

GROOMING YOUR DONKEY FOR HALTER

By Carolyn Christian, Quarter Moon Ranch

What does it take to win in the show ring at halter? It begins with a well-conformed miniature donkey. It continues with a well-behaved animal who presents himself well. He needs to walk, trot, stand quietly while being judged and look alert. He also needs to be well-groomed. Although a halter class is looking for the donkey that most resembles the conformational excellence of the breed, when a judge is faced with several donkeys equal to that standard, something must set them apart. That something could very well be how well the animal is groomed. Can grooming make a difference in a judge's placings? You bet. It can be the difference between moving up or down a ribbon or two because grooming is a major part of the overall presentation. Hopefully, this article will prove helpful to you in learning some basics regarding grooming for halter classes. Additionally, good grooming is beneficial in performance classes because it too makes a better presentation under harness. Let me begin by saying that there is never one way to groom a donkey. The procedures that Pete and I use are what work for us. The key is to not be afraid to groom or clip your donkey. It's a time for both of you to enjoy.

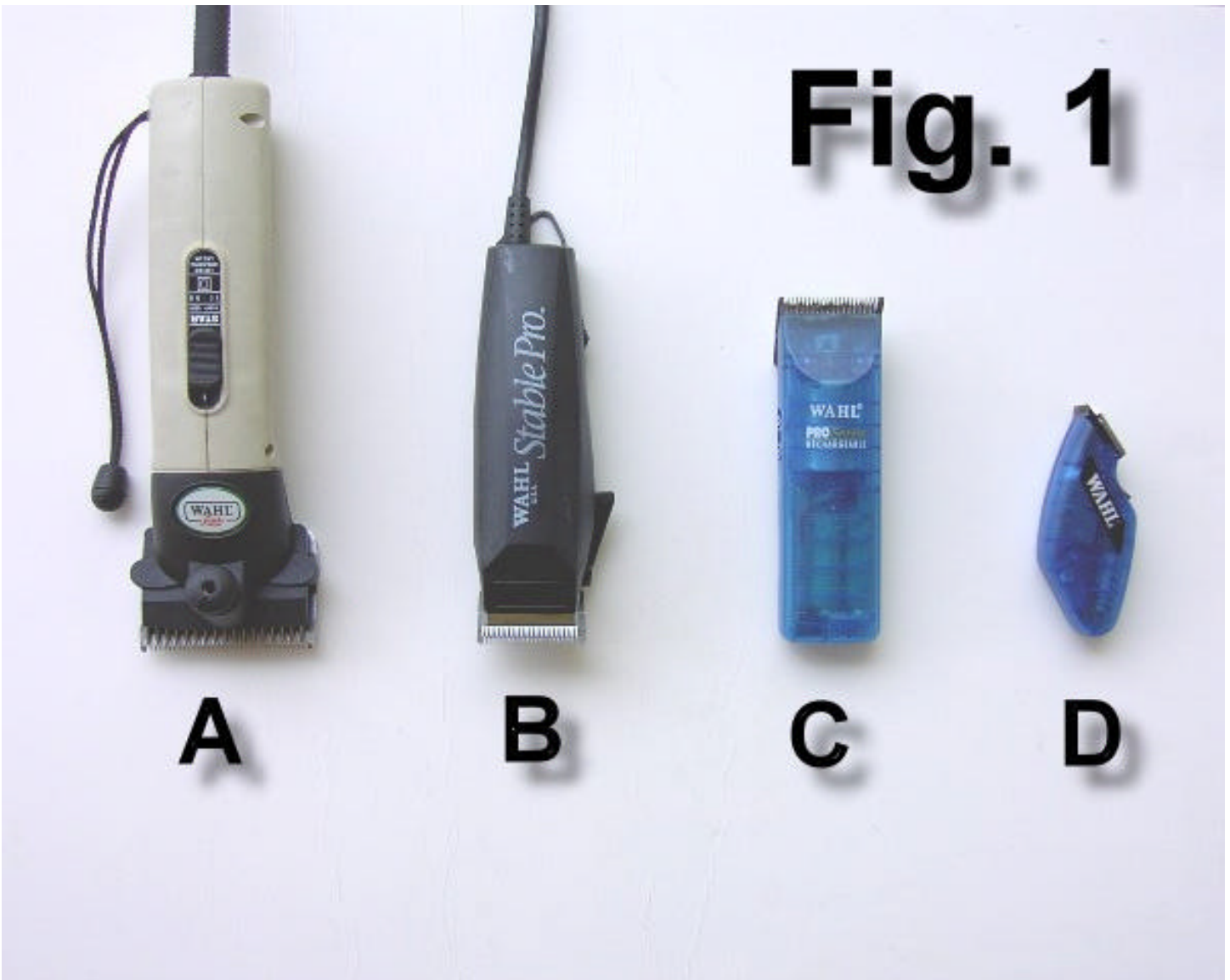
CLIPPERS

There are several brands of clippers on the market today. They come in all sizes and with different types of blades and blade sizes. Some of the more popular brand names are Wahl, Oster, Lister, and Andis. Different sizes of clippers can be used on different parts of the body. Clippers can be purchased through equine catalogs, at feed and tack stores, and over the Net. Our personal preference for a general purpose clipper, especially for the beginner, is the Wahl Stable Pro which is reasonably priced at approximately \$75 to \$80 (Fig. 1-B). For a miniature, these are easy to handle and the blades are adjustable which gives the groomer many options. Also, Wahl clippers get warm but not hot as some others do. The body of some clippers can become very hot. A hot blade will burn the donkey and reduce the life of the clipper and the blade so you must take time to let it cool down. Unfortunately, doing so also increases clipping time.

If you have adult donkeys and/or many donkeys you want to clip, you might want to invest in a larger clipper. We use the Wahl Star Clipper (Fig. 1-A) for the body of our yearlings and adults. The 3" blade dramatically cuts clipping time. We then can use smaller clippers for areas that are more difficult to reach. Large clippers such as these will cost between \$200 and \$300.

Other handy clippers that are smaller and more maneuverable are clippers like the Wahl Pro Series Rechargeable Clipper (Fig. 1-C) which costs approximately \$44 and the Wahl Pocket Pro (Fig.1-D) costing around \$15. These clippers are great for getting into fine areas such as the inside of ears and around the hoof. We keep a battery operated clipper in our grooming cart for minor touch-ups that need to be done while at the show and no electricity is available.

Fig. 1



- A. Wahl Star Clipper
- B. Wahl Stable Pro
- C. Wahl Pro Series Rechargeable Clipper
- D. Wahl Pocket Pro

BLADES

Clipper blades come in various widths. For miniatures, we like to use a 2" and a 2 1/2" width blade depending on how much area we want to cover or how many "peaks and valleys" we encounter. The 2" blade can maneuver tight corners better than the wider blade, but requires more passes with the clippers. Blades are numbered such as #5, #10, #15, and #30. The higher the number, the closer the blade will cut. Most clippers the size of the Wahl Stable Pro come with a standard adjustable #30, #15, #10 chrome blade that is 2" wide. You can get the same blade in a 2 1/2" width. Always make sure your blades are sharp, clean, and oiled. Dull blades will not cut evenly and will pull the hair, occasionally resulting in a reflex that you may not like! If you are clipping several donkeys at one time, it's also a good idea to have at least one set of sharpened blades handy in case the set you are using becomes dull. We send our blades to the repair department at Wahl for sharpening,

and they are returned in about a week at a cost of \$4 per set. Sharpening can be done locally so check your yellow pages for that service. Occasionally, there will be someone at a show who sharpens blades. The show chairman will know if that service will be provided.

PRE-CLIPPING CONDITIONING

It is very helpful to condition your donkey to the noise and feel of the clippers prior to actually clipping. You can teach youngsters, even as foals or weanlings, not to fear the clippers by introducing the clippers to them gradually. This is done by simply turning the clippers on, letting them listen to the noise it makes, and then rubbing them over the donkey's body. In this way, when the day comes to actually clip, your donkey won't be as frightened. After your donkey has been clipped many times, he usually will surrender to the process of body clipping. The key is patience. Understand that he is fearful of the noise, clipping tickles, and he'd rather be playing with his friends. We would lose our patience too if we were subjected to the same treatment. **BE PATIENT** and take your time, especially when you clip your donkey for the first time. You may see it as a chore to be done for a halter class, but your donkey sees it much more personally!

WASHING

Always shampoo your donkey with an equine shampoo to remove all the dirt. We shampoo twice. This will prevent noticeable clip lines, will protect your blades from becoming dull, and the job will go much faster. Dry the donkey well. Wet hair is very difficult to clip and ruins blades. If the sun is bright and it's warm, we tie them out in the sun to dry. If it's cooler or if you want to cut drying time, you can blow them dry with a professional blower or your own blow dryer, being careful not to get too close to the skin.

HOW FAR AHEAD OF THE SHOW SHOULD I CLIP?

The best time to body clip prior to a show involves personal preference and the temperature in your area in the weeks prior to the show. You may prefer to have a slight amount of hair growth on your show donkey when he's being exhibited. The advantage to that is it allows any clipping lines to blend together and causes the donkey to look more natural and even. The disadvantage is that the hair may grow out unevenly and/or darker in some spots than others on your darker donkeys. We like to have a little hair growth after the body clip so we clip our donkeys 7-10 days prior to a show in the summer months and 5-7 days prior to a show in the cooler months. Remember that cooler weather causes the hair to grow faster. If you've body clipped your donkey and the evenings are cool, you might want to blanket him to prevent too much re-growth.

CLIPPING LOCATION

Especially for the first few times, you must find a location where you can tie your donkey in such a manner that prevents the donkey from moving forward, sideways or back. An ideal location is to find a portion of your fence or stall that makes a 90-degree angle. Tie the donkey in the corner with his nose facing one side of the stall and his side resting on the other. This gives you a clear clipping side and prevents the donkey from escaping. Some folks like to cross-tie their donkeys for clipping. This is done by clipping a lead rope to each side of the halter and tying his head between a doorway or something similar to prevent excessive movement. Until your donkey is accustomed to being clipped, find an area with less traffic and as far away from other donkeys so that he will not be distracted. Also, plan a time to clip your donkey when you will not be rushed or during the heat of the day when both you and your donkey are exhausted. Make this a fun experience for both of you.

WHERE ON THE DONKEY DO I START?

We like to start clipping at the rear of the donkey on the hip and back and work forward, being careful to go against the grain (or the way the hair grows). Some people go with the grain in order to leave more hair on the donkey. This method makes it very difficult to avoid clipper lines. If you are clipping for the show ring, most exhibitors clip against the grain. Use short strokes, keeping the clipper at the same angle in order to keep the hair an even length. Using this same procedure, slowly move up the body from rear to front. It won't take you long to discover that clipping will make you twist, turn, and contort your body in ways you didn't know were possible. The hair on the underbelly is very soft and is more difficult to cut. To get this hair even may require going over it several times. We like to complete the entire body first, including the neck, before we move to the legs, head and ears. Brush the donkey as you go and look for places that you may have missed.

LEGS

The sensitive areas on most donkeys are the feet, head, nose (muzzle), and ears. You will find that most donkeys do NOT like at least one if not all of those areas clipped. Handling the feet and ears from birth will help in desensitizing for clipping. The front legs usually aren't as difficult as the rear ones so we begin with the front legs. We adjust the blade to the closest setting and go around the hoof wall then up the fetlock. Once you have completed the foot, adjust the blades back to the longest setting for clipping the legs. After the front legs are clipped, we move to the rear ones. Don't get in a hurry clipping the rear legs if your donkey is nervous. It's a learning experience for you both. Remember, if your donkey has a bad experience, the next time will be even worse because they don't forget. If he is putting up a real fight, clip elsewhere for a moment then come back to the legs.

HEAD

After completing the body, neck, and legs, we move to the head. Miniature donkeys' heads are small with lots of areas that are difficult to reach. Remove the halter and attach it around the neck. The entire head may require repeating several times to get everything clipped and to make sure it is even. Move up the sides of the cheek. Clip over and under the eyes being very careful in that area. Try to keep loose hair away from the eyes.

EARS

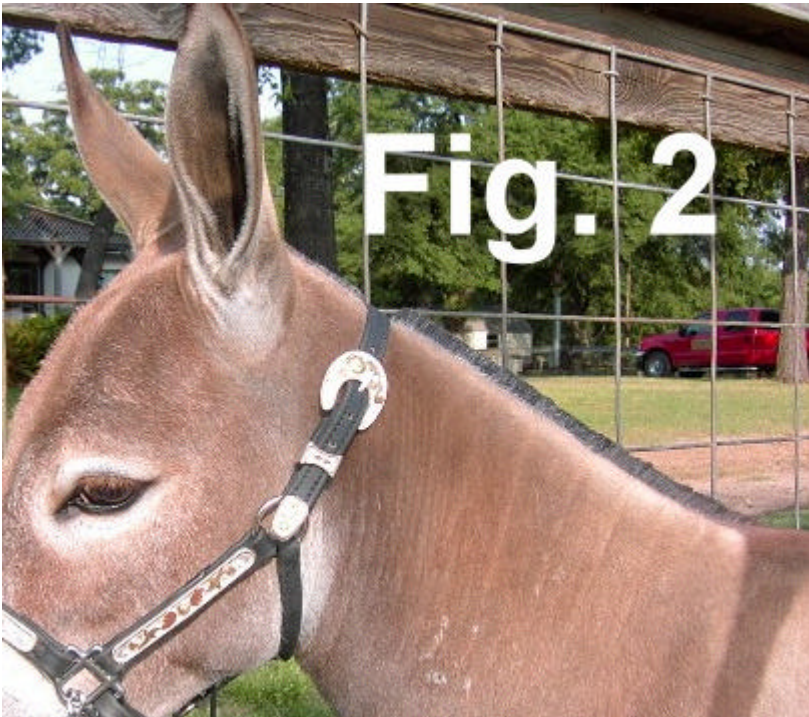
The ears are very sensitive to a donkey. Just think of it. How would you like a loud, buzzing, vibrating, tickling "thing" stuck down your ear? It is helpful to have someone hold the head still while clipping the ears. Clip the outside first then the inside and finally the edge of the ear. Try not to get hair inside the ear. Place cotton in the ear for this purpose, but don't forget to take it out. The inside of the ears is where your smaller clippers really come in handy. Clip all the hair inside the ear. It takes away from the appearance if any is left.

NOSE

Adjust the clippers to the closest setting or you may choose to use a smaller clipper for this area. Clip all the long hair on the nose, lips, and below the lower lip, making sure that you got them all. Whiskers grow fast so you may have to do a touch-up on the muzzle before the show.

MANE

Be extremely careful when cutting around the mane. Should your donkey jerk his head, you may find yourself with a vacant space in the middle of his mane. If this should happen, cut the entire mane off. Some exhibitors do that anyway as part of their grooming for the show ring. It's customary to clip a "bridle path" from the top of his mane to where his show halter ends. Cut all of the hair in this area. Additionally, the mane is trimmed to a length that is flattering to the donkey. You don't want a youngster sporting a long mane. If your donkey has a thin neck, leave the mane a bit longer to balance the look. The length of the mane is a personal preference. We like a shorter mane. You might prefer a longer one. Manes can either be trimmed by hand with scissors or by placing two dowel rods on either side and trimming the hairs between the rods. Good scissors are a must. You need ones that are capable of cutting through thick hair. (See Fig. 2)



TAIL

We've observed that most exhibitors trim the hair off the tail anywhere from 2" to 6" from the tail set. This is also a matter of preference. When clipping the tail for the first time, start by clipping down the tail just an inch or two. Step back and see how you like it, then proceed with more if you choose. You won't be able to put hair back once you've cut it lower than you would have liked. (See Fig. 3)



AFTER CLIPPING CARE

Once you've body clipped your donkey, apply a coat conditioner over the body, mane, and tail. There are many types available. We use a product called Healthy Hair Care which is available through equine catalogs and feed and tack stores. It comes as a concentrate that you dilute with water. Spray the Healthy Hair in modest amounts on the donkey. Brush when wet and again lightly when dry. Your donkey will sparkle and feel like the handsome jack or beautiful jenny that he or she is. Some folks like to use healthy hair after shampooing and before you begin clipping to allow the blades to easily move through the hair. Using a conditioner under the blanket (if you blanket your donkey) will help moisturize the hair and make it shiny.

If your donkey is dark, you might want to consider putting him in a stall during the day and turning him out at night. The coat on a dark donkey can become sun damaged very quickly, especially when the hair is so short. If you can't put him up, you might purchase an inexpensive hood and sheet to

put on him while he's out in the pasture. Sorrel donkeys have an advantage in this area because the sun reacts just the opposite on a sorrel. The sun brings out the rich color of a sorrel donkey so you WANT to leave him in the sun prior to the show. Be sure to spray your recently clipped donkey for flies. He has no protection from biting flies after he's been clipped.

GROOMING AT THE SHOW

Your donkey will need a bath. You can either bathe him at home before you leave for the show or at the show where there are wash areas in most venues. If you bathe your donkey at home, you will need to keep him from rolling by putting him in a stall with shavings and blanketing him if possible. The morning of the show, we pull out our grooming cart. It's a Stanley rolling toolbox that contains all of our clippers and grooming supplies (Fig. 4). It's perfect for our needs and is around \$80 at most home improvement stores.



THE MORNING OF THE SHOW

First, take your donkey from his stall and tie him in the alley. Brush him well and pick any dirt from his hooves with a hoof pick. This will permit him to walk and trot more freely. If you didn't do any touch-up trimming upon arrival at the show, you will want to do it now. Trim his muzzle, around his hooves, his mane, his ears, and any stray hairs that may have grown since he was body clipped. Comb his tail and make a blunt cut at the end. We like to cut the tail level with the hock. (See Fig. 3) If your donkey's tail has unsightly fly away hairs, either styling gel or hairspray will work to tame it down. We use a baby oil gel on the muzzle to make it look shiny and not so dull. This gel is also used on the ears both inside and out. You will want to apply a black hoof polish to your donkey's hooves. Some folks prefer a clear polish for spotted donkeys.

Your last step is to apply a finishing product to the coat and tail to make your donkey shine. There are too many finishing products to mention and they're all fun to try as you determine which of them works for you. Brand names for some of the more popular finishing sprays are Healthy Hair Care, World Champion, Grand Champion, Show Sheen, Cowboy Magic, Vellus products, and Ultra. Both Super 14 and Nu-Image are coat enhancing products that are fed to donkeys as a vitamin supplement to make the skin and coat healthy, sleek, and glossy. These products must be fed weeks prior to exhibiting your donkey or they will have no effect.

Finally, it's time to put your donkey's show halter on. Show halters come in varying prices depending on the degree of silver and embellishments. A show halter should fit well and complement the donkey, being neither too large nor too small for the size of the animal. You don't want a halter that takes away from the overall presentation, but a halter that enhances it. Your show halter need not be expensive but it needs to be tasteful. Be sure to polish any silver on your show halter prior to the show.

REWARDS OF GOOD GROOMING

Showing is not only hard work but it costs money. None of us go into the ring to lose. So if you intend to show your donkey at halter, make your investment of time and money pay for you by doing the things that can produce winning results. So many factors go into a judge's decision on who to place at halter. The days are long gone in most shows where you can take a donkey from the pasture, give him a bath, and put him into the ring and expect to take home a ribbon. Although awarding the best conformation is the purpose of a halter class, it's important to pay attention to other variables that will make your donkey stand out. He should be able to walk, trot, and stand for the judge. He must be in good condition which involves good and selective nutrition prior to the show. The handler should present himself well too. And yes....an animal who is well-groomed and healthy looking will get a second look from the judge over one who is not. Be patient with your donkey and this will be a pleasant experience for both of you. Do I hear the buzz of clippers? You can do it!

