

Retraining

PART 2

Racehorses

In the second part of this series we look at introducing side reins and climbing on board....

Head carriage

When able to lunge in a civilised manner it's time to influence the head carriage. Whilst a skilled handler, in most cases, can work a horse's head down i.e. stretching the muscles along the top of his neck and his back, there are some horses that just don't respond positively. This is when it's acceptable to use side-reins or another form of training aid to encourage a lowering of the head but they **MUST NOT** be used to force the head down. The aid is there only to encourage, thus if using side-reins, they should only be sufficiently tight enough to exert a contact on the bit - you are **NOT** attempting to draw the head up or in.



'Hero Worship' reacts in the way of many horses when side-reins are fitted for the first time – a hollow outline with a short-stepping, stilted stride.

Over a period of time as a horse naturally responds, side-reins can be shortened a little so as to introduce the concept of accepting a correct contact with the bit. As some horses will dramatically invert to avoid the action of the side-rein, if you're not sure how to fit them correctly, or you have difficulty keeping your horse moving actively forward on the lunge, don't use them but elect for a harbridge instead.

If you're practised in the art of long-reining this is the better option but if not, continue with your lunge work using a training aid to assist you if necessary.

Re-introduce the saddle

Re-introduce the saddle carefully if it's been some time since your horse had a rider on, as some horses can have a bit of a reaction. You can even lean over him for a few days before actually mounting properly.

With regards to mounting you may need mounting block practice; this can be a lengthy process for some so initially you will require a leg up. Standing the horse in a corner facing something solid is the best way to start teaching him to stand whilst being mounted.

Once in the saddle spend a few days walking (and trotting if you feel comfortable doing so) around the school on a longer rein; whilst you shouldn't ride with your reins loops, don't take a strangle hold either. Have a length of rein with your hands very low and held wide apart to encourage your horse to seek the bit and ride forwards.

Your task is to teach your horse a completely new set of rules - the aids - getting him to accept the contact, working from behind to build an outline and so on; he has to be taught to use his body in a completely different way. He needs to be moving forwards, but not rushing the trot (a good evasion tactic). Use your seat, back and lower leg to control the pace not the reins. If you experience difficulty in achieving lateral bend but opening the inside rein doesn't help, neck reining is a great way to teach the concept and loosen tight muscles, but don't allow this to become a habit on your part as it isn't 'correct'!

Rider position is very important; tipping forwards encouraging a horse onto the forehand whilst sitting too far back (the armchair seat) doesn't allow him to lift and use his back. Many riders ride too short; a longer leg allows for correct application of the leg aids and for riding with a lighter seat during early retraining.



Abi and Nic demonstrate a very typical scene; an inattentive, stiff and stilted horse, a rider with incorrect leg position (too far forward, although too far back is usually seen); the hands are too close together although a good height, despite the defensive position being adopted the rider isn't at all secure in the saddle. Don't expect that after a few circuits your horse will suddenly drop his head into an outline to die for - he won't! He'll undoubtedly continue as in this photo until rider changes are made and he learns to use his back. A racehorse isn't used to working with weight down on his back; everything about racing puts weight on the forehand; horses are not encouraged to take weight behind.



With a bit change, removal of the flash noseband and some position practice from Abi, we have a totally different horse in just a matter of weeks. Ideally Abi needs to move Nic more off her leg to encourage greater hindleg activity – more stepping under; if she opened her hands away from Nic's neck he would follow the rein down into a lovely stretch. In time Abi will be able to lift her hands a little more off the neck. Endless walking and trotting around the arena teaches nothing; plenty of changes of direction using large circles (25m), loops, tear drops and serpentines to teach the horse to use his quarters and soften through the back are required.

Using poles is a great way of improving balance, working the back, improving rhythm and co-ordination, etc. as well as providing interest; they can be laid in straight lines or in a fan. Carefully introduce your horse to poles in walk as he won't have seen them before.

Teaching canter is often best achieved from a rising trot particularly with sensitive horses so that you don't restrict the necessary lift through the back required for strike off. You can remain out of the saddle for the first few strides and then gradually sit down. The canter may seem rather fast as first whilst the horse isn't balanced so don't try and work in too small a space.

Introducing jumping should be done with care; if you haven't taught a horse to jump before you should seek advice. The National Hunt horse is taught to jump for racing so it can be a slow process correcting rushing, flattening, etc. A horse rushing to a fence isn't necessarily a sign of enthusiasm, more likely tension.

Throughout your training, don't let others put pressure on you; work at a pace you and your horse are comfortable with. It doesn't matter how long it takes to achieve results as long as you can see progress, however slight. The time taken to establish the basics depends entirely on the individual, his temperament, your skills and how long your horse was in training.

Fred and Rowena Cook of Equine Management and Training have many years of experience retraining racehorses; they work closely with the Retraining of Racehorses Charity and run the Charity Helpline. They have also written a book which will be published in the Spring.

If you need any help or advice contact 01780 740733 or email askthexperts@ror.org.uk

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