

HOOFBEATS

Did you ever hold a donkey on your lap?

By Pat Murphy, Contributing Writer

Probably the tiniest hooves that Hoofbeats has ever trotted over to visit are those belonging to the Mediterranean Miniature Donkeys. In Ballard, Linda and Brett Marchi started with two of these adorable creatures on their farm – and now they have a pasture full.

There are always a few fluffy babies to pick up and cuddle. The only trouble is you'll never want to put them down. It's OK with them, and they'll sit right in your lap! At maturity the adults are only 36 inches or under. The donkey gestation period ranges from 11-14 months.

They can put on their own comedy shows interacting with each other; and are able to present a concert at feeding time. "They each have their own unique bray," says Brett. "The little ones 'waffle,' which sounds like squeaky toys. Some are like trumpets, or trombones; others higher-pitched like flutes, but so far we don't have a tuba."

So besides laughing and loving these little guys, what else is possible? You can enter the show circuit!

"My daughter, Hannah, and I usually are the ones to go to the shows," Linda tells

me. Of course, these charming donkey shows are not to be confused with Mule Days. "They have regular horse classes for the donkeys. For instance, the trail classes are the same except the little donkeys are led through them rather than be ridden. Your foals can even enter baby contests." In the cutting horse classes, do these little guys cut a guinea pig out of the herd? (Well, maybe not).

But there really is coon jumping, where the miniature donkeys jump over wooden



Two little visitors enjoy playing with Max.

hurdles rather than raccoons. Donkeys are good jumpers. But the driving classes are maybe the most fun. The Marchis have a beautiful Meadowbrook cart that is pulled by one of the mature animals. There are very successful shows in northern California and Oregon.

Brett adds: "The shows are really funny, and you meet people from all walks of life who like to have a good time."

When Christmas time comes around, we all wrack our brains for an unusual gift. This may be just the answer for people who want a gentle, amusing and unique pet.

They don't require a lot of care, equipment or feed. Just a shady place to romp, some clean water and oat hay, and they are good grazers. You would probably want to put them in a safe place night.

"They are also ideal first pets for children," Linda says. "They don't kick or bite, and they are hardy and long-lived. When they mature, anyone of them can be driven, or ridden by a kid. They actually don't need any training! You just put a saddle on ride."

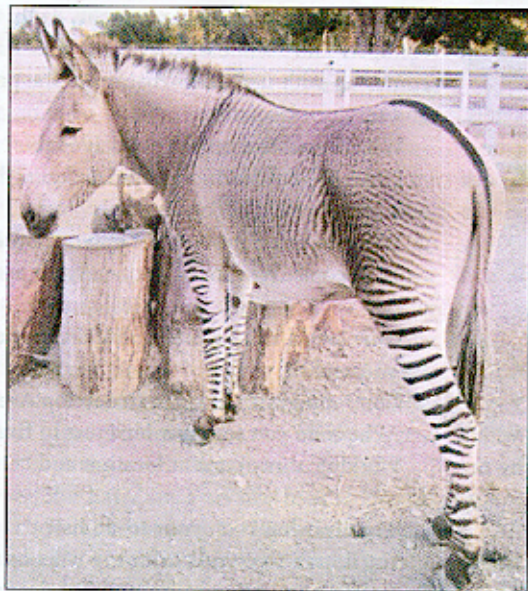
They have inherited the trait of willingness to carry a burden.

"We have even heard that they can be house-broken but haven't tried it ourselves. But our donkeys have been on 'The Ellen De Generes Show' and she led one around inside the studio pretending to look for George Clooney. They are being used as therapy animals, too. We have an elderly gentleman in his 90s who is in a wheelchair, who just loves to come and visit the donkeys. They know him so well that they come and lay their heads in his lap. We also have handicapped

children who come to ride."

The animal wearing the fanciest outfit at the farm is the zonkey. This is a cross between a zebra and a donkey. He has a creamy coffee-colored coat with dark brown stripes. This handsome creature will make his debut into show business pulling a cart. He is the only baritone in 5 o'clock chorus.

The Marchi's many visitors include schools, antique car clubs and passers-by. Sometimes, out-of-towners say visiting Seeing Spots Farm was the most amusing part of their Valley visit.



Zeore the zonkey contemplates the day.



Perfecto Arias, 95, enjoys visits with his old friends the Mediterranean donkeys.