

# Racehorses

You never stop learning from horses and it's very important not just to manage, but also train. A horse is an individual so reading and listening to others as much as possible opens you up to new ideas and tools for the kit bag - of which you can't have too many, particularly for retraining a horse off the track. Some tools are not always in line with classical training methods, often rather unconventional tactics can work wonders in providing the "light-bulb" moment when progress seems to have ground to a halt.

Whilst it may sometimes seem like it, your horse isn't stupid, stubborn or awkward, he's confused; this will be because the lines of communication have broken down - your instructions (aids/cues) are not accurate and/or clear or are ill-timed. Remember, your horse is already trained to do a specific job - he thinks he knows exactly what you want him to do so he'll try to do things in the manner he's always done.

There are two schools of thought on the commencement of a retraining programme:

- that horses should have 2/3 months "let down" time upon leaving the racing environment, or
- that it is acceptable to start retraining work from day one.

There is nothing wrong with the second option provided you have suitable experience to cope with a very fit, super-charged athlete. The vast majority of people opt for the former, which obviously gives a horse chance to relax mentally, lose his racing muscles and the effects of a high energy diet to fade. However, just because a horse has had this relaxation time doesn't mean to say that when retraining starts he's miraculously forgotten his past; to him he's still a racehorse.

Whilst the ex-racehorse is usually good to load (although it's unlikely he'll have travelled in a trailer) and to shoe (may not be used to hot shoeing) with good stable manners (definitely not used to being tied up outside his stable), also bear the following in mind:

- He may not stand still for you to mount; the racehorse is usually mounted from the walk; some may rear up a little if you try to stop them moving; some will stand if someone holds them.
- He may not have experienced a conventional (GP) saddle on his back; it will feel very different particularly in terms of weight.
- Whilst increasingly racehorses are ridden with longer stirrups, not all, so your horse may not have experienced legs quite so far down his sides.
- He won't understand the correct working of the bit - contact; invariably a take-up of the reins results in hollowing - head/neck go up and out. You may experience head tossing/tilting, snatching at the bit, etc. Many horses may well teeth grind too; that is tension.

- He won't understand the aids - hands, leg, seat or weight.
- Your braking system may prove limited or non-existent; remember that when you shorten up the reins and undoubtedly, although unintentionally, incline yourself forward, you're actually giving cues to go faster!
- Contrary to popular belief racehorses are used to hacking out but invariably they do so with others so riding out in company will be associated with work i.e. a training gallop. When you do go out alone you could encounter separation anxiety - insecurity and nervousness.

### With regard to saddlery

- Regular consultations with a saddle fitter will be required during the early months as the racing physique fades and a new musculature develops, but to what extent will depend entirely on the manner of schooling work undertaken and how well and accurately it is effected.
- The thoroughbred back is very sensitive; however well-fitted your saddle a numnah will be required - one that absorbs concussion as opposed to just being thick. Thoroughbreds can become niggled when sweaty particularly in the saddle region. Generally they are used to elasticated girths.
- Acceptance of the bit/contact is one of the biggest issues facing the re-racehorse rider - indeed any rider. Be prepared to go through several bit changes as retraining progresses but change a bit because the horse is telling you, not because your riding dictates! Bitless is not an option in the early days as there is no understanding of the other aids.

### Other considerations include:

- Racehorses have a lifestyle based on a structured routine and as creatures of habit can soon exhibit behavioural or stress related symptoms which weren't evident when in training. When they lose their familiar lifestyle; they may even appear grumpy and bad-tempered but with time to adjust and settle in, this will pass - just give them time.
- Increasingly racehorses are having access to grazing but this is limited; so long hours at grass aren't an option to begin with - access to stabling is essential; being thin-skinned rugs will be needed in the stable (as well as out) to ensure warmth until he acclimatises to his new lifestyle. Take care with leg straps - fillet strings are the order of the day in racing yards.

- It's quite possible the horse has an ulcer, albeit low grade; colic is a potential threat in the early days as the digestive system adjusts to a more fibre-based diet. During the early weeks (and even months) your horse may not eat the quantities of forage you would like him to but don't be alarmed by this.
- It's quite likely the horse will have incurred some form of injury (back, pelvis or leg are the most common) particularly the national hunt horse, which may not present initial difficulties but may well manifest later on during the course of re-training work.
- A full M.O.T comprising of a worm count (and any resultant worming) and visits from an EDT and chiropractor are recommended, plus a visit from your farrier to assess general foot condition as many thoroughbreds do have poor quality horn.
- Patience and flexibility are virtues you will need; the thoroughbred is very sensitive and quick-minded, readily prone to boredom; he can become more easily flustered when not understanding what is being asked of him. You must remain calm but confident as a sharp-minded thoroughbred will soon pick up on your own nervousness and weaknesses.

## Starting Retraining

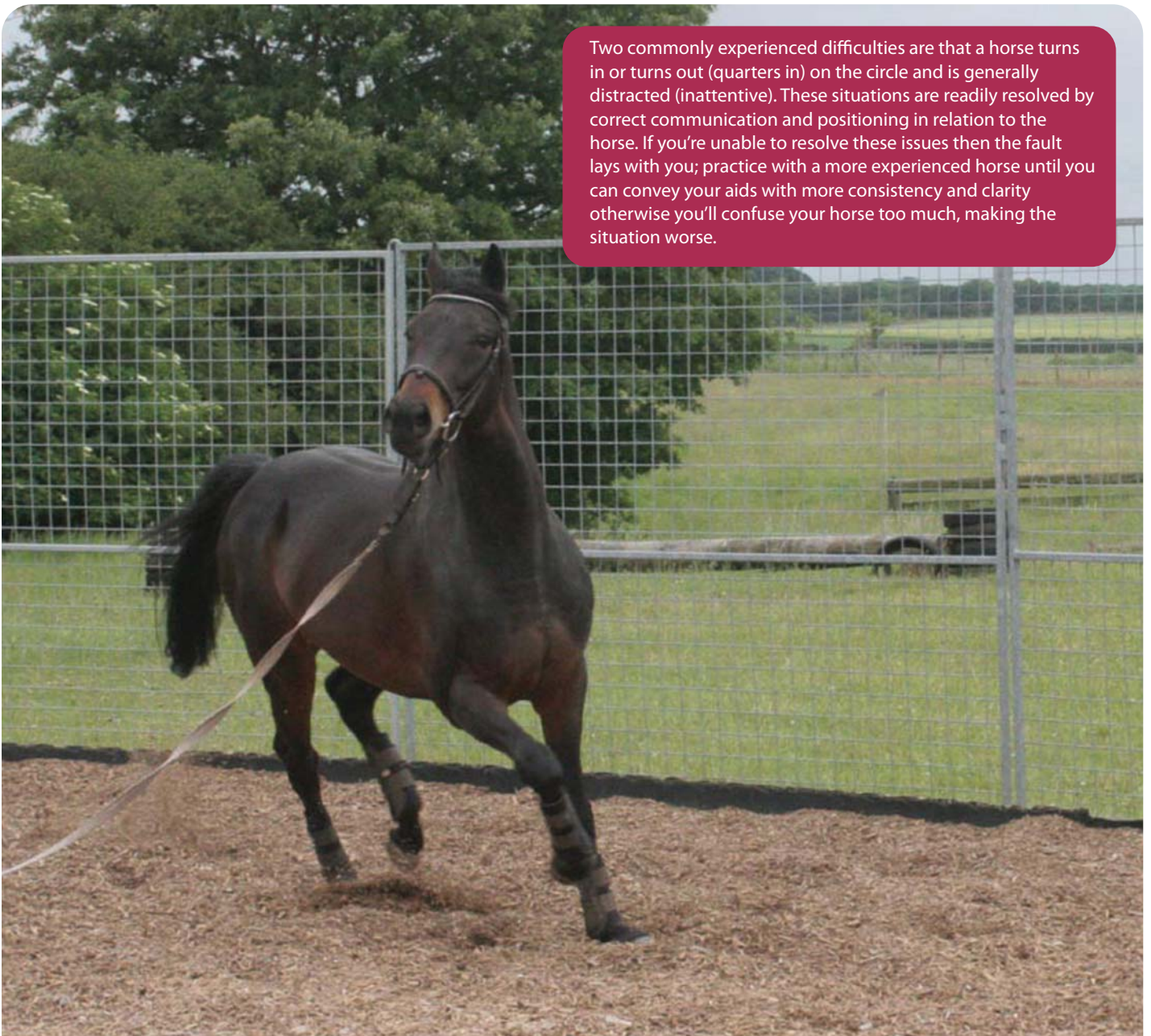
It is recommended that training commences with groundwork rather than straight from the saddle. However if your own horse is generally sensible and controllable there's no reason why you can't intersperse such training with some hacking out. However most horses out of training have high head carriage, don't have a good acceptance of the bit, can seem strong, don't understand the riding aids, etc. so it's sensible to establish some basics before venturing out into the open. Ideally start your schooling work in an enclosed space so as to afford safety to you both.

Groundwork can start with very simple exercises to help you build a confident relationship as your horse must see you as the person in whom he can put his trust. Practice stepping him backwards and sideways, moving his quarters or just the forehand; use poles to test mental and physical dexterity. There are lots of things you can do - just refer to the internet or friends who do Parelli, Intelligent Horsemanship etc.

During early lunge work don't attach the lunge line directly to the bit or to just one side of it; this doesn't afford enough control and interferes with the bit action. The practice of putting the lunge line over the head isn't recommended as this imparts an uplifting one-sided pull on the bit which can result in head tilt and other bit evasions.

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Two commonly experienced difficulties are that a horse turns in or turns out (quarters in) on the circle and is generally distracted (inattentive). These situations are readily resolved by correct communication and positioning in relation to the horse. If you're unable to resolve these issues then the fault lays with you; practice with a more experienced horse until you can convey your aids with more consistency and clarity otherwise you'll confuse your horse too much, making the situation worse.





Keep the lunge line slack and align yourself by the shoulder to control the pace.

Another scenario is when the horse tears around at break neck speed; however tempting don't pull on the lunge line and certainly don't shout as both actions exacerbate the situation. Most horses soon realise that they aren't actually achieving anything, settling down after a few circuits but some don't and risk hurting themselves so you must stop them as soon as possible – move towards him, shortening the line as you do; you must block him so position yourself ahead of his shoulder as quickly as possible.

Until this habit is broken, work in a much reduced area (section

off small area of the school) as your horse will be much less inclined to try and whiz around. Treat him exactly as a youngster – lead him around in a circle; when he's happy doing that gradually let the line out, taking a few steps away from him giving him the idea of not relying on you to maintain forward movement but you're still close enough to give him security. At any time if he attempts to increase his speed, go back to the leading position and repeat the exercise until the correct response is achieved. Progress by continually increasing the length of the lunge line and stepping further and further away, increasing the size of your working area.

When executing lunge work don't restrict your horse to a working area that's too small for him to cope with; 20m is pretty tight for an unbalanced, unmuscled horse. In order to maintain control, move around yourself so that you don't have to let your horse have too much line.



Restrict work to walk and trot but incorporate plenty of transitions, including halt – at which point your horse should keep his focus on you awaiting the next cue – as “Call Oscar” is doing with Fred. Cantering on the lunge should not be attempted until you have full control and the horse has improved his balance and is more supple through the back.

**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](mailto:askthexperts@ror.org.uk)**

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**NEXT ISSUE - PART 2  
Climbing on board**