

# A relationship for results

*We all want the best possible relationship with our horses, but what's the best way to go about it? Sue Palmer shares four easy-to-follow steps*

**A**re you looking for closer companionship or better competition results? Whatever you do with your horse, building a better relationship is sure to be your ultimate goal. Top-class horse people do this by learning to listen to their horse and responding appropriately to his needs.

By sharing knowledge, experience and understanding, we can recognise more quickly and easily what our horses are trying to tell us. The better you're able to understand and communicate with your horse, the stronger your relationship – and the more rosettes you'll bring home. So, here are my top tips for improving your relationship and results.

Photos: Bob Atkins





## Our expert



**Sue Palmer MCSP** is a chartered physiotherapist who's ACPAT and RAMP registered. She's also a BHS Stage 3 Coach in Complete Horsemanship and an Intelligent Horsemanship recommended trainer.

## TOP TIP

If you notice a change in your horse's behaviour, think about whether the cause could be physical, or related to his management or environment.





# 1 It takes a village

Whatever you're looking to achieve with your horse, his welfare must come first. The equestrian world is gradually recognising that equine performance is related to physical and psychological wellbeing – just as it is in humans. The trouble is that horses can't verbalise how they're feeling.

This is why having a trusted, experienced and well-qualified team of equestrian professionals to support you, as well as an appetite for learning, is essential for success. And it's equally applicable whether you've ridden at the top of your sport, are aiming to step up to affiliated competition, or simply want to have fun and be safe out hacking. In fact, it's probably the most important for amateur riders, who don't get to spend as much time with their horse as they might like to. The more time you're able to enjoy with your horse, the quicker you'll recognise what's normal for him and, therefore, the easier it is to know when something isn't right. Equally, the more horses you know, the easier it is to recognise normal from abnormal.

A credible professional will know what normal looks like, especially if they see your horse on a regular basis. They'll help you quickly pick up whether something needs addressing, often before it starts to show in your horse's performance or behaviour.



*Performance is related to physical and psychological wellbeing*

## TOP TIP

Don't feel as though you have to stick with the first professional you try – whether that's a coach, farrier or saddler. Finding the right fit for you and your horse is the most important thing, so make sure your goals and methods are aligned.





## 2 Listen carefully

Horses can only communicate pain, discomfort or lack of understanding through their performance or behaviour. So, if your horse is demonstrating poor or reduced performance, or unwanted behaviours, the first thing to do is try to get to the bottom of what's causing it, rather than trying to patch or fix without understanding the root behind it.

While all horse owners know this

is true, many don't act on it. Have a look around and you're bound to find someone looking for help with a horse who's napping, bucking or refusing to load. What advice are they getting from professionals, well-meaning friends or the internet? How often does that advice include a check for physical discomfort, or to take a step back and retrain themselves or the horse? It's far more common to be told to push the horse harder, change the bit or just give him a smack.

### TOP TIP

Not all advice is helpful – even if it's well-meaning. Be aware that, while most people are just trying to help, that doesn't mean their methods are right for you and your horse.

## Find your balance

Could you change the tide? Try to lead by example with your horse and, if those around you ask for help, advise them to follow a route that's more horse-friendly. A carefully reasoned suggestion that perhaps the horse might be struggling is more likely to be listened to today than it was a few years ago.

Each of us has our own experiences and, by sharing these, we can help educate and inform. For the good of the horse, we must promote listening to and understanding them through their efforts to communicate in the only way they know how.





## 3 Fun and games

Owning a horse is meant to be fun. Sadly, it's easy for the enjoyment to get lost along the way. When safety's a concern, or confidence a problem, it's no wonder we can't always see the way forward.

Peer pressure can get in the way of doing what you want to with your horse – and it's easy to look at everyone else's seemingly perfect life on social media and wonder where you went wrong. Often, we get annoyed with ourselves, wishing we could do better. But we can – that's what it's all about!

Take some time to think about what matters most to you. What is it you'd like to achieve with your horse? Do you want to have him walk over in the field, rather than it taking an hour to catch him? Do you want to be able to hack out alone, instead of having to go in company? Would you like your horse to be lighter in the contact, or pick up the correct canter lead on both reins? Maybe you want to compete at Elementary dressage, complete a one-day event or jump clear around a 1m course? Figure out what's important to you, as opposed to the goals of the person with the stable next to yours. Then go about finding the people and techniques to help you achieve those aims.

### TOP TIP

If competing becomes stressful rather than fun, don't be afraid to take a step back or drop down a level. There's no shame in it – feeling confident before an outing is far more enjoyable than suffering nauseating butterflies at the thought of getting on board.



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## 4 Put it in words

Write down your thoughts and ponder them until you have a clear, unambiguous goal. Break this down into several smaller goals, and then separate them again until you have a list of small, realistic and achievable ones – each is a step on the road towards achieving your ultimate aim. Again, write them down to help stop you getting side-tracked along the way. Then, decide the who, what, where, when and how for the first goal on your list.

Now you're ready to get started. Learning is fun. Horses are tolerant and patient creatures when their basic needs are met. There's no good or bad – there just is. It's up to you to look ahead, rather than the past, and the future should involve plenty of fun.

## Looking forward

Making these changes to the way you manage your horse, and being open about them with your friends, means you're helping change things for the better. Better education is the key to ensuring as many people as possible understand that there are links between pain, behaviour and

performance. Only then can horses be treated with respect and recognised as individuals with different levels of pain tolerance. You can take the lead with your horse, aiming to treat him kindly every step of the way – you're sure to build a far better bond for it. ■