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Horse

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'He panics when I get on'

Lewis is a sensible horse with one big problem – he panics and takes off when being mounted. Can equine behaviourist **Sue Palmer** help?



THE OWNER

LIZ PEGG is based in Weston on Trent, near Derby. She has owned nine-year-old Lewis, a 14.3hh Welsh Section D gelding, for just under a year. Liz enjoys hacking, and has recently taken Lewis to a fun ride, and would like to do more. Having ridden confidently as a child, Liz's difficult last horse damaged her confidence. She's enjoying riding Lewis, but is worried about his behaviour when she tries to get on.



THE TRAINER

SUE PALMER holds the Monty Roberts Preliminary Certificate of Horsemanship and is a recommended associate of Intelligent Horsemanship. She is also a qualified veterinary physiotherapist (ACPAT Cat A) and runs Holistic Horse Help from her base in Stafford. For more information or advice, visit: www.holisticheorsehelp.com.

Despite the fact that Liz describes Lewis as "a sensible horse and a lovely ride" he panics and gets anxious when mounted. The cob has behaved this way since Liz bought him. She hasn't seen it as a problem until recently when he reared up as a friend tried to get on him. Liz is concerned that there's something worrying the horse that's making him rush off.

His teeth were seen recently by the vet, so we can rule those out, but Lewis has not had his back checked in the past few months. A brief physio assessment reveals some tension

that is almost certainly part of the problem. A horse with a sore back is unlikely to want to stand still while the rider gets on, and I recommend physiotherapy to address this.

Liz also thinks her old saddle isn't right for Lewis. I find that it's bridging (not spreading the weight evenly along the back), and the seat is tipping back. This means that Liz will be sitting too far back and putting pressure on the less supported part of Lewis's back, which will make mounting uncomfortable for him. One of the first things to do, then, is to get Lewis properly fitted with a new saddle.



LUNGE LESSONS

One of Liz's concerns is that she's unable to lunge Lewis. As a working mum, she can't always find the time to ride him, and would like to be able to lunge him for exercise occasionally. When she first got Lewis, she tried to lunge him, and found that he either took off, or just stood and faced her. Worried that she couldn't control him, she hasn't tried again since.

I decide to start with addressing this, as part of my assessment of the relationship between Liz and Lewis. To Liz's surprise, the cob circles well around her, if a little quickly. She doesn't feel out of control, and he doesn't stop and face her. To me, this shows how much their relationship has come on in the year that they've been together, and Liz's confidence receives an instant boost.



THE PROBLEM REVEALED

Liz then tacks up and I ask her to show me the mounting issue. She is feeling a little nervous, but she decides she's happy to get on Lewis while I stand back and watch.

As soon as she swings her leg over the saddle, before she is able to get her foot in the stirrup, Lewis takes off. Liz is obviously used to this and grips with her thighs as she turns him in a circle until he relaxes to a jog and then to a walk.

Lewis's body language clearly shows concern. Liz confirms that this is normal behaviour for him at the mounting block, and that he has been this way since before she owned him.



Liz is very nervous about mounting Lewis, but she decides to get on without any help (left). However, as soon as she swings her leg over the saddle Lewis takes off (above)

BACK TO BASICS

We take things back to the beginning, looking to find the point that worries Lewis in the process of mounting. We put on the Monty Roberts Dually halter, which offers a gentle pressure and release system, as I don't want the added complication of any potential reaction to pressure from the bit.

First of all we lead Lewis between the mounting block and a solid wall, then through the same gap but with Liz standing on the block (below). We then ask him to stop beside the mounting block, and Liz reaches forward and gives him a scratch. Each stage is taken slowly enough that we can back off at any point if Lewis shows concern, but he takes it all in his stride.

However, when Liz lifts her foot towards the stirrup, it's a different matter. Lewis's head comes up and his body tenses (right). So we practise this part of the mounting process slowly again and again, with regular breaks and rewards, until he remains relaxed when Liz steps into the stirrup. **H3**





REDUCING TENSION

I decide that moving into the open field, where Lewis doesn't feel too trapped, is the way to progress in this particular case. There is no reaction to Liz jumping up and down beside Lewis while holding onto the saddle, so I leg her up, asking her to lean her bodyweight over his saddle and come

straight down onto her feet again. Initially Lewis tenses (above), but he's quick to learn and relax, and Liz is soon able to lean her weight over him for longer periods of time and give him a scratch.

Once we're at this point, I ask Lewis to adjust his balance and move a foot, while Liz stays leaning

over him. Again, we work on the basis of repetition and reward, and include plenty of breaks for a rest. Gradually, Liz is able to move her right leg against his quarters, and eventually, bit by bit, she puts her leg over the saddle and sits astride her horse (above, inset). With all the preparation and training that we've done, Lewis doesn't move an inch.

We then consolidate the training steps that we've already worked through, and add in the bridle, so that Liz can begin to take a hold on the reins. By the end of the session, Liz is able to mount Lewis with me standing nearby and have him stand until he is asked to move. He then walks on calmly. I suggest that when she works on this alone Liz has a couple of treats in her pocket, and that once she is on, she gives Lewis a treat out of each hand before she asks him to walk forward.



NEXT STEPS

Liz and Lewis have made great progress in this session, but it's just the beginning. The behavioural signs in this case are almost certainly a symptom suggesting an underlying cause, which is why addressing any back and tack issues was crucial.

When I leave her, Liz is sceptical about whether the work that we have done will last, and more importantly whether it will be effective when she is on her own with Lewis. I tell her to take it as slowly as she needs to, and to practise all the steps that we've been through today until they are mundane tasks to both her and Lewis. Repetition is the key here.

A week later, Liz said: "I've done a lot of work on the ground with Lewis this week, but today was the first chance I had to ride. I tacked him up and went through all the stages Sue showed me. Any time I felt that he was getting tense I went back a step. After about 15 minutes I got on him, sorted out my stirrups and girth, gave him a treat either side, then took up my reins and I actually had to squeeze him to walk on!"

TOP TIPS FOR SAFE MOUNTING

- It is NOT normal for your horse to be uncomfortable when you put the saddle on or do the girth up, or get on your horse. Try to find out the reason why. Your vet or physiotherapist is a good place to start. You can find your local, qualified chartered physiotherapist by visiting: www.acpat.co.uk.
- Accidents caused by a horse not standing still when you mount are common and can be serious. Take the time to teach your horse that moving off before being asked is not acceptable behaviour.
- If your horse takes a step as you get on, immediately move him back to where he was before he took the step, and then relax the pressure and reward him for standing still. Repeat as many times as necessary.
- Always use a mounting block if possible to get on your horse. It's better for your back, for his back, and for your saddle.
- If your horse always swings his quarters away from you when you go to get on, line him up so that he stands between the mounting block and a safe fence. This will prevent him from moving away.

