

Control those feet

Rachel and Lucy McKeown are desperate to build a better relationship with their bold mare. Equine behaviourist **Sue Palmer** teaches them to take control



THE OWNER

RACHEL MCKEOWN and her 14-year-old daughter **LUCY** live in Staffordshire and have owned Lily, a seven-year-old 15.2hh coloured cob mare, since October 2008. Initially ridden by Rachel, the plan is for her to gradually become Lucy's horse. Although Rachel is confident with Lily, she recognises that it's important for the mare's behaviour to improve in order for Lucy's confidence to develop.



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.holistichorsehelp.com.

The plan is for cob mare Lily to become 14-year-old Lucy McKeown's horse, but her mum Rachel explains that the mare's behaviour makes it unsafe for Lucy to get her in from the field. They have decided that Lucy should not hack Lily out until the relationship improves, as Lily took off when Lucy last hacked her out.

Although Lucy and Lily have competed successfully in a few walk and trot dressage competitions, Lily has recently taken advantage of Lucy in this situation. She misbehaved in the collecting ring and napped once she

entered the arena, so to stay safe they have stopped competing for now.

Lucy has a thirst for knowledge, learning from books and DVDs as well as lessons. She has attended a natural horsemanship course, where Lily's behaviour improved dramatically throughout the day. Lucy says: "Lily is a bold, intelligent character. Unfortunately, she is disrespectful, which makes her difficult to lead. Sometimes I feel I can't control her because she is so 'big' in everything she does. I would love to find a way that would make her want to work with me, not against me."



ESTABLISHING THE ISSUES

Talking with Rachel and Lucy reveals just how much they both care about Lily. It also becomes clear that, although Lucy would love to do more with Lily, she's lacking the confidence to do so. It's obvious that Rachel is concerned for her daughter's safety when Lily gets strong, too.

To assess the relationship, I ask Lucy to lead Lily in a straight line from one point to another. The extent of her difficulties on the ground is obvious. Lily pushes into Lucy, goes into trot, and trots a circle around her. Lucy simply cannot walk Lily in a straight line because Lily keeps blocking her way. Every so often, Lucy stops Lily and asks her

to back up a few steps, but this has no effect on her ability to have her walk in a straight line.

When Rachel leads Lily in a straight line, I can immediately see the differences between the way that Lucy and Rachel work. Rachel has Lily on a short lead rope, and has the confidence to be much more definite in what she is asking, which gives her more control.

However, Lily's head is in the air and she resists, pulling on the rope and trotting on the spot (above). When she spots something in the distance, her tail goes up over her back as she spins around Rachel.

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Rachel's priority is to address the groundwork problems so that she and Lucy can be safer handling Lily. I teach them to lead Lily with a relaxed rope, and to have Lily's eye level with or behind their shoulder (right). That way, they are able to notice quickly when Lily is starting to take charge of the situation, and to react appropriately. Lucy is already practised at stopping Lily when she wants to, she just needs to stop her at the right time before her behaviour gets out of hand, rather than allowing Lily to trot circles around her.

It becomes apparent that both Lucy and Rachel struggle with asking Lily to turn right. It is essential to have control of the main directions in which your horse can move – forwards, backwards, left and right. The handler needs to have control of the horse's feet – we do not want the horse having control of the handler's feet.

When I ask Lucy to lead Lily in a circle to the right, she has to push Lily around the circle. However, she finds that if she keeps Lily's eye level with her shoulder, she is able to walk a circle to the right and have Lily follow her. We practise some human-to-human leading (inset) to demonstrate that in order for the handler's speed to stay the same, the horse must walk faster on a circle to the left, and slower on a circle to the right. We can make it easier for the horse by adjusting the handler's speed instead.



Sue uses a lunge line to draw out a square (or you could trace out the line in the sand instead). Lucy must keep her feet within the square when handling Lily, so that she remains in charge of the mare's feet, not vice versa



DRAWING LINES IN THE SAND

I explain that Lily should stop when her handler stops. If they have been walking with Lily's eye level with their shoulder, then when the handler stops, Lily's eye should not come past their shoulder. Again, this allows the handler to react quickly and appropriately to move Lily back into position. Not every horse needs to be led with this

level of precision, but attention to detail is essential if you have a problem to overcome. The aim is to create a more relaxed and attentive horse.

To help them to understand this exercise, I use a lunge line to draw a square in the arena surface (you can draw in the sand, to avoid the risk of your horse's feet becoming entangled in the rope). Lucy

leads Lily in a straight line towards the square, and stops when her (Lucy's) feet are inside the square. If Lily tries to continue on past Lucy, she is moved (without Lucy's feet leaving the square) until her eye is level with Lucy's shoulder and she is facing in the direction that she was originally travelling. Any pressure is then instantly released. **H**


CIRCLING ON YOUR TERMS

The last exercise I want Rachel and Lucy to work on today is asking Lily to circle around them. Lucy has already used this exercise, so Lily understands what is being asked of her. I suggest they practise this occasionally, so that if they are in the situation of Lily choosing to circle around them rather than walk with them, they can swiftly change tactics and make it their decision for her to be circling. I ask them to circle her while keeping their feet inside the square, to be clear that it is them causing Lily's feet to move, rather than Lily persuading them to move around her (right and below).



NEXT STEPS

Rachel and Lucy need to work together to improve Lily's behaviour. Rachel has the strength and confidence to help Lily understand what is being asked of her, and Lucy has the determination and love for her horse that will help them succeed. I suggest that they practise these techniques when Lily is being well behaved, until their reactions to her behaviours are instinctive. They can then start to put them into practice when she's being more challenging. It will take time, but with strong foundations there's every chance that Lucy and Lily will develop a good relationship.

Rachel and Lucy have gained a greater understanding of Lily's behaviour during their session. "Knowing that I need to take control of Lily's feet, rather than her take control of mine, makes a lot of sense," says Rachel. "I'll be interested to transfer these skills when she's being more difficult." Lucy has also found the work beneficial. "Looking at things differently has helped me to understand Lily, and helped get her to work with me instead of against me," she says. 



TOP TIPS FOR FIDGETY HORSES

- The one who's in charge of the other's feet is the one in charge. Take charge of your horse's feet, rather than allowing him to be in charge of yours.
- Try leading your horse in a straight line from one marker to another, turning in a circle to the left and to the right. All of these should be easy with a 'smile in the lead line' – a loose feel on the rope rather than a tight hold.
- Draw a circle in the sand. Stand in the circle, and ask your horse to move forwards towards you, backwards away from you, and in a circle around you in either direction. If you can stay in the circle, then you know that you are causing your horse's feet to move, rather than him causing yours to move.
- Just because your horse is questioning what you are asking of him, that doesn't mean that he is working against you. It is natural for the horse to question you, but the 'discussion' between you should not become an argument or a battle.
- Think about what it is that indicates that your horse is working with you, and then look for those signals in their body language. Make sure you let the horse know when you are pleased with him, so he learns when he has behaved well.