

Showing a Miniature at Halter

Little Hooves 4-H Club: Aimed at 4-H Showing

While there are certain similarities between showmanship and showing at halter (halter classes) there are also differences. In a halter class, the **horse** alone is being judged on conformation and movement, but the handler can help greatly to show the horse to its best advantage. Conditioning (feeding, exercise, neck sweats), preparation (clipping, make-up), and training are also important. In a halter class, horses are lead in at the walk, then they are trotted past the judge (or judges), to see how well they move, and then are set up for inspection, usually head to tail. Their teeth may be inspected to check the bite. Follow instructions given in the ring and keep a safe distance from other horses. Your horse needs to stand square and look alert, with ears forward and "showing neck" when a judge comes by. When judges are looking elsewhere, you can both relax a bit but stay in the same place, usually with the handler in front of the horse.

Training for halter assumes the horse already walks and trots on the lead. The horse must be trained to stand square, usually by hand setting legs, and not "creep" or lean forward, and then put their ears forward and use their necks for the judge. Training can be done any time the horse is being led with a halter and lead. First step is to get them to stand still. Ask for a "whoa" then stand in front of the horse, facing his head. When in this position, you want him to stand and not move! Keep saying whoa if you need to, and if they stay still for even a few seconds at first, reward them by moving next to them and scratching their withers. If he steps forward, back him up and then stop with another "whoa".

Setting of legs can be done at the same time as teaching "whoa". I start by using the position of the right hind as the start of the "square" and then move the left hind next to it, and a comfortable distance apart. Then the right front, and finally the left front are set. This may take several days before you can get the hind feet to stay put and start to work on the front feet! It is also important that the feet be set so the horse is square and not too stretched, and that all 4 feet are pointed straight ahead. This is much easier if the horse has straight legs, but a handler can do wonders. Of course, if the horse is trained for showmanship and can be set up off the halter & lead, that is even better. If you do hand set legs, you must be careful that in positioning the legs you keep hold of the lead but do not pull the horse out of position! Bending down should also be done by bending the knees and making sure there are no clothing gaps visible to judges or spectators.

The goal of this training is to be able to set the horses feet, stand back with a loose lead, and have the horse stand still and stay focused on you. In the beginning, it is very common to stand too close to the horse which does not show him to his best advantage. A secondary goal is to make sure that the horse is holding his head up high and will shift his weight back when you ask, to get the best response to your cues for neck and ears. This should be done by training and not by jerking the lead rope! If you watch halter classes you will see all kinds of contortions, rope jerking, knee bends, arm exercises, etc. but you should be able to show with a minimum of these actions. You do need to "bait" the horse with grass, peppermints, crinkly noises, a hat, or whatever works to get the neck arched and ears forward. Just try not to disturb the other horses. And of course, keep your distance from other horses in the ring, especially if the class includes "big" horses.

Examples from major miniature shows - note that the hand holds treats of some kind which are given after the judge moves away.



More tips: The horse in the second photo is a bit stretched, but he may show best that way. If the judge wants to see him less stretched, he will ask to "square him". The handler then needs to move front or back feet until horse is square, and then re-show (ask for ears).

Most horses will look better if you scratch them over the high point on their croup so that they level their topline. Practice to find what works best for each horse.

If the horse moves a foot when the judge is looking at your horse, keep showing and fix the foot after the judge moves on. You should never block the judge's view but don't need to move like you do in showmanship.

To show teeth (practice this) just move the lips back so the teeth are visible. Hold the head higher or lower, if needed, to make the bite look the best.

It is helpful to wear something (e.g. a jacket) with pockets that are easy to get your hands in. Some horses will get their ears up just from the motion of putting your hand in a pocket.

Show halters: Be sure to find a halter that fits and is a complimentary color. Halters with closed rings are safer than those with "U"-shaped noseband ends, as the latter can come apart in the ring. Also, buckle on leads are less likely to come off than the ones with snaps, all important factors if you are showing a youngster.

When walking/trotting for judge, they need to see how the horse moves so if the horse canters, bucks, or does not move straight, stop and try again. Also, the judge will have a better side view of the trot if you are at or near the end of the lead and not at your usual position between head and shoulder.

Clipping and conditioning are not covered here, but make sure that at least the bridle path, fetlocks, muzzle, and ears are neatly clipped. Add some baby oil gel to shine up the muzzle and over the eye, put some hair gel in the mane and foretop to keep them under control, put on your show halter, be sure you are wearing the proper number and go proudly into the ring!

Program will include putting on neck sweats and practice setting up and showing a mini.