

"This empowering, helpful, and wonderful read will inspire Mini owners."  
– AMERICAN MINIATURE HORSE ASSOCIATION

# minischool

Train Your Miniature Horse to Be All He Can Be

- Longeing
- Tricks
- Driving
- Dressage
- Jumping
- And More!

Sabine Ellinger



› Foreword from the AMHA	ix
› Foreword by Manfred Hölzel	x
› Preface: Why Minis Are So Much Fun	xi
<b>›››</b>	
<b>So, What's a "Mini"?</b>	<b>xii</b>
› When Size Isn't a Factor	2
› About the Miniature Horse	2
› About the Miniature Shetland	3
› Mini Breeding	4
› General Breeding Requirements	5
› Raising Young Minis	5
› The Importance of Conformation	6
› Evaluating Conformation	6
› The Gaits	9
› Additional Tips for Choosing a Mini	12
› Mini Prices	14
<b>›››</b>	
<b>Care and Nutrition</b>	<b>16</b>
› Basic Stable Management	18
› Lameness and Illness	19
› Feeding Basics	21
› Choosing Supplements	22
› Feed and Nutrition Analysis	23
› Exercise, Exercise, Exercise	24
› Social Contact	24
› Turnout	25
<b>›››</b>	
<b>Tack and Equipment</b>	<b>28</b>
› Basic Equipment	30
<b>›››</b>	
<b>Principles of Training</b>	<b>34</b>
Mini ABCs	36



Training Methods	42
The Training Scale	42
Planning a Training Session	50



## How Minis Learn 52

‣ Classical Conditioning: Learning through Association	54
‣ Operant Conditioning: Learning through Success	54
‣ Positive Reinforcement	55
‣ Negative Reinforcement	56
‣ Punishment	56
‣ Factors that Impact the Ability to Learn	57
‣ Having Fun!	59
‣ Positive Thinking	59



## Longeing and Long-Lining 60

‣ Basic Training	62
‣ Longeing Basics	63
‣ Long-Lining	65
‣ Cavalletti and Gymnastics	69
‣ Conditioning and Fitness	70



## Trick Training 72

‣ Bowing	75
‣ Kneeling	77
‣ Lying Down	79
‣ Sitting	80
‣ Spanish Walk	82
‣ Rearing	85
‣ Standing on a Pedestal	87





<b>Dressage Movements</b>	<b>90</b>
> The Basics	92
> Flexion and Bend	92
> Leg-Yield	92
> Shoulder-In	93
> Haunches-In (Travers)	95
> Half-Pass	96
> Halt	97
> Rein-Back	97
> Simple Lead Change	98
> Counter-Canter	99
> Flying Lead Change	101
> Pirouette	103
> Piaffe	104
> Passage	105
> Levade	106



<b>Driving</b>	<b>108</b>
> A Fun Change in Routine	110
> Equipment	110
> Dressage between the Shafts	111
> Fitness Training Benefits	112
> Driving on Roads and Trails	112



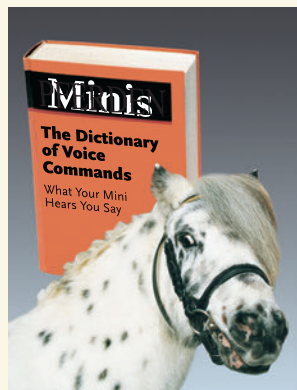
<b>A Primer on In-Hand Work</b>	<b>114</b>
> Schooling Piaffe	116
> Long-Reining	119
> Holding the Long Reins	120
> Timing of the Aids	120
> Neck Position	121
> Training Schedule	122





## **It's Showtime! 124**

- › Shows and Demonstrations 126
- › Presentation 126
- › Handler Attire 127
- › Creating a Musical Freestyle 128
- › Dealing with Stage Fright 129
- › Pre-Show Preparation 131
- › Warming Up 132
- › The Big Day! 134



## **Voice Commands 136**

- › The Dictionary of Voice Commands 138
- › Basic Vocabulary 139
- › To Cluck or Not to Cluck? 141



## **Problem Solving 142**

- › Analysis 144
- › A Vicious Cycle 145
- › Ensuring Obedience 145
- › More on Punishment 146
- › Controlling Sweat 147
- › Making Time 148
- › Setting Goals 149
- › Physical Growth and Development 150
- › Handling Stallions 151
- › How Do I Learn More? 154
- › Conclusion 158



## **Index 159**



# So, What's a "Mini"?

- **When Size Isn't a Factor 2**
- **About the Miniature Horse 2**
- **About the Miniature Shetland 3**
- **Mini Breeding 4**
- **General Breeding Requirements 5**
- **Raising Young Minis 5**
- **The Importance of Conformation 6**
- **Evaluating Conformation 6**
- **The Gaits 9**
- **Additional Tips for Choosing a Mini 12**
- **Mini Prices 14**

DUPLICATION PROHIBITED  
by copyright holder



## When Size Isn't a Factor

The world of small equines is a fun one in which anybody, regardless of age, size, or ability can participate. This is what I wish to demonstrate in *Mini School*—the joy that can be the result of working with a horse or pony when size isn't a factor.

While my methods can certainly apply to horses of larger stature, I've geared this book specifically toward the Miniature Horse, the Miniature Shetland, and derivatives of those breeds. My training model, Lancelot, featured throughout the pages of this book, is a Miniature Appaloosa registered by the Appaloosa Studbook of the Netherlands ([www.appaloosa-stamboek.com](http://www.appaloosa-stamboek.com)). While distinct differences are apparent when comparing the Miniature Horse

and the Miniature Shetland, and the Miniature Appaloosa—which can be of either descent—the similarities are such that my techniques apply equally to all. On the pages that follow I will refer to simply “Minis,” meaning any of these breeds, interchangeably.

### About the Miniature Horse

The American Miniature Horse Association (AMHA) describes the American Miniature Horse as one of the world's fastest growing equine breeds. Classically elegant, gentle by nature, and appealing to people of all abilities, sizes, and ages, this small and unique equine stands no taller than 34 inches at the withers as measured from the last hairs of the mane. The AMHA has established

*The same as a “regular” horse—all that's different is his size.*





an official “Standard of Perfection” in which the general impression of the Miniature Horse should be “A small, sound, well-balanced horse, possessing the correct conformation characteristics required of most breeds, [including] refinement and femininity in the mare [and] boldness and masculinity in the stallion. The general impression should be one of symmetry, strength, agility, and alertness. Since the breed objective is the smallest possible perfect horse, preference in judging shall be given the smaller horse, other characteristics being approximately equal” ([www.amha.org](http://www.amha.org)).

Today’s stylish and perfectly proportioned Miniature Horses are the product of nearly 400 years of selective breeding. Although purchases and breeding of Miniature Horses have been regularly documented in the US since the early 1800s, accurate accounts and pedigrees were not maintained by most breeders until the 1970s. With the closing of the AMHA registry, breeders are now required to maintain accurate pedigrees on all their stock, and foals may not be registered unless both parents are also registered with the AMHA.

### About the Miniature Shetland

You would be hard-pressed to find a horse person unfamiliar with the Shetland Pony. The breed was originally used



*My Mini stallion's expressive face.*

in coal mines to pull carts. Shetlands spent most of their time underground without seeing the light of day. They weathered storms, cold, and often went hungry. They had to be hearty, strong-willed, easy keepers in order to survive. Characteristics such as obstinacy, perseverance, and the ability to remain fat on little food helped ensure their survival. No one thought about conformation or temperament as it would apply to specialized training when breeding (or rather, “multiplying”) these ponies. The people of those times and settings had other, far more serious problems to worry about.

In the early to mid-twentieth century descendants of these first hardy ponies were intentionally “downsized.” The result was the Miniature Shetland, which must stand no taller than 34 inches at

the withers. (Note: the "standard-size" Shetland can mature up to 42 inches.) About 32 inches is the height favored in the Miniature Shetland show ring, and many do not aim to breed ponies under 30 inches tall at maturity due to concern over resulting loss of type. The goal of

*Only a typey, healthy, powerful stallion...*



the Miniature Shetland breeder is a pony that, although small, is physically capable of engaging in any manner of disciplines ([www.shetlandponystud-booksociety.co.uk](http://www.shetlandponystud-booksociety.co.uk)).

## Mini Breeding

For our purposes, we have to learn how to use common Mini traits to our advantage. Since they tend to be easy keepers, they can save their owners money, but like their larger counterparts, if they



*...and lovely mare with a good build and disposition are suitable for breeding.*

consume too much protein-rich feed they can become sick or lame. Their usual high intelligence accelerates their learning process, but if they become bored, they can give their owners a very hard time.

Mini breeding need not be simply "Mini-multiplying." Every Mini breeder should carefully consider which individuals he pairs together because negative traits in the parents (say, stubbornness or obesity) usually become even more pronounced in the foal. And it can be very difficult to find someone who wants to buy an animal with behavioral problems or conformation defects and then expend the time and effort to make something of him.

Severe conformation flaws can still occur but not to the extent that was the case 20 years ago. The modern-day Mini has been bred with more emphasis placed on his suitability for driving and riding. Quality of the gaits, jumping ability, conformation, and



*A magnificent Mini filly.*

temperament have all been enormously improved in the past two decades because in addition to the suitability for specific disciplines, breeders have put a strong emphasis on breeding as cooperative and friendly a Mini as possible. In previous years, even without being spoiled by incorrect handling, many

small equines were nippy and difficult to handle. Through selective breeding the occurrence of such unwanted traits has been reduced. Of course, difficult horses still exist, but for the most part they are created by improper handling rather than by nature.

*Even a Mini foal needs room to gallop.*



## General Breeding Requirements

---

As I've touched on, when choosing a sire and dam, only healthy Minis without serious conformational or character flaws should be paired together. Breeding your mare just because "she is so sweet" is not a good idea. A Mini foal looks very cute in his first summer, but that won't be enough to find a buyer for him later on.

Both the sire and dam should be approved by a breed society such as the American Miniature Horse Association ([www.amha.org](http://www.amha.org)) or the Shetland Pony Studbook Society ([www.shetlandponystudbook.co.uk](http://www.shetlandponystudbook.co.uk)) so that the foal will have registration papers and therefore a better future.

## Raising Young Minis

---

Raising a Mini foal is no different from raising a Quarter Horse or Warmblood

foal. Mini foals need a herd and a good-size pasture in order to grow up in a

healthy and natural manner. It saddens me when I see a Mini stabled in make-shift housing with a tiny turnout area because his owner doesn't understand proper horsekeeping.

It is important for youngsters to have playmates of a similar age so they learn social skills that contribute to ease of handling later in life. Foals need to move so that their lungs, heart, and bones can be properly strengthened. Playing daily with other young horses

and participating in little scuffles to determine a social hierarchy is the best kind of training you can give a young horse.

Remember that raising young stock properly costs money. Foals must be vaccinated and dewormed, their hooves must be trimmed regularly, and they can also get sick or hurt. While they may indeed cost less to feed, raising Minis, when done right, is no less expensive than raising full-size horses.

## The Importance of Conformation

---

Conformation flaws usually won't really affect a Mini's ability to perform tricks, but they can pose difficulties when training him in dressage, driving, or jumping. Minis often do not have ideal conformation because many breeders select their breeding stock with a focus on small size rather than on other physical parameters. Poorly set necks, improperly angled or weak hindquarters, a lack of room in the throatlatch, and bad bone structure can make training and conditioning a Mini for an equestrian

discipline much more difficult and in some cases nearly impossible.

The same criteria that apply to the conformation of full-size horses are relevant in Minis. Thick throatlatches limit the horse's ability to flex at the poll, weak hindquarters hinder collection, and crooked legs make the horse less resilient over time. The Mini's smaller size and the fact that he is not ridden—or at least not ridden to the same degree his full-size cousin is—makes the severity of the problems relative.

## Evaluating Conformation

---

Although you may not care to always be "looking for a problem," you must be able to recognize and evaluate conformational faults in a prospective Mini

purchase. There are some that do not hinder a Mini's training and should not discourage a buyer. However, there are others that make any sort of work—in-



*Flawless conformation offers the best chance of training success.*

hand or in harness—a constant challenge, despite the Mini’s best efforts. Such a Mini must work many times harder to achieve the same results as a Mini with good conformation.

When selecting a Mini for training such as I describe in this book, the buyer should choose one that resembles a “scaled-down” version of a normal-size riding horse. With a critical eye, evaluate the following points:

**Head** A Mini should have a kind face with big, expressive eyes. You can tell a lot about his character just by looking at his facial expression. The shape of the head is not so important but a “clean” throatlatch is crucial. A thick throatlatch makes it very difficult for a Mini to “give” at the poll, which should be as moveable as a ball bearing. Wide cheek

bones combined with a thick throatlatch area are quite common and are unfortunately very limiting.

**Neck** A correctly shaped neck enables correct contact with the bit and the handler’s hands, and thus establishes a better connection with the Mini. Ewe-necks, “swan necks” (those that are unusually long and set on too high), and low-set necks are much more difficult to work with to achieve an optimal connection with the Mini’s mouth. The neck should be wide at the base, set relatively high, and should taper gradually and harmoniously up to the poll.

**Shoulders** An elastic, swinging stride can only come out of a well-angled, sloping shoulder. Minis with upright shoulders tend to hurry and “shuffle along.”

**Back** A well-shaped, gently curved back of an appropriate length facilitates dressage and driving training. The development of impulsion (forward thrust generated by the hindquarters) and carrying capacity (ability of the hindquarters to assume more of the Mini's weight and reverse his natural heaviness on the forehand), and everything else that comes from the hind end relies on a "swinging" and supple back. Swaybacks (those with an exaggerated downward dip) and roach backs (those with an upward protruding "bump") are stiff and inflexible, making it harder for the Mini to perform.

**Croup** If a croup-high Mini is asked to collect (assume an optimal state of balance with more weight over his lowered hindquarters and with a gently rounded topline—see p. 48), he must expend vastly more energy than one with better hind end conformation. Most collected movements, depending on the degree of collection required, may not be possible for a croup-high Mini.

**Hindquarters** The hindquarters are the Mini's engine! It is hard for a Mini to compensate for conformational flaws in this area. Correctly angled hind legs make collection (see above) immensely easier. The hindquarters should be as broad as possible from the top down in order to allow enough room for optimal muscle development.

**Bone Structure** The Mini's legs carry his body. For him to withstand work, he should have clean legs and feet. They should be straight and without serious conformational defects. The legs will have to withstand stress if the Mini is to jump (see p. 69), or perform collected movements or "airs above the ground" (see p. 103). More pronounced joints are usually more resilient. Otherwise the legs should be "clean" with no spongy spots or bumps.

*Regular trimming of the hooves to maintain correct shape and hoof health is very important.*



**Hooves and Lower Legs** The hooves should be relatively symmetrical with the front feet somewhat rounded and the hind feet oval in shape. They should be free of ridges and cracks. An optimal Mini hoof is one that does not require shoes because it is large enough to support his body with a hard hoof wall and a well-defined frog.

The top photo on page 8 shows correct front hoof shape and well-formed lower-leg joints. The joints are wide and clearly have a larger diameter than the cannon bone. The base of the cannon bone is evenly developed without being thick. When the leg is optimally formed,

you can draw an imaginary line from the front of the knee (or hock, in the hind leg), down through the fetlock, and to the hoof.

Mini hooves require regular trimming and shaping—an important part of keeping a Mini healthy and helping him reach old age. If the balance of the hooves is incorrect then the Mini will distribute his weight unevenly and overall body tension will occur. In this case, corrective shoeing or trimming is recommended. The hooves and joints of a Mini in training will be heavily stressed and exposed to different footings, and therefore, they should be closely monitored.

## The Gaits

The role of the gaits in training Minis is similar to that in training full-size

horses. Because Minis are so charming and cute, the importance of the qual-

*Lancelot demonstrates a clear four-beat walk.*



ity of their gaits is often overlooked. However, when performing, competing, or putting on a demonstration, the overall impression the audience has of your Mini will be greatly diminished if you have not emphasized maintaining purity in his gaits.

Evaluating gaits in a Mini foal is much more difficult than in one that is full-grown. For breeders, such an evaluation gives important insight that should be noted when breeding the stallion and mare again. Experienced breeders can prevent repeat mistakes. Only through inspecting many Mini foals can you become an expert in this area.

## Walk

In the days when horses were a primary part of the militia, their walk was of great importance. A horse with a good walk needed to take fewer steps to travel the same distance as a horse with a poor walk. He would therefore tire less quickly and be more resilient.

Even though our Minis are not intended for cavalry work, the quality of their walk still deserves attention. There are three criteria that are used to evaluate the walk: rhythm, reach, and activity.

As always, rhythm is the first and most important. The walk is a four-beat gait. Minis often have trouble with the

four-beat rhythm, because little emphasis is placed on this quality when breeding them. With their short legs, Minis try to compensate for their diminished reach by becoming quick, which has a negative influence on the rhythm. Thus, it is important to make sure that the walk remains pure.

The reach in the walk is best distinguished by how far the hind hoof tracks over the footprint of the front hoof. The more the Mini "over-tracks," the better. The walk is active when the rhythm remains pure, there is significant reach, and the frequency of the steps is not too slow. (As I've mentioned, most Minis actually tend to be too hurried in the walk.) A "pacing walk," in which the legs on one side step forward at nearly the same time, is a negative trait and once it occurs is very difficult to correct.

It is important not to make any compromises with the quality of the walk.

*Lancelot in a working trot.*

