

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.



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.

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.

HD

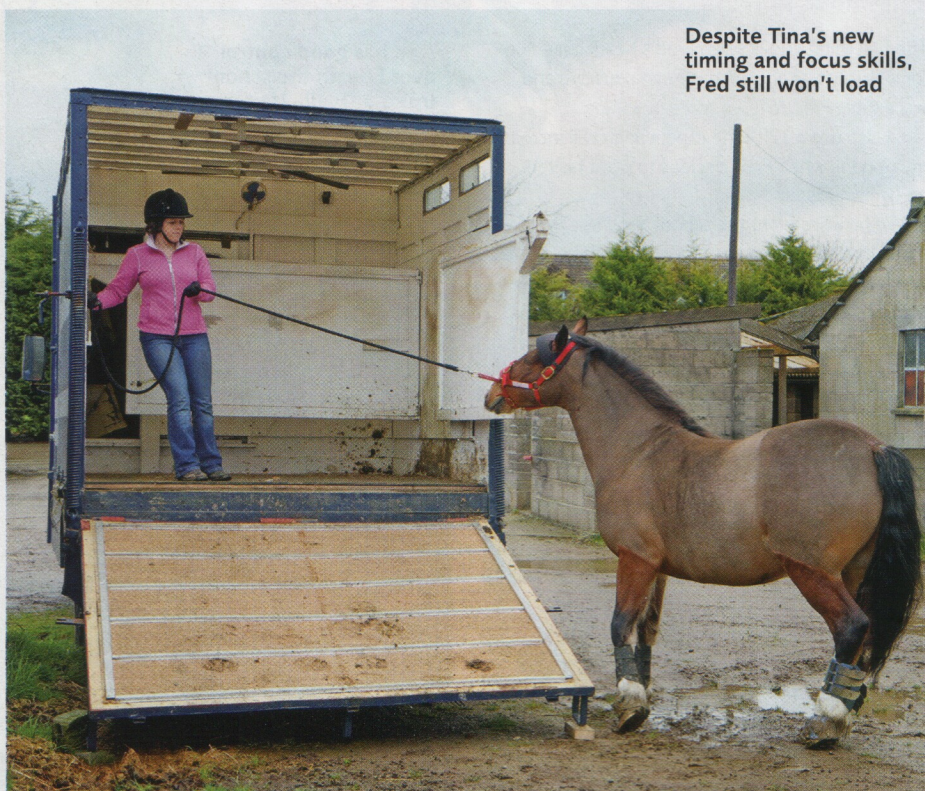
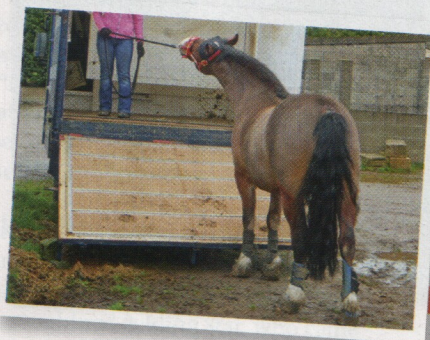
STAYING FOCUSED

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.

