

# Off the track

### PART 1

Retraining racehorses is challenging but, done well, full of rewards too. Trainers Fred and Rowena Cook have invited us to follow the progress of ex-racer Blue in his change of career

**E**x-racehorses aren't like other equines in terms of how they need to be handled both from the ground and under saddle, as many of you will know.

Their racing life involves heavily structured lifestyles and routines so, when their careers end, they face a totally different future.

New saddles and new bits, new training programmes, new feed times, new freedoms and new owners are just some of the things to get used to when their time on the track is over. It's not surprising it can often be confusing for both horse and owner when these issues are broached.

Today, as an influx of racehorses hits the sales, many people have found themselves giving homes to unwanted Thoroughbreds straight off the track – and hit problem after problem. This is often because new owners may not fully understand what to expect from a horse straight out of racing – and equally the horse may not fully understand what's expected of him.

Your Horse joins specialist trainers Fred and Rowena Cook as they start retraining six-year-old ex-racehorse Blue.

### Fred and Rowena

Fred and Rowena Cook have years of experience handling and training horses from all equestrian spheres. Their knowledge of the way racehorses are kept in training helps them understand the problems new owners face. They work hard to train their horses to be forward-going, polite and well-mannered, but above all confident and happy.

Fred and Rowena also run the Helpline for the ROR (Retraining of Racehorses) so if you want any advice, then just give them a call on 01780 740773



Rowena, Blue and Fred

## PROFILE

**NAME** First Blue  
**STABLE NAME** Blue  
**AGE** 6  
**HEIGHT** 15.3h  
**RACED** 8 times  
**PLACINGS** 2, 2  
**LAST RACE** Boxing Day 2008



## Beginning Blue's retraining

Blue is a completely blank canvass for retraining. Since his last race in December, he may have continued his normal training for a month or so, in the hope he might have another race, but since then, and certainly since his arrival on the Cooks' yard, he's been enjoying time out, doing absolutely nothing.

"Blue could do one of two things today, when we begin working with him – he could make a fuss and find everything to be very strange, or he could do absolutely nothing at all," says Fred.

"However, having got to know Blue a little over the past two months, it's clear that he's a really genuine, kind horse so I think we can expect the latter."

## A bit of 'R and R'

When horses reach the end of their racing careers, whether they've been injured or simply didn't cut the mustard, they're normally "let down" for a period of time. This is generally time out at grass to allow their racing muscles to soften, put on weight and relax.

"The most important thing to remember, and what many people forget is that, even though the horse has possibly had a number of months out of racing, they'll not have forgotten the job they've been trained to do," explains Fred.

"They'll still think they're a racehorse – that won't have changed, so the proper phases of re-training are always necessary."

## Costume change

Before any training can begin, Blue needs to be groomed and have his boots and bridle put on in preparation for lunging in the round pen. While this is an everyday task in our eyes, Blue hasn't had a bit in his mouth since December so this needs to be done with due care and attention.

"We always use boots all round and Blue seems happy to have his on. He'll most likely have been run in a jointed snaffle, so a different bit will feel odd for him at first.

"Today we're putting him in a training lozenge snaffle to encourage him to soften and work on a more gentle contact – although at this stage, contact, in terms of how we understand it generally in the riding horse, is not something Blue will know anything about," says Fred.

Blue is happy to accept his new bit and immediately begins to mouth.

"It's fine that he's playing with the bit at this



Blue likes his new bridle

stage but, if he continues to do so throughout the week, we might call out the dentist to have a look at him, just as a precaution to check his teeth are indeed ok," Fred explains. "Obviously we checked his mouth on arrival and couldn't find anything that gave us cause for concern at that time."

## Right to the round pen

With Blue ready in his boots and bridle, Fred leads him out to the round pen to be lunged before introducing the saddle. Fred lunges Blue using a leather coupling (or bit connector). This strap fastens from bit ring to bit ring with the lunge connecting directly to the strap.

"I always lunge with a coupling on," says Fred. "I prefer to use this because it doesn't go over the horse's heading putting downward pressure on the poll which some horses object to."

Fred sends Blue out onto a circle and straight away his back legs go up and he has a bit of a frolic.

"This is a pretty typical reaction," explains Rowena. "He's had a lot of time off so it's normal for him to want to have a bit of a buck. You'll also notice that he's cantering a little disunited and seems a little off on his inside hind, not lame but more of an unevenness to his gait. It might be he's feeling some tightness in his hamstring or it could be simply a little tweak of the muscle, something he's done in the field."

Rowena says that as there's nothing immediately obvious – no swelling or bulge of any muscles – they'll just keep an eye on this leg, and, if in a day or two, it's no better they'll call the chiropractor.

"We've already checked Blue had no underlying injuries from his racing career but, even if this had been the case and he'd needed more time off, we'd have used this time to do ground work and establish a bond with him."

As Blue continues to let off steam, Fred explains the deeper surface of their round pen is very important at times like this, though no surface should be too deep it risks muscular damage.

"When they get like this, it would be easy for them to slip and fall on a shallow surface, so the deeper surface on the round pen is important. They need to have a kick and a buck if they want so the area in which they do it needs to be safe. It's a larger round pen than

standard, so we can lunge larger horses in here and even put a jump in if we want. It allows for that extra bit of space when they need it."

The three-way coupling fastens from bit ring to bit ring, and also to the noseband which relieves pressure on the bit.



Blue reacts as expected for his first session



turn the page

for common worries of the new owner of an ex-racer

## Back down to earth

Fred continues to lunge Blue, calling him in occasionally for a pat and some praise. Blue is quick to catch on and seems extremely obedient in this early stage.

Fred makes Blue rein-back by calling him in to a halt, then applying light pressure to his chest with his hand. Back out on the circle, he also uses his hand to signal to Blue he wants him to change direction.

"It's great that Blue is so responsive to Fred's hand movements," says Rowena. "He's showing us he's got a brain and he understands which is brilliant. Some horses won't grasp this for weeks – they're all different. The important thing is to be patient and calm, there's no point in pulling the horse around and being aggressive. It's up to the person on the end of the lunge line to be very clear and positive – the horse doesn't know so it's up to you to teach him," she says.

As Blue continues on the circle in canter, his body language begins to change. It's clear he's much more relaxed and calm now. His ears go forward, he slows down and his strides look comfortable and controlled.

If you don't have a round pen to work in, don't worry, you can readily make yourself a working area. So set some boundaries and make your own round pen using electric fencing and high fence posts. It's quick and easy to do and your horse will know exactly where his work space is.



Blue comes in for a pat

## Looking for a cause

As Fred continues to work Blue on a smaller circle he looks a little lame, but Fred explains this isn't a reason to automatically panic. "Often, if the horse looks a little lame at this stage, owners will start jumping to all sorts of conclusions, getting worked up unnecessarily.

"In this case, Blue could be holding some tension in his muscles following his let-down, or he could simply be a little bridle lame. He seems to have stopped mouthing the bit and he's holding on to it now which makes me think he could bit a little tense," says Fred. "The important thing is to look for reasons why your horse is showing signs of lameness and discomfort, instead of jumping to conclusions."

Rowena enters the round pen to hold Blue while Fred checks him over for tension and soreness.

"I'm feeling for tension in Blue's muscles and straight away, as I'm feeling his left shoulder, it's evident he's sore here. This could be the reason he was off on his near hind on the large circle, and then slightly lame in front on the smaller circle."

"Often, all it takes is a little exploration to put the pieces together and you can discover and understand why your horse is moving a certain way."

Fred also checks Blue's pelvis for any rotation by placing his thumbs above the pelvic bones, laying them flat to the skin, with his index fingers pointing vertically up. If the tips of the index fingers are offset, it could indicate a rotated pelvis. Fortunately Blue's pelvis appears to be level.

"I'll also check his legs and feet. He doesn't have any shoes on so any lameness or visible discomfort may be due to a bruised sole," says Fred. "Everything looks fine, but we'll check him later (for swelling and/or heat in his limbs as a result of his first day of work) and call the chiropractor, with our vet's approval, for his shoulder if there's no improvement in the next few days."

This may appear to some to be a somewhat casual attitude, but Fred and Rowena's vast experience mean they don't often have to resort to veterinary intervention.



Fred checks Blue's pelvis

Fred feels for tension in Blue's muscles

# Retraining racehorses



Blue finally relaxes

Blue keeps an eye on things



## Saddle on

Now Blue's had time to become relaxed in the round pen, Fred and Rowena feel he's ready for the saddle to go on.

Fred says: "He's probably never seen a saddle like this GP before, so it will be strange. It'll weigh more, cover more of his back, come lower down his sides and the rider's legs will be in a completely different position, so all these things can make this a difficult stage for some ex-racehorses to get used to."

As his new saddle is put on for the first time, Blue is completely calm. He can obviously feel that it's different and looks back to see what's going on, out of curiosity. Fred lowers the stirrups and lets them hang freely before sending Blue out on a circle again. If, at this stage, the horse becomes tense, the stirrups are left up until he is completely at ease in walk, trot and canter.



with stirrups up



stirrups down

"This is a great reaction," says Fred. "Some horses will have another good buck with their new saddle on, or take some time to relax and move properly in it, but Blue seems to be very accepting of it straight away. He's a very genuine and I think he'll be a great little horse."



## End of phase one

Leaving things on a good note, Blue is taken back to his stable, untacked, brushed and left to relax before being put out to grass later in the afternoon. His first session went by with a little excitement initially, but quickly progressed as he got the hang of things. It's clear Blue's quick to learn and we think he'll be the perfect horse for our retraining of racehorses series. We'll be catching up with Fred, Rowena and Blue soon to see how his training advances.

## Common panics of the new ex-racehorse owner!

### "HE DOESN'T LIKE AFFECTION"

On a race yard, the day-to-day running can be quite hectic, so many ex-racehorses won't be used to lots of one-on-one affection. If they seem a little off with you, remember it's just an unusual form of contact for them. Give them time to adjust and remember that, just like people, they have their own personalities – they might just like their space!

### "HE'S TICKLISH WHEN I GROOM HIM"

It might seem as though your horse is ticklish or uncomfortable when you groom him and many people worry that something's wrong. It's important to remember that Thoroughbreds have thin skin and,

if they've just come out of training, they're unlikely to have a lot of body fat. Try using a soft bristled brush and be gentler where they seem most sensitive.

### "HE HATES BEING ON HIS OWN"

Racehorses are used to being and running with other horses all the time, so going it alone can be extremely stressful and take a long time to get used to. Out hacking, try walking ahead of a friend and their horse for a few strides. If your horse starts to feel tense or panicked, allow the other horse to catch up as a reward. Let them learn at a pace they're happy with and don't make them go cold turkey!

Visit [www.ror.org.uk](http://www.ror.org.uk) or [www.equinetraining.co.uk](http://www.equinetraining.co.uk) for more information and advice on ex-racehorses

## STILL TO COME...

Future visits to see how Blue is progressing will report on a variety of aspects of his re-training, as he progresses from racehorse to riding horse, including

- Blue's visit from the chiropractor
- Introducing long reins
- Pole work
- Loose jumping
- Under saddle for the first time in six months