

Ruby - the terrified Section A

Monday 7 August

I received a telephone call from a woman who sounded very concerned about a pony that she and her husband had recently rescued from a field where she was being terribly bullied by the other horses and generally not well cared for.

Ruby, who is a beautiful little grey, Section A filly, 12 months old, standing at probably only around 9 or 10 hands high had never been handled before and therefore not keen on the idea of being caught to be moved. Unfortunately, the sellers decided that the best way to catch her was to rope her and wrestle her to the ground whilst a large, tattooed man sat on her, forced a head collar on and finally dragged her into their trailer.

I received my telephone call after Ruby had been at her new home for approximately two weeks and, quite understandably, still wouldn't let anyone anywhere near her! Luckily, they had done the best thing for her and put her into a paddock with their gentle old mare.

I considered the paddock to be not too big in size and my first thought was to try and establish some form of communication by using advance and retreat in the paddock with her. As I approached, she took off at top speed, hurtling at startling velocity to the farthest end of the field, and I took chase. As I caught up, she whirled around and took off again. Back I went too. This time, however, when she reached the far corner of the paddock she looked around her wildly and then turned and looked straight at me. The second she did this, I turned around and walked away.

This carried on for about 10-15 minutes, with her learning that she could make me go passive whenever she turned to face me, and that I would approach if she turned away from me. Whenever she had her head turned to me, I would then walk in arcs around her trying to see if I could draw her to me, but apart from a couple of steps in my direction she was far too scared to allow me to get closer than about 15 feet.

The most important thing had been achieved though and we had at least opened up a channel of communication between us. She could either choose to be with me, or away from me and either was fine. It would be her choice and she was beginning to understand that I meant her no harm whichever choice she made.

My next thought was to try and erect a rudimentary round pen in the field, to give me a better working space, but as she didn't respect electric tape this idea was immediately ditched and the preferable notion of leading the mare into the stables and allowing Ruby to follow was used. Again, using advance and retreat, I tried to build up some trust between us. Ruby tentatively reached out as far as she dared, sniffed my hand then shot to the back of the stable like a thing possessed!

Next time around though she got a little braver and before long I was able to use my artificial arm (a padded glove and a shirt sleeve on an upturned walking stick) to stroke her all over and even pick up all of her feet.

Minutes later I'd even done away with the arm and could approach her (slowly), fuss her all over, pick up all of her feet and even change her head collar several times.

I left her owners considerably happier and with homework to do with her every night. Once she's more confident with us I've promised to do some leading and loading work with her too and give her the best start in life that we can. Somehow, I don't see whips playing a big part in her future.

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16 September 2006 (Second session)

Went back to see Ruby just over a week after my first visit. I'd left her owners with some homework exercises to do with her, a little each evening. I couldn't have been more impressed with the improvements I saw; the nervous wreck of a pony I had seen at the beginning of our last session had become this inquisitive little bright eyed pony who virtually demanded that we come over and say hello!

Jan told me that although she was infinitely more confident, they were still finding her way of approaches to the left side and that, if possible, they would like to start leading her around.

I began with some initial advance and retreat work in her stable, just to re-acquaint myself. Then, I clipped a lead rope on and using gentle pressure and release, started to ask her for a step to the side, unbalancing her rather than pulling forward immediately. As soon as she had taken just one step in my direction I slackened the rope, instantly rewarding her efforts and letting her know that she'd done what I wanted, reinforcing it with a (slow!) rub between the eyes.

Very soon, one step became two, then three and four and five and, before long, we could circle round her stable, stop and even get a couple of steps of back up.

Next we moved her out of her comfort zone and down into the paddock, all the time keeping control of her steps, not letting her walk ahead of my shoulder, stopping, asking for a few steps back and also turning in circles to the left and right. When she was confident with me and listening to me carefully, I had someone stand quietly at her head and hold her, I then approached Ruby from several feet away, giving her a nice rub and then moved to the next side, gradually increasing speed until I was jogging from one side, around her head to the other side and she stood stock still and accepted it without any anxiety at all.

After leading, and then backing, her through some L shaped poles on the ground I thought we might as well see what she's like with the trailer, expecting to have maybe a minute or two of gentle persuasion she fooled me totally by just following me in and stood happily munching on some hay!

So after we'd each taken her through the trailer a few times the plastic bags on a stick came out. She quickly became accustomed to them going away every time she stood still.

Then, just to top it all, as if that wasn't enough, a line of six trail bikes came roaring down the lane. Ruby was obviously very scared by the sight and sounds of these monsters so we kept doing very tight circles, always keeping her head to me, controlling her feet and then as soon as the last one had passed I ran off down the lane with her after it and we saw them off together! We reinforced this with Ailsa driving our vehicle up and down the lane passed us, each time we chased it away until it was no longer a frightening monster.

If Ruby has taught me anything, it's that even when a horse has been mistreated, it's amazing how quickly they can learn to trust people and to continue giving us the chance to get it right.

The use of non-violent training methods sends a massively powerful message to the horse, unbelievable leaps in progress will happen if you work with the horse's natural willingness to find the easier, more comfortable option.

Tom Bowyer