

Appliance of SCIENCE!

Planning an exciting new steed? Discover how Hartpury College experts help a rider create a partnership with a new horse



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The equine team at Hartpury College want to make research accessible to all riders. In our 'Succeed with Science!' series (*Horse&Rider* September 2011 to May 2012), they looked at various aspects of equestrianism, from feeding to sports psychology. Now they explain how research-based knowledge can be of practical help to real horse and rider partnerships. First: how to cope with a new, stronger and bigger horse.

Stacey xxxxxxxxx bought Hero when she outgrew her much-loved pony, Dudley. Jo Winfield from Hartpury went to visit, and as soon as Stacey started to work Hero in the school it became apparent that this was not a happy partnership. Hero's



Case study

Moving on up – progressing from first pony to first horse

Every young rider knows how hard it is to move on from an outgrown pony to their first horse. By the very nature of growing up, the rider has become accustomed to their faithful pony. The partnership knows each other inside out and little idiosyncrasies are not a problem.

Confidence is high, winning has become a habit and any soundness or behavioural issues have become things of the past. Other aspects such as tack and equipment have all been

refined so that a happy, harmonious and winning partnership has developed.

Stacey and Dudley were just such a partnership. They knew each other for seven years and now Stacey is about to make the step up to her first horse, Hero. Both horses are Welsh Section Ds but at different height ranges. Both of the horses are kept at a DIY livery yard in South Devon, and Stacey is lucky enough to have a very supportive mum!



extend pic at bottom and also make him look smaller - he looks bigger than the big one at the mo!

natural tempo seemed too much for Stacey, putting her into a defensive position. Bracing her lower leg and pulling, she had lost her independent position. Naturally, Hero pulled back and hollowed, rushing about in his energetic trot.

One of the first things that needs to be addressed when working with a new rider is their confidence levels, so Jo had a good long chat with Stacey to develop rapport and help her work out how to support Hero's training.

Jo asked Stacey to shorten her stirrups to allow her lower leg to stay underneath her body, with the stirrup leather hanging vertically. She encouraged her to place her foot further onto the stirrup, transferring her weight all the way through her leg into her foot with a soft knee.

Jo also gave Stacey a neck strap so she could support her position without pulling on the reins. She spent some time with the pair in halt, making Stacey aware of how to use her upper body to slow down rather than leaning forward when Hero becomes strong.

These aspects all link into basic rider biomechanics, but knowing what

to do is quite a different matter to remembering how to do it when the horse is over-reacting to something!

From the human perspective, Jo explained to Stacey that setting clear goals and boundaries for the future will help her enjoy Hero and move forward to a happy partnership.

Changing perceptions

Jo also suggested that rather than labelling Hero as stressy, Stacey should instead think of him as a 'high-energy horse'. He is naturally forward-going and has three super paces. Stacey needed to realise that this is Hero's natural talent and what he likes to do, and Jo encouraged her to praise him when he went forward rather than worrying about being able to stop.

Once allowed forward into a softer hand (because her position had improved), Hero began to seek the contact and naturally start to find his own balance, and Stacey felt more in control of the situation.

Jo also encouraged Stacey to use her voice when asking for transitions – this stops the rider holding her breath and becoming tense.



Stacey, Hero and Jo

First checks

At the time of writing, Stacey had owned Hero for six months. To begin with, he was thoroughly assessed – his teeth, back and health checks were catered for. Stacey acquired a new saddle that fits both horse and rider well. Hero is ridden in a Nathe snaffle bit with a flash noseband.

Making the step up to a bigger, more active horse is a challenge – one to be enjoyed!



Dudley

Dudley – much-loved but outgrown

Description: 12-year-old Welsh Section D
Height: 140cm (measured) 14.3hh in imperial
Career: Very successful showing career, winning Riding Club Working Hunter Champion and Reserve Supreme 2010.
Attitude: Laid-back, a happy, easy-going chap.



Hero

Hero – new boy on the block!

Description: Six-year-old Welsh Section D
Height: 160cm (15.3hh)
Attitude: High energy and full of life, although likes TLC at home. Stacey would like to event Hero and has started training for this. She finds Hero quieter at a small show or training event, but a little anxious and stressed when ridden at home.

Positive schooling

Anxiety is a natural response to an unknown situation, or when a rider is placed in an environment that they are not happy with. Coping is how we manage it – it's a positive outcome.

Jo helped Stacey understand how she felt when Hero became strong in the contact and what he felt like when she thought he was running away with her – even in trot. Stacey felt that Hero was rather 'hot' to the leg – he didn't really accept the leg aids.

Jo suggested that in the trot, Stacey should ask him to take bigger steps without using her legs and then take smaller steps without pulling the reins. This gave Stacey a greater awareness of how to use her body weight and her voice, and how Hero reacted positively to her use of all of her aids.

Basically, she developed a positive way to cope with Hero becoming strong, by using these 'tools' which made her feel more empowered about asking Hero to do certain basic things, such as transitions and changes of rein. By being empowered, Stacey always had a plan to put into place when Hero over-reacted to her aids.

Once Stacey became aware of the positive influence she had on Hero's way of going, she was able to ride him forward more freely. Jo suggested she ride a canter transition from a bigger trot to allow Hero to find his natural balance and strike off on the correct lead – particularly difficult on his right rein, his stiffer side. It worked!

Once Stacey was aware of this positive way of thinking about Hero's work, his way of going improved very quickly. She was able to plan ahead, thinking about when she wanted to ask Hero to do something such as a change in direction of a transition.

Jo asked Stacey what she was doing to achieve such good results. By making the rider aware of their actions, they become empowered to take responsibility for their actions – and the positive results.

Also, Hero would not have improved so quickly if Stacey had not been able to ride him so well, thanks to Jo's adjustments. This is an important aspect to coaching philosophy: the rider should be given the skills to produce similar results when their trainer is not present, as well as in any organised session.

At the start, Stacey was sitting in a defensive position, slightly tipping forward and losing her independent lower leg – typical of a more novice rider profile



Hero reacted by naturally putting his back into extension or hollowing

Simply riding in a better position has a positive effect on Hero's way of going

By the end of the session, when her confidence in Hero has grown, Stacey is in a more upright position which allows her to be much more effective and enhances her balance



As Stacey adopts a more advanced, independent position, it allows Hero to lower his head and neck, placing tension on the nuchal ligament of the neck and engaging his spinal musculature. Over time, this will aid development of his topline and provide him with the strength to advance in his collection and sustainable level of work



Appliance of science

Through integration of scientific knowledge, various improvements were achieved with Stacey and Hero

- A saddle that fits both horse and rider was chosen and teeth, back and health checks were made.
- The coach considered the rider's biomechanics. Jo noted Stacey's somatotype (thin body shape, see 'Succeed with science!', *Horse&Rider* February 2012) and supported her in becoming more effective in her position, making her aware of how to achieve postural stability.
- A psychological assessment was made, and discussion with the rider

and her mum allowed them to adopt a more positive way of seeing Hero's personality. As a result, they were able to work with the horse's natural way of going and temperament.

All in all, these advances and, more importantly, their direct application into the real life situation – in which Stacey moved from a familiar pony up to a more powerful, energetic horse – started to improve the welfare and training of both horse and rider.

Work with your horse's natural temperament and way of going for the best results

6 tips for a great new partnership

Jo gave Stacey some top tips which can help in the development of any new horse and rider partnership

1 Always allow plenty of time to ride a new horse If you make time, you won't be in a rush to finish and you can work to his and your needs, rather than any time constraints.

2 Consider the mood that you are in This is really important with a high-energy horse as he needs your full attention. If you are very tired or in a bad mood, then this is not a good time to ride.

3 Know what to expect from your horse Assess what you think he is likely to do and have a plan for dealing with it. If you know he is likely to canter very quickly from the trot transition, expect him to be fast and allow him to establish the canter before asking him to slow the tempo down and re-establish a better balance. It is unrealistic to expect him to canter slowly after the transition to begin with and you'll only be disappointed when he doesn't!

4 Be responsible for your position Why should the horse carry you when you're out of balance? Make sure your stirrups are of a suitable length for you to be independent and secure. If you are on a young or potentially spooky horse, use a neck strap to support your balance rather than the horse's mouth.

5 Smile and tell the horse that you are pleased with him! When you tell him he has been good, it reiterates that you asked him to do something, he understood and got a positive outcome. If you look happy, you will be thinking happy and you will get good results that you are pleased with. Enjoy your horse – if you get off thinking you don't like him, just take a moment to think about what he thinks of you.

6 Ask your horse for a lot – but be happy with a little!

Next month

Juggling a horse, job and family, and, ahem, not getting any younger? Our Hartpury experts will help rejuvenate your riding!