

Miniature Hunter and Jumper In-Hand

Little Hooves 4-H Club/On Target Miniatures

Most miniature horses love to jump, but they should not be asked to jump until they are at least 2 1/2 years of age - 3 years is even better. Just like with trail and showmanship, it is important that the mini lead well and walk and trot next to you, not getting ahead or behind, and turn well in both directions at the trot before you attempt any jumps. Jumping can also be done at a canter, but only if you can easily keep up.

Hunter and jumper classes are judged differently but very similar to the way they are judged for riding. Hunters are judged on their form over the jump - how they tuck their knees and round their backs - and also how smoothly they jump the course, with no refusals, knock-downs, or touches. The mini should maintain the same gait (trot or canter) over the entire course, should take the corners smoothly, jump the middle of the jump and stay along side the handler. In jumper classes, form does not matter and only faults are counted - 3 faults for a refusal and 4 for each knockdown. In both hunter and jumper classes, circling between jumps (for example if the mini gets ahead of you) is faulted, and minis are disqualified after a total of 3 refusals. If the mini stops at a jump but does not back up and then jumps, it is NOT a refusal; it will still count against you in hunter but not jumper. There are different rules for what to do about ties in jumper classes, with some shows raising the jumps to break ties, and others timing additional go-rounds. Know the rules for your show!

Minis are usually started over ground poles, spaced properly for trotting. Then a low cross rail can be added, so that they trot over the poles and then jump the cross rail and learn to jump in the middle of the jump. The handler must be careful to steer the mini to the middle of the jump and be prepared for it to duck out, while also being ready to raise their right hand as the mini goes over the jump. The lead is often attached to a chain which is threaded through the halter and under the chin as it is for showmanship, and attached to upper halter ring on the off (right) side. This provides a bit more control and also keeps the halter from sliding on the face where it might get into an eye. Where the hand holds the lead for best control will vary by mini and their level of training. To start out, you may need to hold the lead fairly close to the halter, aim the mini at the jump, and then move around the end of the jump yourself while the mini jumps. It is not as easy as it may look! A well-trained hunter might be held near the middle of the lead with the end in the left hand and will look like it is taking the jumps all on its own.

Some minis may benefit from starting over a solid jump such as downed tree about a foot in diameter. This will prevent plowing into a jump to knock it down, which some minis will do with cross rails, especially if they don't understand what is being asked. Once the mini is jumping the cross rail or solid jump consistently, the jump can be changed to a vertical at about 12-15" in height. This is also a good time to add interesting items such as flowers, towels, wading pools, or anything that can be SAFELY jumped. Additional jumps can also be added, usually 15 feet or so apart, until the mini can jump a course of 4-8 jumps consistently. Do not punish the horse for refusals or knockdowns, but simply repeat them, even if the jump has to be lowered to do this. Reward a good job with praise, pats, or grass, and only quit on a good note. **Do not jump too many jumps at a time, especially early in training - 6-8 jumps is a good number in one day for a mini.** Also, be sure that the mini is warmed up at least a few minutes at the trot before taking the first jump. At a show, try to take at least one warm up jump before your class, but don't tire the horse out either.

Troubleshooting

It is very important to have the mini moving at the proper pace - neither too fast nor too slow - in order to jump its best. Some horses might need to be speeded up (Princess) while others need to be slowed down (Cowboy, Mira). Sometimes for training you may need to trot the horse around the outside of the jumps until they are at the right speed before you attempt a jump. At a show you need to do this before it is your turn to jump. If you are trotting a hunter course, you might need to remind the mini to "trot" between jumps if they want to break into a canter. If a mini starts to rush the jumps, they might need to be stopped between the jumps to slow them down, trotted around the jumps until they are at the right pace, and then jumped one jump at a time (again, not at a show, but in training). Also remember that all horses have a blind spot right in front of them so that about the time they are jumping they are unable to see the jump and must trust their handler.

Horses that are lazy and tend to hit the jumps can be jumped over more solid jumps to remind them to be careful. Those that over-jump or have trouble gauging their take-off point will usually improve with practice. An extra pole placed at the spot where he should take off may help. Raising jumps should be done slowly, 2 inches at a time (or whatever the minimum is on your jumps) and only when the mini is very comfortable at the last height. Jump heights should also be varied in a course so that the mini learns to judge the height and not just assume they are all the same. Placement of jumps should also be varied so that they learn to jump going into and coming out of corners, and get practice on jumps that are close together (in and outs). To improve jumping form, putting 2 jumps close together to form an "oxer" 1 1/2- 2 feet wide, can help. This will force the mini to stay off the ground longer, and lift its legs higher. There is only so much improvement that can be done with training though, as some horses just have better jumping form than others.

As the jumps get higher (they don't need to be over 24" for hunter) the horse will need to be moving faster and you may need to lift your hand higher as they jump. Also, when they are jumping higher, it takes them a bit longer, so you may need to slow down just as the mini jumps so that you don't get ahead. You might want a special cue to get them to go faster especially if you also do hunter and are telling them to "trot" between jumps. If you choose to canter the hunter course, the mini will be expected to be on the correct lead, just as if you were riding. Training a mini to change leads between jumps is not easy but can be done. In jumper, you do NOT need to maintain a steady pace (although you might be timed) and can catch your breath between jumps, then cue your mini to canter over the next jump. Lead changes are not judged in jumper, but over a timed course may be safer, because the horse will be less likely to fall in a sharp turn if he is on the correct lead.

If you find a mini that either doesn't like to jump or suddenly develops a problem, such as refusing or knocking over jumps it used to be able to do, there could be a physical problem. In such a case, the mini should be checked by a veterinarian, farrier, or even a chiropractor to see if a problem can be pinpointed and fixed. In the rare case where a mini just doesn't seem to like jumping, there are other things to try such as trail, showmanship, or driving.