

# Getting to know you



When your new horse arrives, take time to show him around his new home.



Most horses will be keen to go out in the field to meet their new companions.

**Y**ou've been to view a horse and he seems perfect in every way, so you decide to buy him. After parting with your money, you can hardly wait to bring him home, ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after. But while that may be your dream, the reality is often quite different.

Horses, as we all know, don't always do what we expect them to do. Most don't like change of any sort, and moving to a new home is one of the biggest changes that they can face. Every single thing in his life has altered and is now unfamiliar.

Most horses need a period of adjustment to 'settle in'. It is what happens during this period that makes or breaks your relationship with your new horse.

## First impressions count

On his arrival, your priority should be demonstrating to your new horse that you are a good person to be around. By nature, horses are suspicious of anything they don't know – and that includes you. What this boils down to is first impressions.

When your new horse arrives, the first thing to do when he comes off the horsebox is take him to meet his new friends and companions. Even if he can't see them, he can smell them in the air and will be keen to join them. It's his natural herd instinct.

When you buy a new horse, the first few days are crucial in terms of getting to know him and forming a bond. Behaviourist **Ruth Mazet** shares her advice on helping him to settle in

If the horse appears really anxious, lead him around to let him get the feel of the place and poke his nose into things if he wants to. A stressed horse has a build-up of adrenalin-induced energy. He needs to work it off, and walking him around allows this to happen.

Next, if he is to be turned out in the field, before letting him loose, give him a pat and offer him a treat. He may be too excited to take it, but few horses can resist something tasty to eat and this should give him a good first impression of you.

Whether he is sharing a field with other horses or is turned out alone, leave a headcollar on for the first few days – but make sure it is either field-safe, or made from leather, which breaks more easily should your horse get stuck on something.

You want catching him to be as easy as possible. Whether it will be or not depends on his past experience and also his first impression of you. If he was easy to catch with his previous owner, then that's a good start, but he may not necessarily respond to you in the same way.

When catching, walk towards him in a measured, calm way. You don't want to scare him off, but at the same time, you want him to know you are confident. As you get close, stop to talk to him, and have a treat ready in your hand to offer him. While he is eating, give him a pat or rub under his mane. Take your time, because horses hate to be rushed.

## The days to follow

The first time you lead your new horse, either to or from the field, several factors come into play. One is that he might actually go into shock on arrival at a new home and, as a result, appear to be quiet and well-behaved.

Do not be fooled, however, as he is processing the experience. On the second day, he is more likely to show his true reaction, which is probably anxiety. This

## GET OFF TO THE RIGHT START

### 1 TAKE YOUR TIME

On the day your new horse arrives, let him settle and relax in his stable or field. You might be desperate to ride, but it's better to wait for him to get used to his new surroundings first.

### 2 SAFETY FIRST

If he is a bit anxious, consider wearing a hard hat at all times when grooming or leading him.

### 3 ON THE LUNGE

If you think he might be sharp to ride, lunge him first. This will give you a chance to see how he reacts in the arena before you get on board.

### 4 PLENTY OF PRAISE

Lots of pats and affection, and the occasional treat, will start your relationship off on the right footing.

### 5 A HELPING HAND

If you're nervous about handling or riding your new horse, seek help from someone more experienced.

### 6 ASK QUESTIONS

Try to find out as much as possible about the history of your new horse. Make sure you inquire whether he is good to box, clip, lead, shoe and in traffic – but bear in mind that he might not behave in the same way in his new home, until he is well settled in.

**Did you know?**

In the stable you can learn a lot about your new horse. Does he turn away as you go in? Does he move politely out of the way? Or does he try to barge out as soon as the door is opened?

may make him a little speedy, or may have the reverse effect and mean he is stubborn and resistant.

The trick is to allow as much latitude as possible. If he prances a bit, so be it. When he gets used to everything, he will settle down. If he's a little quick, try to keep up with him or find a compromise in speed. If he's reluctant and slow, be patient. He has to find that nothing bad happens during, or after, this brief experience.

**Handle with care**

Once you have brought him to the yard, it is time to progress to the next steps of grooming, tacking up and riding – but is he ready? Does he appear anxious, nervous, or on his toes? Is he looking around with a wild look in his eye?

If the answer is 'yes' to any of these things, lead him around for a while. Only when he calms down should you tie him up and groom him.

If he seems unable to settle, continue to walk him around for a bit longer, then take him back to where he wants to go – which is his field.

This way, you're showing him consideration and an understanding of his anxiety. Spend a few days taking him to the yard and repeating the procedure, until he is comfortable with it. Only then should you proceed to the next step.

When the horse is tied up, he is trapped – and in a strange, new place, he may not be entirely comfortable with this. A little agitation, therefore, is to be expected. At this point, you have to gauge the horse's reactions. If he's fairly calm, carry on. If his anxiety rises and he gets more fidgety, do a little more, then turn him out again.

As with bringing him into the yard, he needs this stage to become comfortable

and familiar, before going on any further.

The reason for such care and patience is simple – if your new horse is showing signs of anxiety or nervousness when being groomed or handled, he is likely to be even worse when ridden. So you want him to feel comfortable with you and your way of doing things, as well as his new surroundings. As a general rule this doesn't take more than two or three days – but it's better to be safe than sorry.

**A steady pace**

When you first ride your new horse, the secret is to make it easy for him to get used to you and your way of riding. Don't ask too much at first. He may have done all sorts of clever things when you tried him out, but he felt secure then.

You also need to consider what he did before? Was it mostly schooling, with a little hacking? Was it mostly hacking, with a little schooling? Was it all of one and none of the other? The closer you can get to the life he lived before, the easier it is for him to adjust to all the other differences.

As mentioned above, horses sometimes go into shock when moving to a new home. This makes them completely compliant, and it's only a day or two later, when the shock has worn off, we find out they are not so perfect after all.

For this reason, it pays huge dividends to keep everything you ask of him down to the minimum for the first few days. It is up to us to feel our way forward and not to push, rush or expect too much.

**In the saddle**

It is a common error, when mounting a horse for the first time, to hang onto the reins a little too much to keep him standing still. Unfortunately, where it comes from is rider nervousness, which is instantly transmitted to the horse.

He gets nervous too, which makes him fidgety. If you know you're feeling nervous, ask someone to stand by his head and hold him lightly. Your horse won't be sure of himself either.

It is a good idea to ride in a place where you feel confident, such as an arena or enclosed paddock. If the horse shows hesitation about going into the arena, it may be a good idea to lead him in there and walk him round for a few minutes in-hand. He will find it much easier to adjust without a rider.

If you would prefer to go hacking, while this is fine in principle, hacking out in a



When mounting a new horse it's a good idea to ask a friend to lightly hold the reins.

**NOT ALL PLAIN SAILING**



Last October, Jennie Gillam bought an eight-year-old, 17hh gelding called My Golden Clover ('Clover') with the plan of eventing him in the future. However, the timing of his arrival was

unfortunate – he arrived four days before Jennie had to go on holiday. This meant that Clover was turned out in the field to be looked after by friends of Jennie.

"When I got back, he found settling into his new routine difficult – he was a lot sharper than he had been at the dealers, and was also quite nervy," says Jennie.

"He didn't seem to like being tied up – I think I must have gone through six lead ropes and loads of baling

twine. I began to worry that I had bought the wrong horse.

"The saddle that I originally borrowed for him didn't fit, so I ordered a new one and he spent the first six weeks just being lunged.

"The new saddle arrived just before Christmas, so I'm now riding him out and will start jumping him soon.

"He still pulls back at odd times when tied up, but he is generally much calmer and finally seems to have settled in."

new environment brings possible problems in its wake. So bear in mind that although he may have hacked out very nicely where he lived before, he is now in a strange place. And until he gets used to the location he could be quite a different ride.

Wherever you choose to ride, in the first instance, stay in walk while you get the feel of him. And if hacking out, I would do the first ride almost entirely in walk. If the horse and rider are not comfortable with each other in walk, it's only going to get worse in the faster paces.

**Schooling lessons**

Now is the time to play around and find out what sort of contact he likes – what keeps him comfortable and responding well to the aids. If in a school or paddock, put in lots of changes of rein, circles and other school figures.

Don't worry about the niceties of working into corners or bending round your leg, and even less about correct outline, or being on the bit. All these things can come later, when you have established mutual understanding and a good, working relationship. For now, all you want is quiet, easy obedience to the simple things.

When you feel that you are going well together in walk – and not before, try a little trotting in the same way, with plenty of rein changes, circles and so on. Don't ask for too much. Go back to walk while you are still ahead. Slowly, over time, you can ask for more, until eventually, you have what you want from him. Keep the early schooling sessions short – no more than half an hour.

It is so tempting to hurry into what you want the horse to do, but as I've already

mentioned, horses hate to be rushed. The slower you go towards your final goal and the less you ask of him in the early days, the more he will like and respect you.

After all, what is the rush? Hopefully, you have years ahead of you, and time and patience in the early days should reap benefits in future years. ■

**TIP from the TOP**

In the early stages, don't let anyone else ride your new horse until you are both completely confident and have become used to one another.

Go steady out hacking in the early days to allow your horse to get used to his new surroundings.



**A DEBUT OUTING**

So your horse has had a week or so to settle in, and now there is a show coming up at the weekend. You want to take your new horse – that's what you bought him for, after all, and he's been there and done it all before.

However, going to any kind of social activity is going to be exciting for the horse. He may have done it all before, but from another home, with a different rider. If he has any doubts or fears about where he is now, he is likely to be on his toes when taken somewhere else.

As a general rule, leave at least a month of settling in and getting to know each other before embarking on any show or event. Even then, you must be prepared for him to be edgy and even a little difficult. Evidently, if you plan to attend these events regularly, he has to get used to it – and will in due course, as long as you keep your expectations realistic and deal with any difficulties that arise with kindness and consideration.

If the horse has never been to any such event before, this is another ball-game entirely. He may need a considerable number of shows or pleasure rides before he begins to settle down.

Don't take a new horse to a show for at least a month.

