

Little Hooves 4-H Club
Suffield, CT
Leading Your Mini
(And Introduction to Horse Show Classes)

These instructions are for miniatures that are already trained to lead, whoa, stop and stand, etc. and assume the mini is wearing a halter with a lead rope attached. Stand on the left side of the mini between his head and shoulder, with both of you facing the same direction. Hold your right hand, with your palm up, on the lead about 6-12" from the halter, with the other end of the lead held in your left hand but not wrapped around it. There are many times when you will need to hold your right hand farther away from the halter (walking over obstacles or jumping for example) but this is a good way to start. Ideally, if you start to walk forward, the mini will start walking next to you. If not, say "walk" or "walk *MINI'S NAME*" and give a slight tug on the rope. Stay between the mini's head and shoulder as you walk together. Do not get in front and pull and do not let the mini get ahead of you. If you are in a group, keep at least one horse length between you and the horse in front. If needed, make a small circle or cut across the ring to keep your distance.

Whoa or stop: Your mini should stay with you, with little or no pressure on the lead, until you ask him to "whoa" and/or you stop. You should be able to do this without any pressure on the lead rope, but if needed, you may pull back on the lead to get him to stop next to you. As you practice, you should get to the point where you do not need to apply pressure or say "whoa". When you stop, the mini stops next to you, both of you facing forward.

Backing: To get your mini to back up, stand to the left side of his head and turn your body so you are facing his rear end. Do not stand right in front of him, but slightly to the side of his head. Say "Back" and pull the lead rope straight back toward his chest, then release and keep repeating as he takes backward steps. It is important that he STOP backing when you stop the cue. As you practice, you will find that by changing your body position and slightly moving your hand you can turn corners. If you want your mini to go straight back you need to stay in the same place and pull straight back.

Trotting: At the walk, lean a bit forward, move your right hand forward, start trotting, and the mini should start trotting next to you. You can use the word "trot" but it is much better if they can follow and do what you do without using verbal commands. In the show ring it is important that they keep trotting when asked, so do not try to make very sharp turns. This requires a lot of practice to learn to communicate with each other, so don't expect to get it perfect right away. The goal is for the mini to be so focused on you that he will walk, halt, trot, and follow next to you with a loose lead.

Leading across or near grass (or anything else that is tempting): This can be a real challenge, because even though minis are a lot smaller than big horses, they are still stronger than most 4-Hers. You need to let them know you are in control, but that does not mean hurting them. Take a tighter and closer hold on the lead and make one or two sharp but short upward tugs on the lead right before you get to the grass. This should get the mini's attention and let him know that you are in control. If he still manages to get his head down, you need to pull sharply and HARD to get his head up. Or pull him in a circle so he can't eat. You might need help from an adult. Once they learn they can get away with this (or anything) they will try again and again, so it is important to stop it right away.

Obstacles: Plan your route around obstacles so you don't need to make sharp turns. When walking over poles, a bridge, tarp, etc., lower your hand or let out the rope so the mini can put his head down to check things out.



This is what the judge likes to see, especially if the horse is dropping his head on his own. It shows he is paying attention to the obstacle and not just blindly following his handler.

Turning: In general, you want to turn the horse to the right and away from you, unless you are told to turn to the left. This makes it less likely that the mini will step on you. You might be asked to turn the mini around inside a box made from poles placed on the ground. In that case you need to make sure he does not try to walk with you, but moves his front feet more or less sideways until he has gone all the way around. (He can also move his back feet around his front feet, but that requires a different cue). Be sure you end up facing the correct direction; if you are to do a complete (360 degree) turn then you should be facing in the same direction that you were when you started.

Other obstacles: Sometimes you might be asked to stop your mini and open a mailbox or place something over the mini's back. Be sure the mini stops and stands quietly first, and then move slowly so as not to scare him. You might be asked to pick up something scary such as an umbrella or plastic bag and show it to your mini. Be sure you know how your mini might respond before you do this! If you know your mini will be calm, this is your chance to show off a bit. If your mini might be scared, move very slowly and carefully.

Things to watch out for: Whenever you are leading a horse, make sure that their head is facing forward and that you are not pulling it to the side. Also, keep an eye on the halter to make sure it doesn't slip and get near an eye. If the mini has trouble walking or stopping straight, try leading and stopping near a fence. Also, it is good practice to sometimes lead from the **WRONG** side (stand on right side with your left hand on lead). This can also help if the horse is turning his head toward you. Do not always start and stop in the same place; remember that everything you do with a horse is teaching them something.

These are the basic skills needed for Showmanship, Trail-in-hand, and Disciplined Rail (Command) Classes. Additional skills will be covered in a later lesson.

Little Hooves 4-H Club leader: Mary Adams, e-mail targetsmom@cox.net