkle at each corner of the mouth. You will also need to make sure the bit is large enough in width for your horse so that the bit does not pinch him. He will open and close his mouth a lot and roll his tongue under the bit as he gets use to it. Make sure that there is nothing the horse can get his halter or bit caught on in the area he is in while doing this.

I then start to lunge the horse in a surcingle and crupper for a few days. Tie the horse up while introducing him to the new parts of the harness. Let him see and smell it. Put the surcingle and crupper on the horse gently, making sure not to cinch him up too tight. You should be able to put three fingers between the girth area and the horse's lower ribs area. The crupper will feel strange to the horse and he may be frightened of it. You should have the crupper attached to where there is some give to it but not flopping. You should be able to raise it up by the long part of the strap a bit, but if it is leaning to one side or the other it is too loose. Attach a lunge line on your horse and step back quickly as your horse may buck some when feeling the pressure of the girth or crupper. This is normal and most horses work out of that in a few workouts.

When your horse feels comfortable while working with the surcingle and crupper and has consistently stood quietly while you put them on and take them off, he is ready to add the driving bridle with blinders. He will not be able to see you when he has his driving bridle depending on where you are so keep that in mind. Talk to him when adjusting a harness or working around him so he will know where you are. When adjusting the bridle to your horse, his eye should be at the center of the blinders and the bit should be up in his mouth enough to create a wrinkle. If you have the bit too low in his mouth, he can get his tongue over it and cause him a lot of discomfort and also you will have less control over him if he does that. Buckle the throatlatch piece so that when your horse is flexing his neck the throatlatch piece will not be too tight against his throat, you should be able to put a couple of fingers under it when flexing the horse's headset. You can put a halter over the bridle and work him lunging a few times with it until he gets used to it. Make sure your side check or overcheck is wrapped under the throat strap to keep it from flopping into the horse's face during lunging at this time.

After a few workouts, add a caveson, or nose band to the bridle. The caveson's purpose is to keep the horse's mouth closed, which will give you more power over the horse when driving. A good driving horse will be quiet in the mouth, not opening the mouth a lot when driving. A horse that is just learning however will normally chew the bit some or open and close his mouth a little at first. A caveson will help to teach the horse to keep his mouth closed; you should have it fairly tight, only a finger should fit between the caveson and the horse. Your caveson should be about an inch or a little more below the bottom of the cheekbone. If you have your caveson too low it will interfere with turning your horse. When your horse is use to lunging with the full bridle on, you can start adding side check reins to his harness, making what we call a biting rig. Side check reins consist of two small leather straps with a bit of elastic or surgical tubing to give it some stretch, with a buckle or snap at each end. Attach one end to the terrot or ring on the saddle part of your harness and the other snap to the bit of the horse. It is best if this is done in a round pen or smaller enclosed paddock. The first few times you have the side check reins on have them a bit loose and then gradually tighten them a bit as the horse learns to begin to bring his nose in a bit. Don't expect your horse to have a perfect headset the first few times, this takes a lot of time to develop. The biting rig will really help your horse to develop the muscles in his neck that he needs to keep his head in a flexed position for driving. You can round pen your horse with the biting rig on and as he brings his head into a flexed position, the side check reins will become slack, giving him a reward for bringing his head in. When your horse consistently works freely in the round pen with his neck in a flexed position, and is working calmly, he is ready to add the side check or overcheck to position his head set at the level desired. If you have

worked a lot with the lunge line, your horse should stop and stand when you tell him whoa in a nice calm voice.

When first adding the side check or overcheck on your horse, have it in a looser position and work him, gradually over time taking it up a notch at a time until your horse has his head in a good position and is flexing to the bit. I like to see the horse's head in a vertical position, or near vertical.

When your horse is working comfortably in the biting rig in your round pen or small paddock and is working with his neck arched and near vertical or vertical on his head set, you can begin line driving him. This teaches the horse to turn, stop, bend his neck to the rein, and back readily. This simulates you driving him, only you will be walking behind the horse. Taking some time to line drive him until he will walk readily, trot, turn both ways equally, stop and stand and back readily will really pay off for you when it's time to hook him up. I start line driving in the round pen at first, because when you start line driving your horse he will be somewhat slow to turn at first. This is normal and it will take several times of ground driving to accomplish a consistency in your horse's workout. Your horse may want to keep turning around so that he can try to see you. This is normal and most horses try this a few times when first learning to ground drive. When he does this straighten him back out and step a little closer behind him and be ready as soon as he starts to try to turn around and tap him lightly with the whip to encourage him to go on straight ahead. He will learn to accept you walking behind him with some time. Always have a driving whip as your aid when line driving or driving your horse.

The first few times you line drive your horse, do not put the reins through the terrots, just lay them on the upper saddle part of the harness. The first few times you line drive your horse just ask him to walk, stop and stand. After he gets use to you being behind him line driving he will consistently go straight and then put them through the terrots, these are the rings on the saddle where the reins thread through. When the horse line drives well, backs well four or five steps, stands quietly, walks off and trots and stays in control, then it's time to add the martingale to the harness. The martingale is a strap of leather that hooks to the girth and comes up between the horse's front legs, and has a fork with two rings at the end where the reins go through. The martingale should be adjusted in length so that there is only a slight V when the horse is being worked. If you have the martingale too short it will be more severe on the horse's mouth and also will pull the horse's head down into a lower position. The martingale when used correctly will help the horse flex his head in a nice position and also gives you a better headset. I work the horse a few times with the martingale, making sure he is comfortable with it. I then work the horse some, turning in serpentines and bending his neck right and left, practice lots of turns and good flexing.

### **Indian Shafts:**

When your horse has been line driving smoothly for a number of workouts, is mannered, stands quietly and backs readily, walks and trots easily, then it's time for the Fake Shafts or Indian Shafts as we call them.

The purpose of these Indian shafts are to get the horse use to the shafts touching him in the flanks as you turn and also the feel of them going down the sides. It will also make some noise as

it drags behind him and will get your horse prepared for the cart. We made ours out of PVC Pipe or you can use wood. The first time or two you use the Indian shafts have your horse in the round pen or small paddock. Have a helper hold your horse while you put the shafts through the shaft loops of your harness. Take your shaft tie strap and wind it around the PVC shaft and through the shaft loop and then wrap in front of the shaft loop and back down to the buckle. This will help the PVC shaft stay in place. It should not be excessively tight or too loose as to let the shafts flop up and down in the shaft loops. Have your helper attach a lead to the bit, or have a halter over the bridle and attach a lead to the halter, but keeping to the side. Line drive your horse with the Indian shafts while your helper leads the horse, being sure to stay at the side of the horse's head. Some horses are frightened by the Indian shafts and will buck or try to run a bit. With the help and your previous line driving, your horse should learn to accept them pretty easily if all goes well. When your horse will turn and stop and walk willingly with them on after two or three workouts, more if needed, then you are ready to hook up to the cart. The Indian shafts really help to prepare a horse for the final step.

### **Hooking your Horse up:**

The first couple of times you hook your horse up you should have a helper place a halter over the bridle of the horse and hook a lead to the snap. Make sure the halter does not hinder the use of the bridle. The helper should stand at the side of the horse and out of the way of the shafts.

You will need to add your breast piece of your harness prior to hooking up to the cart. A horse actually pushes against the breast piece to pull the cart. It needs to be positioned so that it is just above the point of shoulder. If you have it too low, it will interfere with the horse's movement and if it's too high, it can restrict the horse's airflow. The point of shoulder can be felt with your hand at the side of the front of the horse's chest; you will feel a protruding sharper bone. The bottom of your breast piece should be fitted a little above this point of shoulder. Bring the cart up and over the horse's hips and run the shafts through the shaft loops. The traces or long two straps of the breast piece will go back and attach to the cart and should be firm but not too loose. If they are too loose, they will sag and lose their effectiveness in the horse's pulling the cart. You will then need to secure the shafts by taking the shaft ties around the shaft. Take the tie strap and bring it up and over the shaft towards you and then wrap it around the shaft and through the shaft loop and then round in front of the shaft loop also. This will help to keep the cart from slipping forward and secure the cart well. These shaft ties should be just firm but not too tight. If they are too tight it will cause the straps to come up tight under the horse's belly when the driver is in the cart. If they are too loose the cart can slide forward too close to the horse's rear end which can be dangerous if the horse hits the cart with his rear hooves when working. The shafts should be adjusted so that they are slightly above level at all times. If they are level or below level, it can put too much weight on the back of the horse when driving, making the horse sore. There is a buckle on the shaft loops to adjust the height of the shaft loops.

When your cart is hooked up, and your helper is holding a lead snapped to your horse's halter over the bridle, then have your helper walk off staying to the side of the horse's head, go ahead and line drive your horse. Make sure you have your whip in your hands too for control and in the event your horse would start going backwards quickly you will have your whip to tap him to urge him forward. Line drive your horse a bit with the empty cart, helper leading while you are line driving. I do the controlling of the horse when doing this; the helper is just there in case

the horse really gets frightened or out of control. Most horses, if taken along slowly and are consistent in all the previous steps, usually accept this fairly well. The noise of the cart may take a few rounds to get use to. When your horse will walk and stop and turn well with the empty cart, then stop and go ahead and get in. Have your helper walk holding the lead on the horse, but you will be doing the main controlling and turning, stopping, etc. If your horse does well for a few minutes and seems to accept it, stop there for the day and unharness him. The second day use the helper again, and if all goes well and the horse seems comfortable then have your helper unhook his lead and just stay nearby while you drive him on your own. The first few days just walk and then ask your horse to trot slowly at first for short distances and then ask him to come back to the walk. Practice stopping and standing. After a few days gradually ask your horse to trot on a little more, gradually gaining a little more speed after he is consistently driving quietly and mannerly. As your workout times increase, try to work on the consistency of your speeds in driving. For instance, work on keeping a nice even speed for your collected trot, with your horse's head and neck flexed, and then practice going on to the working trot, trying to be smooth on your transition of the gaits. Practice coming down to a walk and then back into the trot until your horse does this smoothly and without hesitation. When driving in the collected trot then urge your horse into the working trot and encourage him to lengthen his stride and move on a bit, then come back down to the collected trot.

When your horse is working well and gaining confidence, you will need to practice your horse in with another horse prior to showing him. Practice walking at first so that he can see and hear the other horse. Then when he is comfortable with the other driving horse in the arena, practice passing and being passed by the other driving horse. Be courteous when passing, making sure you have plenty of room to go back to the rail and not cutting the other driving horse off. You will need to practice passing the other horse and maintaining a consistent speed and doing so smoothly. Practice standing and backing in the lineup. Your horse should back four or five steps readily and then walk back up straight into the lineup. This will take time and patience.

Normally a driving horse will take from 3 to 6 months or more to be ready for a show. The first few times you take your driving horse to a show, try to allow for practice time in the arena the evening before your classes if at all possible. This can really make a big difference in your horse's performance when he is still a green driving horse. The first year of showing a driving horse is a learning experience. Taking time and having lots of patience will really pay off for you and your driving horse. You will have many years of enjoyment out of a well trained driving horse!

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