

Ground Driving II Little Hooves 4-H Club

In ground driving, the handler or "driver" stands behind the harnessed horse, and holds the reins and gives commands as they will be given when hooked to a cart. The goal is to get the horse used to rein contact, establish steering, walking and trotting on command, use of the whip to control the bend of the body, and most importantly, a good solid HALT. Of course, without the cart, the driver must walk or trot behind the horse, or have them circle around them. Ground driving is usually considered as an intermediate step in training a horse to pull a cart, but can also be a great learning exercise for both horse and handler. Several training steps are required before a horse can be ground driven safely, and just as you don't need to train a horse before you can ride him, you do not need to be the one to train the mini to ground drive. But you should be aware of the steps needed to get to that point and may be able to witness various steps in the training at On Target Miniatures (OTM). The time spent on each step is highly variable and depends on the horse's reaction to that step. Progress is made only when the horse is totally comfortable and obedient at the previous step, however long it takes. Weather and physical factors - especially teething - can also affect a training schedule.

Training steps as done at OTM: (Assumes the horse is 2 1/2 years old or older, has been longed on a longe line in a circle, and knows "walk", "trot" and "whoa". Basic training in trail obstacles and exposure to lots of different sights and sounds are also done at OTM). Training sessions should be short, especially at the start and for young horses - no more than 10-15 minutes.

1. Fitting/trying on the harness, bridle and bit. Most horses will find any bit uncomfortable at first so plenty of time should be spent getting used to that before attaching reins. Some horses will object to various harness parts or straps hitting against their body. Some people start with an open bridle (one without blinders) because the restricted vision is often a problem.
2. Longeing in the harness, with the line attached to a halter or cavesson. This confirms voice commands and lets them get used to the harness, bit, and bridle. This can be done with or without breeching straps attached and usually without the breast plate and traces.
3. Attaching lines to the bridle and running through the harness tugs or a low ring on a surcingle and repeating longeing on 2 lines with outside line around hindquarters. Ground driving can be started at this point or after the lines are moved up to go through the harness terrets. Breast plate and traces can be left off for most steps in ground driving. Lines longer than reins are useful at this stage.

When starting ground driving a second person leading the horse with a lead rope on the halter can be a huge help. You stand behind the horse holding reins and whip as shown in Ground Driving I and below, ask the horse to walk, and the leader starts to move out. Start in an enclosed area doing circles, then figure eights to practice steering and the most important "whoa". Keep contact on both reins (don't let them get loose and floppy) and use the least amount of pressure to make turns and stops. Sometimes wiggling your fingers on the side you want to turn toward will be enough. But if you move the inside hand back to signal a turn be sure to move the outside hand forward the same distance. When asking for a halt, use the smallest amount of pressure needed, and immediately release when the horse stops, but maintain slight contact. The halt is the most important lesson and you want the horse to stand still and relaxed and wait for your next command. Add a brief trot every so often, making sure you are not bumping the horse's mouth, which can hurt. The chance of this is less if you have the horse circle around you by longeing on 2 lines as was done in step 3 above.

Common issues are opening the mouth, head shaking, trying to get the tongue over the bit, not steering well, and turning around and facing the driver. Ground driving can also be done with the reins attached to the halter, which is common with horse younger than 2 1/2 years or with an inexperienced driver. When ground driving, you hold the reins the same way as you do when riding English or driving, and hold a whip as shown in the photo below of Rusty and Stephanie.



Although this photo of 2 1/2 year old 28" Rusty was taken when he had only been ground driving a few times, this is the look you are striving for. His head is in a relaxed position, with ears about level with his back and face vertical to the ground, with soft contact on the reins and a closed mouth. His side-check is very loose. A moist mouth is another sign that your training is going well. Once the mini is halting, walking, trotting and turning well, you can try ground driving in a different area and add some obstacles such as used in trail. Drive around cones, over a tarp or piece of plywood, and eventually ask the mini to back. Do not ask for the back too early and do not overdo this!!! You do not want to give the mini the idea that they can back to avoid going forward, which some may try to do.

Once a horse is ground driving everywhere you want and standing still when you ask for a "whoa", the next goal is to get him used to noise from behind by shuffling your feet, making noise with your whip or dragging things. You also need to attach the breast collar and traces and have someone pull against it so the horse gets used to the idea of "pulling". Some people attach a tire and have the horse pull that around. PVC poles (or even broomsticks) stuck in the harness tug loops can get them used to the feeling of the shafts against their sides. Any time the horse seems to be uncomfortable with something new, stay at that step over several days (in short sessions) until they accept it. Hitching to the cart is a big step and you want to do everything possible to have that go smoothly and safely.

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