

Confident hacking

For many riders, a spooky horse means hacking alone is impossible. **Sue Palmer** shows how you can build your horse's courage, so you can enjoy the ride



THE OWNER

LIZ PRICE, from Worcester, has had 10-year-old Jasper, a 15hh cob gelding, for just over a year. He is the first horse she has owned, though she has loaned and shared horses, and ridden at riding schools, most of her life.

Liz enjoys hacking out, but if she tries to take Jasper for a ride on his own, he is spooky and seems scared, even of his own shadow.



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 and runs her own business, Holistic Horse Help, from her base in Stafford. For more information or advice, visit: www.holistichorsehelp.com.

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"However, when he's on his own, he turns into a gibbering wreck at the smallest thing, such as the sight of a crisp packet."

Liz describes how Jasper "turns himself inside out", and says it can take up to 10 minutes to get

past the scary object. He's terrified of wheelie bins, and Liz is sure she will have problems getting Jasper to pass the skip in a driveway a short walk from the yard that we are using for this session.

Jasper's behaviour has meant that Liz hasn't hacked him out solo for more than four months. She would like to be able to enjoy the freedom of hacking him alone this summer, rather than being restricted to riding out in a group.



ESTABLISHING YOUR CONFIDENCE LEVELS

Liz's nerves plummet at the thought of hacking out

In the stable, Jasper is calm and relaxed, and Liz works assuredly around him when she is tacking him up. He is alert and interested, and clearly happy with the idea of work.

Once she is in the saddle, Liz's body language shows less confidence, especially at the thought of going out for a hack.

I ask her about her ridden work in the school, and she explains that she is concentrating on

walk and trot work, and that she is struggling with canter.

She grades her confidence at seven out of 10 when riding in the school in walk and trot, but just four out of 10 when she is thinking about going for a hack.

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FIRST STEPS



Do your homework in the arena before going on the roads

Building confidence in the school is just as important as building it out hacking – in fact, the two are closely linked. It is essential that Liz feels secure walking, trotting and cantering in the arena on a loose rein before she can feel the same when hacking out alone.

I ask Liz to ride Jasper down the drive, past two carefully placed wheelie bins, and along the road past the skip, so I can assess his behaviour. She

points out that Jasper is more confident if he has someone walking with him than if he is alone. I walk a little way behind him, so he can't take support from me.

To Liz's surprise, Jasper copes fairly well. He looks at the bins and the skip, and steps sideways away from them, speeding up to get past, but at least he keeps moving forwards.



Jasper copes well walking down the drive on his own...



...but gives the skip a look as he goes past



Liz isn't sure she can get Jasper past the flag. But with space and direction, the cob becomes happier (right)

GIVE HIM SPACE

Back at the yard, I take out a flag to assess Jasper's reaction to a strange object. As I unravel it, his energy levels rise and I ask Liz to ride past me.

The extent of Liz's concern becomes clear, and she is not sure she will be able to get Jasper to do this. However, there is plenty of space for them to give me a wide berth.

So I explain to Liz that she doesn't have to walk near me – she can find a way past without getting too close and causing Jasper any more upset.

Once she realises this and gives Jasper some direction, they pass me without a problem. **HDD**





SPOOK-PROOF YOUR HORSE

I set up an exercise in the arena that should build both Liz and Jasper's confidence. Initially, I ask them to circle around me, while I hold the flag in my hand, with Liz gradually reducing the size of the circle.

We do this in a corner of the school, so that it is easy for Jasper to remain on a small circle. I want

Liz to realise that she can remain in control, even in the presence of a 'scary' object.

Before long, I can even drape the flag over Jasper's head without him flinching.

Next, I stand a couple of metres from the fence and ask Liz to ride down the long side of the school, past me. Each time they go past, I move



PUTTING TRAINING INTO PRACTICE

The next test involves me hanging flags and banners from the fence along the drive. I ask Liz to ride the gelding past these spooky objects and tell her to put into practice the techniques she learned in the arena.

In particular, Liz has to think about keeping her hands near the breastplate strap across Jasper's withers. Every time they come back towards the pommel of the saddle, she can see she's tensing up and pulling on Jasper's mouth, which makes him more uptight.

Liz has to accept that Jasper may want to speed up as he goes past whatever it is that bothers him. She should allow him to do this, but shouldn't let him go any faster than trot.

SUPPORT FROM THE GROUND



Liz's fiancé, Richard, is happy to support her desire to hack out alone, so I spend some time explaining how he can help her. Because Jasper takes confidence from someone on the ground, I ask Richard to walk well in front of Liz, so the horse can follow him.

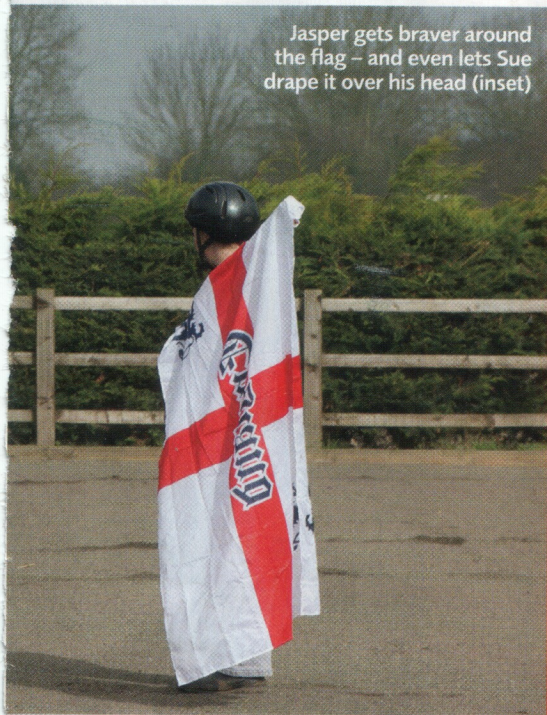
As Liz and Jasper progress, Richard can move to walking beside the gelding, and eventually to walking behind him. The time it takes to move from one stage to the next will be determined by how confident Liz feels – it may be hours, days or even weeks.

If Liz sees something she thinks Jasper will spook at, she should cross the road to give Jasper more space, so that he feels it is safe to walk past – thus building on positive experiences. Liz practises this by riding past the skip on the lane, and both horse and rider cope well.

With Richard walking in front, Jasper feels more assured



Jasper gets braver around the flag – and even lets Sue drape it over his head (inset)



a step closer to the fence, narrowing the gap Jasper has to walk through.

Liz has to learn to relax the contact on the reins, because as soon as she tenses, Jasper does, too. She also has to control her breathing, remembering to breathe out, as well as in.



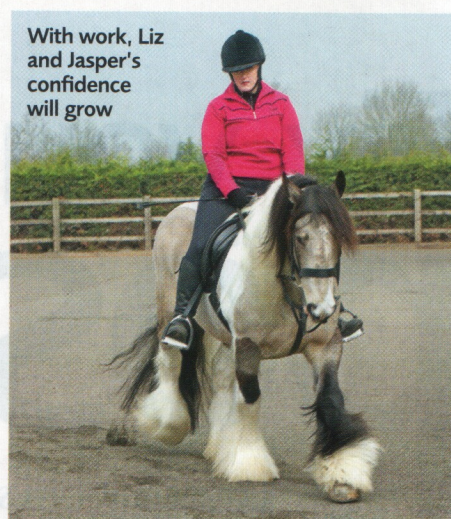
NEXT STEPS

It is impossible to put a timescale on building confidence in either the horse or the rider. However, this session has given Liz plenty of useful ideas to try, both in the school and out hacking. The more relaxed she is, the less agitated Jasper will be.

There is no substitute for hours in the saddle. Liz will find it much easier to make progress in the summer, when she is able to ride on a regular basis, than during the winter months.

When they are ready, I am sure that Liz and Jasper will enjoy many hours of hacking, both alone and in company.

With work, Liz and Jasper's confidence will grow



WHAT DID OUR RIDER LEARN?

"I feel armed with useful techniques to build both my own and Jasper's confidence when riding out alone," says Liz.

"Prior to this training, I was almost trying to 'contain' Jasper to get him past anything scary. Now, I know that by tensing, gathering him up and holding my breath I was making the situation worse.

"I've learned to relax and trust Jasper to work things out for himself, but also to give him boundaries. For example, it is OK to trot past a scary object, but not to canter.

"I intend to use his breastplate more, to encourage my hands forwards and to give me something to hang on to. This way, I will be able to stay with him if he decides to look at spooky things."

TOP TIPS TO BE MORE CONFIDENT

- Build up your confidence in the arena before hacking out. It is easier to feel brave when you don't have traffic, dustbins, barking dogs and open ground to contend with.

- Cross to the other side of the road – if safe to do so – if there is something coming up you think your horse might spook at. It is better to cross the road and walk safely past the object than to spook out into the traffic.

- The belief that your horse has 'won' if you dismount is an old wives' tale. Your horse sees things differently to you and may appreciate you getting off to show him that, if you are brave enough to pass the scary object, it is OK for him to walk past, as well.

- Hacking out with someone on foot is often as good as having another horse

out with you. So, to help you make the transition from riding out in company to going alone, ask a friend to walk beside you a few times.

- If you tense up, you will simply transmit your nerves to your horse. But it is difficult to 'just relax', as instructors so often say. Instead, try to focus on slowing your breathing, shrugging your shoulders or letting your reins go long. These are all things that you would automatically do if you were relaxed.



Forward thinking

Sarah Rhodes loves hacking out, but her mare Izzy's constant napping is turning each ride into a battle for control. **Sue Palmer** steps in to help



THE OWNER

SARAH RHODES lives in Staffordshire. She has owned Izzy, a 12-year-old, 15.1hh, part-Thoroughbred mare, for six months.

Having ridden when she was younger, Sarah had a break from owning horses, then had a horse on loan before getting Izzy. She would like to hack out, have lessons and compete locally. However, Izzy started napping after Sarah bought her, and the problem has got worse.



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Photography: Simon Palmer, Into The Lens

Sarah really enjoys hacking out, but Izzy's tendency to nap – even in company – is making this difficult, if not impossible.

"I've noticed she tends to nap in the same places on rides," says Sarah. "And she remembers what routes we take, so if I try to take her a different way, that's when she starts to nap and the battle begins."

"I usually give her a couple of taps with my whip, and most of the time she walks on. At times, though, she can be stubborn and just won't budge."

"On one occasion, I had to ask a runner who was passing by to lead her a few steps, then she was fine again."

"When she's being really stubborn, she rears and bucks – you name it, she does it."

There have been times when Sarah has been hacking out in company and Izzy has napped so badly that she has had to turn around and come home, leaving her companion to finish the ride alone.

Having sought help from a trainer on her yard, Sarah is now able to ride down the drive and turn left. However, Izzy still naps if she is asked to go right.

The day before I went to see Sarah, she had been for a hack on Izzy with a friend, and even in company Izzy napped four times.

Izzy's napping has reached rock bottom



RULING OUT PHYSICAL ISSUES

Sarah's situation reached rock bottom recently, when she couldn't get Izzy off the yard at all.

She has had the horse checked by a chartered veterinary physiotherapist to see if there were any pain-related issues, but Izzy was given the all clear.

Her saddle was fitted recently, so this is unlikely to be causing a problem. Her teeth have been seen to, as well, and no problems were found.

Sarah called the vet and they tried Izzy on medication for hormonal imbalance – as she can be 'mareish' – to see if this improved the situation, but Sarah doesn't feel it has. She has tried a calming supplement, too, with no improvement.

Izzy has had limited turnout during the past few months, which may have contributed to her behaviour.



Izzy naps before even leaving the yard (above), then spins around when asked to turn right (inset)



OUT ON THE ROAD

We venture out on a hack and I walk behind as Sarah rides Izzy. The mare demonstrates her napping behaviour before we even leave the yard, almost backing into a parked car.

Once she is heading down the drive, she seems relaxed and forward-going. But as soon as Sarah asks her to turn right onto the lane, she starts to back up, trying to spin round and threatening to rear.

Sarah is able to ride her through this, but a few yards later she naps again.

If I walk behind Izzy and slap a rope against my coat to make a noise, Izzy stops napping and goes forwards. Sarah has tried long lining Izzy to help overcome the napping issue, which would often be an excellent solution.

However, I feel that in Izzy's case the issue will only show with a rider on board, as she goes forward if someone encourages her from behind.

Sarah doesn't want to use her stick more, as she would like to find a less aggressive approach.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

While napping, Izzy's reaction to pressure from Sarah is to resist more. Sarah asks Izzy to move forward and, as she begins to go, Sarah asks more insistently. Then Izzy resists and starts to reverse.

As she goes back, Sarah takes the pressure off and waits for the mare to stop before asking her to go forward – and the cycle starts all over again.

I ask Sarah to make it uncomfortable for Izzy when she goes backwards by using her legs, then to make it comfortable for her when she starts to go forwards by relaxing her legs.

Sarah's timing is exceptional. At one point, she even manages to stop her legs mid-squeeze, as Izzy changes from going back to moving forwards.



Sarah should relax when Izzy goes forwards...



...and use her legs when she backs up

REVERSING ON YOUR TERMS

The difference in Izzy's behaviour when Sarah releases the pressure is clear and dramatic – she is much more willing to go forwards, which is great progress.

Another way for Sarah to stop Izzy going backwards when she is napping is to try to turn her around when she starts to reverse, and back her in the direction the rider wants to go. Once Izzy has stopped resisting when she is asked to back up, I tell Sarah to turn her to face the right direction and invite her to move forwards again.

Sarah has to be sensitive using this technique, or she will cause Izzy to rear.



Turn to back up the way you want to go



Reversing – in a controlled manner

STAYING IN CHARGE

Izzy tries to gain control almost all the time, even when Sarah asks her to stand, so that she can chat to me.

We are lucky that the lane we have chosen to work on is quiet, but a road is never an ideal place to resolve a napping issue, as the surface is slippery. So, Sarah takes Izzy into the arena to do some exercises to address her control issues.

I ask Sarah to move Izzy's quarters over one step. Izzy moves softly and obediently away from Sarah's left leg.

However, when Sarah asks the mare to move away from her right leg, she goes backwards, swishing her tail and threatening to rear.

By spending some time quietly but firmly insisting that Izzy does as she is asked, Sarah is able to get her moving evenly in both directions.



Left: Izzy shows resistance to Sarah's right leg, and even when she is asked to stand still, she tries to gain the upper hand; above: by quietly insisting that Izzy does as she is asked, Sarah is able to control the mare

NEXT STEPS

Sarah's confidence, sensitivity and sense of timing are going to be important in helping Izzy overcome her napping issues. Izzy appears to be looking for an opportunity to resist Sarah's aids, and Sarah has to try hard not to give her one.

Because Izzy is so reactive, Sarah has to be ready to respond instantly, by releasing the pressure when the mare does the right thing. But she also has to be quick to correct Izzy gently but firmly when she does the wrong thing.

I suggest that Sarah hacks out in company when possible, in order to avoid difficult situations and build Izzy's confidence.

She should also work in the arena to overcome Izzy's resistance in a safe environment, before tackling the issues on the road. By doing this, she'll improve the horse's responsiveness and relaxation, which will stand them in good stead when they are back out on the roads.




With the pressure off, Izzy relaxes

SARAH'S VERDICT

"I found the session interesting," Sarah says. "It was good to get some ideas on how to deal with Izzy without using brute force."

"Sue's technique of teaching me to put pressure on and take it off at the right time seemed to work well. Before, I tended keep the pressure on, even when Izzy was going forward, thinking that it would keep her moving that way."

"The session also made me realise that I keep niggling at her, which probably doesn't help."

Two days after her session with Sue, Sarah hacked Izzy out alone and made an effort not to put pressure on the horse unless she needed to. "She didn't even nap once!" says Sarah. "I don't think I used my legs at all." 

CONTROLLING THE FEET

Next, I ask Sarah if she can get Izzy to move just one foot forwards, but Izzy moves so quickly this is impossible. So I ask Sarah to move 10 steps.

As Sarah and Izzy concentrate on this, the horse's footfalls slow down. Soon, Sarah has enough control to move Izzy just two steps.

When she asks the mare to move her quarters over again, the resistance returns. Sarah switches

between moving the quarters and controlling the steps, in an effort to help Izzy realise that her resistance is unnecessary and a waste of energy.

I then set up poles to simulate a road, so that Sarah can practise these control exercises in a slightly enclosed area. Again, this increases Izzy's resistance at first, but, as Sarah perseveres, she is able to regain control.

Sarah is soon able to control Izzy in an enclosed space



Hacking with others will help build confidence

TOP TIPS FOR DEALING WITH NAPPING

- If you don't feel confident riding your horse through the napping behaviour, call on a professional to help. A horse who is napping can quickly become a danger to himself and others.
- There are many reasons that a horse naps, and one of the most common is that he is in pain. Before addressing his behaviour, make sure you have had his saddle, back and teeth checked by qualified professionals.
- Learn different techniques to help your horse overcome his nappy behaviour, so that you can choose whichever method

is most appropriate at the time and have another to fall back on if it isn't working.

- Work your horse in-hand and in the school, simulating his napping issues if you can. This way, you'll have the chance to learn to communicate effectively with him in a safe environment, before transferring these skills to the road or bridleways.
- Build on success. Help your horse to become more confident by hacking out in company. Try taking a different route home from the others, to introduce him to hacking alone gradually.

Rising up the ramps

Fred may be a talented cob, but his refusal to load is standing in the way of his rider's competitive ambitions – **Sue Palmer** comes to the rescue



THE RIDER

TINA CLOWES is based in Ilchester, Somerset, and has had Mitcheltroy Mercary, better known as Fred, on loan for two years. Fred, a 14.3hh, 10-year-old Welsh Section D gelding is owned by Steevi Pugh.

Tina would like to compete Fred, and school him over the local cross-country course, but this isn't possible because he refuses to go into the lorry.



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According to his owner, Steevi, Fred is a superstar horse who is happy to try anything and usually does well. But there's one problem: he just won't load.

He hasn't always been like this, says Steevi: "Fred first decided loading wasn't a great idea at a show in 2007. It was muddy and there were tractors and I think this bewildered him.

"The problem got worse, and when Tina came to pick him up, it took us nearly five hours to get him on the lorry. He's never had a bad experience and travels fine.

"We've tried everything: food, having the ramp at a different angle, covering the ramp with shavings, trailers, partitions in and out, other horses, placing his feet on the ramp one by one, lunge lines, a broom pointed at his back end, bridles and a pressure halter, but the only thing that seems to work is time.

"He tends to put two feet on the ramp and then plant himself. He gets upset if we drive him from behind, and putting pressure on his head results in him backing up or rearing."

So, with Tina now keen to take Fred out more, getting him to load without fuss is vital.



Fred is dead set against loading

PUTTING UP A FIGHT

Tina says she hasn't really tried loading Fred over the past six months, because none of the techniques used have improved matters. It takes her an average of two hours to load him, with the fastest time being 40 minutes.

I ask her to show me what happens when she tries to load Fred.

He is wearing brushing boots and overreach boots all round on my request, as travelling boots

could hamper his movement. He has a poll guard to protect his head, in case he throws it up.

The lorry has a partition near the front, which we leave closed. But we do open the middle partition to make the lorry inviting and give Fred all the space he needs.

Tina tries loading Fred in a headcollar with an ordinary lead rope, but he plants his feet halfway up the ramp and won't go any farther.

MANNERS ON THE GROUND

The first thing I do is swap Fred's headcollar for a Dually Halter, which is more sensitive and will enable Fred to learn more quickly.

I also use a 12ft-long rope, which will increase my options when Fred decides to plant his feet or go backwards.

We take Fred into the school and I ask Tina to move him backwards and forwards, and to move his quarters over, then his forehead. This enables me to assess Fred's manners, and Tina's control over, and relationship with, the horse.

I then put four poles in an L-shape and ask Tina to back Fred through them, which he does easily.

It is clear someone has spent time teaching Fred to be polite on the ground.



Tina has good control over Fred in the school
Inset: a Dually Halter will speed up the learning process



Tina learns to control Fred's movement using a simple pole exercise. She easily stops him with one or both front feet over the pole, but finds halting him over one particular section of it more difficult

PRECISION OVER POLES

When Tina was trying to load Fred, I noticed that, although she was doing her best to use pressure and release, her timing was not always right.

Often, she released the pressure as Fred was going backwards, and kept the pressure on as he was coming forwards.

I think Fred is sensitive and has learned to switch off when he is given certain signals.

I ask Tina to walk Fred over a pole, then to stop him with one or both front feet over the pole. She finds this easy. Then I tell her to stop him so that he is positioned over a particular part of the pole

— either the yellow or black sections. She finds this difficult and is surprised at the precision it needs.

Finally, I ask her to make sure Fred is straight when he stops over the pole, so that not only is she taking control of him going forwards and backwards, but also from side to side.

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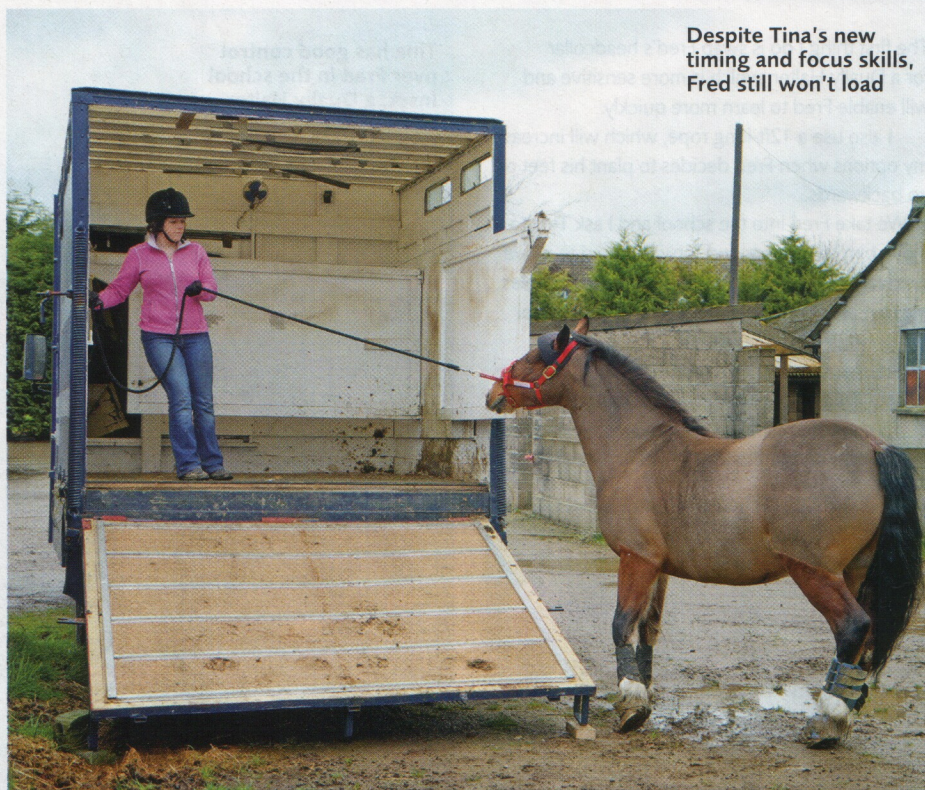
STAYING FOCUSED

In the school, Tina learned she has to be subtle in her signals for Fred to respond correctly, and has to stay 100 per cent focused (which is something Steevi says Fred finds difficult to do!).

Once Tina is focused, Fred responds well, and it's time to move to the lorry and try to load him.

Tina asks Fred to walk on to the lorry's ramp using her improved focus and timing skills. A wooden wall blocks off one side of the lorry so that Fred has only one escape route – which he unfortunately decides to take.

Tina does well to maintain her position and continue to ask Fred to step in the right direction, but she is worried he might hurt himself and this affects her concentration.



Despite Tina's new timing and focus skills, Fred still won't load

CONTROLLING THE PRESSURE

Now, I take Fred from Tina and gradually work towards loading him.

I concentrate on making it uncomfortable when he is doing what I don't want him to do. I do this by applying pressure with the rope when he is standing still, moving backwards or moving around the side of the ramp.

More importantly, I focus on making it comfortable when he does what I want him to do. So I release any pressure, including that from my body language, the instant he moves even one foot forwards or makes a 'try' in the right direction.

There are plenty of other techniques I could use, but while Fred is learning and continually improving with this one, it's the right choice.



Fred is soon trotting up the ramp on his own after Sue has shown him the way (right)



CEMENTING SUCCESS



Tina takes over to build on Fred's progress. Right: her confidence grows each time he loads

After a while, Fred accepts that the easy option is to go into the lorry. Since he has shown no obvious stress or fear, it's time to build on this and improve his willingness to load.

One of the most common mistakes people make with a problem loader is that, as soon as the horse finally goes into the lorry, they lift the ramp behind them and drive off. This is a sure-fire way to make the horse less likely to load in the future.

So I load Fred repeatedly until he is trotting up the ramp by himself. Then I hand him to Tina and she loads him at least 10 times, building up her confidence with each success.

There is a safe bucket of food (with no handle in which Fred may catch his foot) in the lorry for him each time he loads, to increase the incentive.



Practice makes perfect: Tina can look forward to problem-free loading



NEXT STEPS

Tina needs to practise, practise, practise! I suggest loading a difficult horse twice a day for two weeks, then once a day for a week, putting him into the lorry or trailer at least three times each session.

However, remember every horse is an individual, so this programme may need to be adjusted.

Always make sure there is some tasty food waiting for him in a safe bucket (this is different from bribing him with food).

When he's walking up with no resistance, take him on a 30-minute round trip (back to the yard). Then unload him and reload him three times.

Once he loads after this trip with no problems, take him somewhere local that you could ride home from if necessary, maybe for a lesson or

hack, then load him to come home. When you're home, unload, then reload him three times.

In between these trips, continue to load him in the yard two or three times a week. Only after you can do all of this with no problems are you ready to go to a show.

Tina had almost given up hope of ever being able to load Fred. "Focusing on how I was asking Fred to do things and making sure he moved the way I wanted him to on the ground opened my eyes," she says.

"Seeing Fred trotting up the ramp on his own ahead of Sue was a joy and I've learned several techniques. I'm looking forward to following Sue's action plan and getting Fred out and about."

TOP TIPS FOR TRICKY LOADERS

- Tina is really impressed with the Dually Halter. "I've seen them used but didn't realise they made such a difference – I think this is mainly due to people not using them correctly," she says. "I encourage anyone who has one to get an Intelligent Horsemanship recommended associate to show them how to use it."
- The release of pressure teaches a horse he's done the right thing. If he stops at the bottom of the ramp and you give him a stroke and say that everything's OK, in his language you're telling him that stopping at the bottom of the ramp is what you want him to do.
- Make as much space in your lorry as possible, to make it inviting for your horse. Open up the partitions and tie them back – or, even better, take them out completely.
- Be clear about what it is you're asking of your horse. If you're not sure precisely what you want, it's impossible to reward him effectively. Concentrate on having control of each hoof, rather than of the whole horse – if you have control of the feet, you have control of the horse.
- Travelling boots provide great protection, but you may find that for the initial loading practice your horse can move more easily in bandages, brushing boots and overreach boots. Once he is loading in a relaxed way, you can consider reintroducing travelling boots.

