

# 'She's petrified of tractors'

Sarah Hampson's cob Dolly has a phobia of tractors, which, living in a rural area, she needs to overcome. Equine behaviourist Sue Palmer lends a hand – and a bucket



## THE OWNER

**SARAH HAMPSON** has owned Dolly, a 13-year-old black ride-and-drive Welsh Section D mare, for eight years. Based in Bolton-by-Bowland, not far from the Yorkshire Dales, they enjoy hacking and TREC. Sarah has bred a foal from Dolly, which she is now bringing on. Recently a friend, Jodi, has started riding Dolly, and takes part in our training.



## 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](http://www.holistichorsehelp.com).



**S**arah contacted *Horse* magazine to ask for help to overcome Dolly's phobia of tractors. "Living in a rural area, it's difficult to avoid them, especially at harvest time," says Sarah. "I don't think of Dolly as a scoundrel – at least not an intentional one. I've owned her for eight years and she is genuinely scared of tractors."

When Dolly sees one, she seems to lose all self-awareness and concern for her own safety as well as that of her handler or rider, says Sarah. "We've had several near misses as a

result of her 'phobia'. Once, she jumped a stile when a tractor came down the lane towards us. She also pushed me over and tried to bolt when I was leading her and a tractor came out of a nearby building.

"In the past few months, Jodi has been riding Dolly while I've been bringing on the mare's filly, but Jodi has recently had difficulties when meeting tractors out on hacks, too. Like I said, I don't think it is naughtiness with Dolly. She seems afraid, and I wish I could make her see that she doesn't need to be."





## STARTING TO RELAX...

Sarah explains that Dolly's phobia is very specific to tractors – she is absolutely fine with other vehicles, such as quad bikes, driving past. The phobia wasn't such an issue when Sarah first bought Dolly as they lived near a town and tractors were uncommon. But when she moved into a rural area, Sarah had to learn to adapt her hacking times and routes to avoid coming across tractors whenever possible.

Because this issue is only related to tractors, it is unlikely that physical issues such as the horse's

diet, back, teeth or saddle problems have any role to play in Dolly's behaviour. When Dolly initially sees the tractor arrive, even before we start any work, she looks petrified.

We begin by working in a lungeing arena with the tractor parked outside – initially with the engine switched off. We start off in-hand, rather than ridden, so that Dolly can gain confidence from her handler. A quick assessment of some basic in-hand work proves that Dolly is generally a very polite mare.

I ask Dolly's sharer, Jodi, to repeatedly lead Dolly a few paces then stop, gradually getting closer to the tractor (above). It's important that every time they stop Dolly is allowed to relax and have a stroke or a scratch – not a pat, as this is energising rather than relaxing.

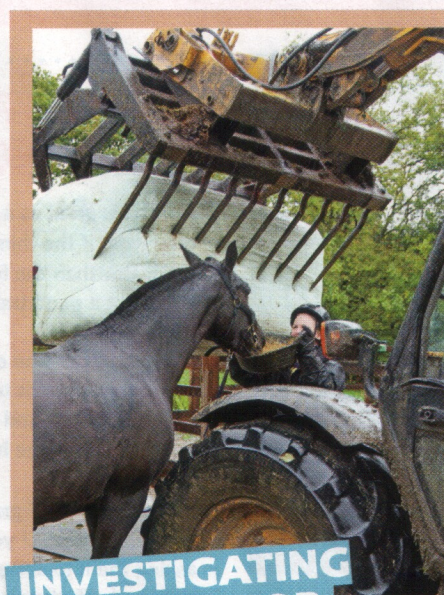
This exercise is repeated with Jodi in the saddle, looking for obedience and relaxation. Dolly is very communicative, bringing her head up when she's worried and dropping it when she begins to relax.

## A BIT OF CUPBOARD LOVE!

I want Dolly to make her own decision to walk up to the tractor. She is a cob who is well motivated by food, so I choose to use food as a reward. I stand beside the tractor and hold a bucket of nuts. Jodi leads Dolly directly towards the tractor.

Initially, the mare is reluctant. But once she gets close enough, she is able to reach the bucket of food. I move the bucket around to the front, back, and middle of the tractor. I hold it at different heights, too, because a horse will find it difficult to put their head down low when they are worried. Using this method, Dolly learns that actually, being beside the tractor can be a good thing.

Before long, we are able to let her loose at the other side of the arena and she makes her own decision to walk straight to the tractor, finding the food as a reward when she gets there (below).



## INVESTIGATING THE TRACTOR

It's time to bring Dolly out of the lungeing arena, and ask her to get really close to the tractor. Again, using food as a reward, we encourage her to investigate different parts of the tractor, initially without the engine running, and later with the engine switched on.

We put food on the wheel arch, which she really enjoys (above, left), and tuck some hay



in between the tyre and the wheel arch. I sit in the tractor and hold the bucket of food by my feet (above, right), and give her some herbal treats that she really likes. Her least favourite area is the back of the tractor where she's very close to the engine and she can feel a breeze from the engine fan, but again the hay wins her over and she soon stands in a relaxed fashion.



## FOLLOW THE LEADER

Once the tractor starts moving, the work we have done really pays off. I follow the tractor around the yard with some hay in my hand, and Dolly is keen to follow me and therefore follow the tractor. The tractor driver feeds Dolly hay from his seat high up in the cab.

We start in the yard, and progress to following the tractor in the lane. Dolly thinks this is a great game, and seems to be really enjoying herself. She finds it more difficult to go past the tractor when it is pulled over to the side of the lane, but soon realises that each time she is beside the tractor she can collect some hay from the driver (left), and so her confidence quickly grows.


By the end of the session, Jodi is able to ride past the tractor by herself (below), something she has never been able to achieve so easily.



## NEXT STEPS

It's going to take time and effort to help Dolly completely overcome her phobia. I suggest that they find a friendly tractor driver who is willing to give them some of his time for a few training sessions. They can also make use of any tractors parked up in the yard, and ask any tractor driver they meet out and about to help them. It's important that Dolly meets tractors of different sizes and shapes, in different areas and at different speeds, to allow her confidence to grow.

"We plan to go out with pockets laden with treats to hand out to any tractor driver we see," says Sarah. "We are also going to make sure that, whenever a tractor is on the yard, we take her up to it and feed her from it."

● Thanks go to Julie Cornthwaite of Bowland Irish Draught Horses for the use of her facilities, and to tractor driver Malcolm Gibson. 

## TOP TIPS FOR PHOBIC EQUINES

- Food is great as a reward, but never as a bribe. Bribery will only work if the thing you are using as a bribe is a stronger motivator than the fear that the horse is trying to overcome – it is not a good training aid.
- Phobias can't be overcome quickly, and there are no shortcuts. The training needs to be repeated over and over again, in different places and at different times of day, in order for your horse to overcome his fear.
- Start small and gradually increase what you are asking your horse to accept. If your horse is scared of tractors, start with asking them to accept a quad bike, and a tractor with the engine switched off, then switched on, and gradually progress to asking them to accept a moving tractor.
- If you encounter a vehicle your horse is worried about on the roads, find a lay-by or driveway to stop in so that you can give your horse more space between him and the object.
- Training your horse to follow the thing he is worried about is important in helping him to overcome his phobia. In the wild, a predator would chase the horse, so the horse will feel more confident if he can 'chase' away the thing he sees as a predator.