

WORK IN PROGRESS.....?

For many horses and their owners life is a journey of experience and growth. Hopefully the things that horse and human learn help to make them better individuals and to be able to work together peacefully and in harmony. This may not have been the case initially and some partnerships require help along the way to bring them to their full potential.

GIGALO – When I first saw this horse and his owner in action it was during a two day clinic run by a trainer from England. His rider spent almost all of the two days in either canter or gallop in the arena as Gigalo found it almost impossible to offer anything but top gear. The instructor did not offer much help to the pair and as a result they did not progress any further and the partnership was near to breaking point.

Out of the blue Gigalo's owner contacted me and asked if I had any livery spaces available, I had one stable recently vacated and so the combination came to our yard for assistance.

The partnership between Gigalo and his owner was on really shaky ground, his owner loved him very much but also realised that if things didn't get sorted out soon there could be a serious accident as Gigalo was on the verge of being a bolter. At first glance Gigalo appeared to be a confident strapping personality and it would be easy to misjudge his temperament as being a "typical lazy cob". The truth could not be further from this. Gigalo was a very insecure horse, nervous and lacking in confidence. He desperately tried to please his owner and thought that if he went very fast and did everything super quick that this would please him. The first task we had to do was to explain to Gigalo that it was ok to be lazy. We spent at least a month just in walk, teaching Gigalo to relax and slow his rhythm to his own natural tempo. We discovered that he had a real fear of being asked to work in an outline and his owner confirmed that he had been worked by previous owners in draw reins. The misuse of this equipment had caused Gigalo to be afraid of a contact and he would fight and pull against the hand as soon as he felt any pressure on his mouth. This made him run through the contact and things tended to go from bad to worse from there.

We taught Gigalo to look for lightness and how to give to pressure not fight it, we re-directed his bountiful energy into a more productive manner by channelling it upwards and inwards instead of forwards at 30mph! As he began to relax his confidence began to grow, this in turn allowed his owner to relax and for the first time they actually began to listen to each other. It was amazing how quickly Gigalo transferred his new found skills in walk into the trot and how his muscle structure changed as he carried himself correctly and in balance. This new found balance also instilled him with confidence and he began to show himself as the real dressage star we had always imagined. It was also interesting to note how his behaviour changed in his stable manners as his confidence grew. He was no longer bargy, he didn't mind staying in his stable overnight (apparently he was a real escape artist in other yards), he moved over when asked and was very respectful. Slowly and surely the really nice confident guy began to emerge and he softened in every way.

The big challenge came when we asked for canter. In previous instances he would take off as fast as he could and motorbike every corner. We had spent four months in walk and trot, teaching him to balance, bend and slow his rhythm, this would be a real test. With a deep breath and extreme self control, his owner asked him into canter by simply thinking the command and giving no visible aids. Gigalo picked up his canter rhythm from the same tempo as the trot and executed a perfect collected canter around the arena, bending in every corner and offering a smooth and light downward transition into trot as though he had been doing it all his life. It was a great success! At last he understood and at last his owner could trust him fully.

Gigalo continues to improve and has now forgotten his speedy past and looks every inch the super dressage horse he is destined to become.

NEVER SAY NEVER – Again this chap and his owner arrived on our yard as liveries. A strapping 17.2hh chestnut he was the epitome of a giant scardy cat! Anything and everything was really, really scary and would elicit jumping to the side with manic snorting, eyes bulging and a heartbeat that could be heard 6ft away!

Riding Never Say Never was another challenge. A schooling session was a hard slog of fighting and kicking as his rider tried to bring him into an outline and keep him on the track. He would go very slowly then suddenly rush forwards making it very difficult for his rider to stay with him and in balance.

Initially all we needed to do with Never Say Never was give him a steady routine of stable management. Simply knowing what to expect and when did wonders for his confidence and he slowly began to relax. Being turned out was a great help and living in a mixed herd in natural surroundings helped to channel his energies as he learned how to be a horse and how to think situations through logically (horsey logic of course). The difference in him in a few short weeks was astounding and the first lesson his owner took with us sealed the bond between them.

Never Say Never wanted very much to work in an outline, he just couldn't, simply because his owner was inadvertently blocking his every attempt to work correctly. A few small adjustments to the owner's riding allowed Never Say Never to instantly offer a beautiful shape with cadence and impulsion. His owner was delighted and they have continued to work together in this way.

The best example of how much Never Say Never has changed and grown as a bold individual came one day when his owner decided she would try some groundwork exercises with him. She decided that she would try to get him close to a white tarpaulin laid out on the ground. What helped Never Say Never that day more than anything else was that his owner's expectations were not high so no pressure was put on him to achieve a difficult goal. This allowed him the freedom to listen to his owner's gentle guidance and encouragement. He surprised us all by confidently approaching the tarpaulin and with very little prompting he not only walked across it but stood quite happily on it! For a horse that was frightened by his own shadow a few short months ago this was a huge achievement.

The knock on affect of this new found confidence is that Never Say Never's personality has had a chance to show through. He has a great sense of humour and is a real gentle giant, yes he still has his excited moments but this is nothing compared to the major traumas he had in the past. He very quickly settles down (within seconds) and regains his composure. His owner has said that she has had the best relationship with her horse since coming to our yard than any time in the 7yrs that she has owned him. May they continue to grow together.

SULLIVAN – When one of my client's sold on her horse she asked me to come with her to find a new youngster to bring on. We visited a very reputable dealer we knew and had a look at what he had in stock. Sullivan was standing in his stable a scraggy, gangly baby. All legs and innocence he looked like a little lost soul. We asked to see him out and moved around the school loose (Sullivan was unbacked) and, despite the fact that every leg faced a different direction when he stood still, he moved beautifully. My client decided to take him and I was given the task of backing him and helping their partnership develop.

Sullivan was such a nice, gentle chap. Willing and easy going (a bit cheeky like all little boys but with a heart of gold). He was very easy and straightforward to back and accepted everything we asked of him with an, "ok, if you say so" attitude. He was so good that we had to constantly hold ourselves back from pushing him too far too soon. It is a very easy mistake to make with willing youngsters and it doesn't take much to push them just that little too far and undo all of that open, honest work they have offered. Keeping ourselves in check wasn't easy but we knew that Sullivan needed time to mature mentally and physically. As he grew stronger and his muscle structure developed his legs straightened up and he began to grow into himself and slowly but surely an absolutely stunning individual appeared.

Within a year of backing him he went to his first show, tack and turnout. A nice class for a baby to learn all about the excitement of a showground. He took it in his stride, obviously thinking that everyone was there just to look at him! We continued to bring him on slowly, letting him get

experience in showing classes and spacing out his competitions over the year. He didn't have perfect conformation but that was not important, he moved very well and he had great prescience in the ring.

The following year we felt he was mature enough mentally to cope with jumping. What Sullivan showed us was beyond our expectations. He had a natural flare for jumping, with huge scope and ability. We carefully nurtured this love and tried not to over tax him, giving him nice easy courses to bring his confidence to the fore. He combined his jumping ability with showing in working hunter classes and began to collect quite a number of rosettes.

Fortunately for Sullivan my client is a very experienced horsewoman and so would diligently work on exercises I gave her and report back her performance at shows. Every month or so we would get together and move Sullivan onto the next level until they were ready to go it alone.

My client has now began to compete Sullivan in one day eventing and he is showing fantastic promise in this sport. She works away at his schooling and carefully manages his development, allowing him time to think and learn. Sullivan is rising 9yrs now and is beginning to mature into his eventing talent. Every so often my client asks me to help her through a problem or move him on that little bit further, and I feel a great deal of pride in their achievements and I am honoured to have played a small part in what promises to be a very long and fruitful partnership.