

On the right lines

This month we see how Fred and Rowena Cook are progressing with new recruit Oscar, as well as a step-by-step guide to long-reining

Since the sad loss of Blue, Fred and Rowena of Equine Management and Training have been working on ex-racehorse Oscar, who is well on his way to a successful future.

Oscar is a beautiful 17hh gentle giant who has plenty of potential. He just tends to carry a little tension and Fred and Rowena are working to improve this as his training progresses.

"When Oscar arrived last August he had all the necessary checks and treatments to ensure he was ready for retraining.

"His injured tendon, which led to his retirement from racing, was scanned and confirmed to be well and, apart from a little bleached hair from his time on the coast at Hollesley Bay, he was in tip top condition," says Rowena.

"Following this, priority number one was to address his diet. The order of the day was to provide him with oil to improve coat, skin and hoof condition, a fibre-based diet with good quality protein. We chose Dengie Alfa-A with Oil, unmolassed sugarbeet and Dengie Fibremix."

As Oscar didn't appear to have any glaringly obvious physical problems he was re-introduced to exercise for a few weeks prior to a chiropractic examination. He had a month of walk and trot exercise to begin to harden his tendons before he was expected to start his proper retraining.

A new life

Last year we started to follow Fred and Rowena Cook, as they retrained a former racehorse, Blue. Sadly Blue was found to have degenerative joint disease and advanced periostitis and the hard decision was taken to have him euthanised. In his place came Call Oscar who had been retired from racing after a tendon injury.



Retraining racehorses



*turn
the
page*
for a step-by-step guide
to long-reining

"He was clearly feeling well in himself, so to avoid having him jumping around on the end of a leadrope jarring his legs, he was let loose in the safe environment of our round pen – the smaller working space always helps to keep lively behaviour to a minimum," says Rowena.

If you don't have access to a round pen, section off a corner of your school to create a smaller working space

Tips for the round pen

If your horse has a tendency to race about, be passive and stand still.

If possible avoid putting your round pen on grass – it's often too firm or too slippery, both of which will cause horses to alter their gait in order to balance, as well as risking injury. However, if you have no alternative select the most level corner of your field, ensure it's free of stones and don't attempt to work when ground conditions are poor.

After a month of exercise Oscar had a chiropractic assessment with Georgina Sim, a McTimoney animal manipulator, and, with the all clear to get working, he was ready to start retraining.

The art of long-reining

Long-reining is a great way to introduce your horse to new aids, improve acceptance and submission, and introduce lateral work. For ex-racehorses it's a safe way to help them understand a new way of working. But it needs to be done carefully, always bearing in mind that your horse may not understand what you're asking of him.

Fred and Rowena are experts, so here they give you a step-by-step guide to long-reining, as well as advice on what you should expect.

"The key to successfully introducing a horse to long-reining is to know what he's likely to do and to take things nice and slowly," says Fred.

"I'd always recommend long-reining with another person to help when doing it for the first time – it's the best way to stay safe and ensure that no situation can arise where the horse becomes panicked. Most ex-racehorses will have been long-reined at some point, but it may have been a long time ago, so it's always best to start again as if it's being done for the first time."

Getting started

After tacking Oscar up, with the reins removed from his bridle and the stirrups securely fastened down using a strap

underneath the belly, Fred clips one of the long-reins to Oscar's right bit ring and stands him quietly.

"Always do this in the stable if you're doing this for the first time," he says.

"At this point, Rowena will stay at Oscar's head, leading him with the leadrope attached to the opposite bit ring."

Rowena continues to hold Oscar as Fred puts the rein through the corresponding stirrup. "When he seems happy and relaxed I'll ask Rowena to walk him on again as I slowly lengthen the rein," says Fred.

"I always talk to the horse throughout the process so they know I'm here and it generally helps to ease a lot of worry."

After working with one rein, Fred quietly attaches the second to the other bit ring. Then, keeping the excess rein neatly gathered, the outside rein is passed quietly over the saddle so that both reins can be held by Fred on one side.



Oscar wears a Myler Combination bit

Getting geared up

Oscar carries a lot of tension and is very unsure about accepting the contact so Fred and Rowena have, for now, chosen to work him in a Myler Combination bit.

"These bits are great for horses like Oscar because there's a lot less pressure on the mouth – instead it's distributed around the head, over his nose, mouth and poll," explains Fred.

"We'd recommend using a noseband that you know your horse is comfortable in and if mouth opening has become a habit (having ruled out any dental or temporomandibular joint (TMJ) issues) then temporary closure of the mouth is fine, but don't automatically opt for a flash noseband. A grackle or Mexican noseband can be a better choice as they don't apply as much pressure on the nose. In Oscar's case he didn't like his mouth being restricted, it only made him react more negatively."

Long-reining guide

Step by step



3 Quietly lift the line and touch his side – and then walk him on

Next, quietly lift the line up and bring it towards his side. He might step sideways, which is a good, natural response.

"Most horses, if they've been broken correctly, will have done this before but it's still important to be as gentle as possible so that the horse never feels as though he's trapped," explains Fred.

If, at this stage, your horse isn't agitated or upset, ask your partner to lead him on, keeping the rein off his side until he relaxes.

4 Change the rein

You can now walk him around the school to ensure he's completely at ease with the line by his side. Be sure to incorporate a change of rein as this will enable you to bring the line further around the hindquarters. To do this, put gentle pressure of the rein on to the outside quarter and, as he changes the rein, apply the same gentle pressure on the other side.



Retraining racehorses



1 Fred makes Oscar aware he's beside him

With the first long-rein clipped on, ask someone to hold your horse's head while you make him aware that you're on his off-side near his hindquarters. Do this slowly and never disappear directly behind him. Always stay a little to the side so that he can see you – if he can't, he could panic.



2 Bring the line around

Bring the line around the off-side but don't yet let it touch your horse. Let him stand and be aware that the line is there. He might want to have a look, which is good.



5 Feed the line over the hindquarters

With the second rein attached, bring the offside rein around the quarters by placing the line just behind the saddle and gently feed it over the hindquarters. Always make sure that the lines are gathered up and not lying on the floor. Repeat the leading process on both reins, then it's time to go it alone, your partner can unclip their lead and move away.

Retraining racehorses

6 Give him time to relax

Allow your horse to walk with no contact and give him time to relax again now that he's on his own. When you ask him to take the contact this may be where you see some tension creep in, as with Oscar.

"Racehorses aren't taught about contact and any pressure put on the reins is a cue to speed up, so at this stage some horses will become confused. It's now your job to help your horse learn a whole set of new rules and aids," says Fred.

"It's a case of taking up the rein for a couple of strides, then releasing, taking it up again and releasing. The horse must learn to round through his back and maintain it – he needs to learn to hold himself."

Repeat the process until the number of strides where your horse takes a contact can be increased. When you move forward to trot you can repeat the process.

7 Like a duck to water

Despite his tension, Oscar is soon much more confident to take the rein contact.

"As his confidence grows over the coming weeks and as more suppling work is introduced, this tension will gradually lessen. His general lack of balance and suppleness means that he's not actually going round corners or achieving much bend on the circle, but again this will improve over time," explains Fred.

"We also like to introduce pole work, which is an important part of any horse's training, whatever their discipline. It also provides variety and interest, which is great for Thoroughbreds who get bored, especially in the early stages of retraining when they're struggling to understand."

Despite not having seen poles before, Oscar tackles his first row without a problem.

"Working over poles keeps it interesting and makes them think. They have to think about what they're doing with their legs. Oscar's not been over poles before so I'm thrilled with him."

Remember If you're in any doubt about your horse's training, seek professional advice to avoid confusion and frustration for you and your horse. Visit www.equinetraining.co.uk and www.ror.org.uk or call Fred and Rowena on the Retraining of Racehorses hotline, 01780 740773



www.yourhorse.co.uk

See more

To find out more about what Oscar has been up to since his arrival at Fred and Rowena's, including re-introducing the saddle, diet and even jumping for the first time, visit www.yourhorse.co.uk/Oscar



Next time

See Oscar under saddle as his ridden work gets underway