

Retrained racehorses show team spirit

Retrained racehorses are achieving success in all sorts of disciplines and are increasingly recognised as versatile competition horses, given the right training and matched with the right rider. They are making a particularly big impression in team chasing, a sport which makes great use of their ability to gallop and jump in company with others.

Multiple national team chase champion Yvonne Goss won the ROR first prize at the 2011 and 2012 championships with the 13 year-old Haxton who ran over hurdles and fences as a seven year-old.

He came to Yvonne's Worcestershire yard after breaking down and she was told he would probably only ever make a hack.

"Haxton came with a bit of a reputation for dropping his shoulder, and was also quite grumpy. It took me about six months to bring him round," she explains.

Once he was fit and well, Yvonne began to think about team chasing him. "I've had thoroughbreds before, but none that have actually run – the best was Perry's Pearl who won the Melton Hunt ride as well as the national team chase championships. As Haxton steplechased, I assumed he could go straight into open classes."

However, she discovered that the Sadlers Way gelding was actually relatively inexperienced, and had to drop him down a grade to get his confidence.

"He's the sort of horse that is very trusting, but as a rider you have to be very confident. I talk to him a lot, and we have lots of 'playtime' on hacks, popping over ditches and little fences where possible."

Haxton's confidence quickly grew, helped by outings with the bloodhounds and foxhunting, where he nannies groups of children on ponies.

Yvonne found his niche running in second place in the Art Hotel Chasers team, and in 2011 helped secure one of the most competitive national championships to date.

"Haxton is incredibly safe to ride – he will always pick up if you are committed, but if there is a pile up in front and I hesitate, he wouldn't jump into it! As long as they will listen to you, ex-racers are ideal for today's competitive sport because they can gallop, and are used to trusting their rider," she comments.

The late, great Earthmover, was given to Charlotte Alexander, a member of the ROR Lycett's A Class Act team, which fields all ex-racehorses, as a 14 year-old and she spent the summer schooling him over fences before his first team chase.

"He had been hunting a few times in the past which did help and he is very bold mentally so did not take long to get going. He went straight into Opens but not with a fast team to begin with. This worked well although he was difficult to steer round the corners initially!"

Charlotte and Earthmover were then recruited to join national champions Fight The Ban, but she admits: "They chose us for his speed, but his lack of experience team chasing showed as he had not mastered the idea of jumping and turning and did give me a few falls. We went back to the drawing board and once I got his brakes sorted out and he gained more experience

we didn't look back. He was never been better than when he was team chasing and became a much more careful jumper which came with training and experience."

Charlotte was then given the former maiden hurdler No More Prisoners last year. She schooled the 11 year-old over the summer and evented him at BE100 level. "He had to be taught everything. He did not understand about jumping a fence in the school when I first had him – he used to run round it as if it was a barrier!

"I had to start him off gently team chasing as he did not understand turning and jumping and so would run out. He has huge scope and is terribly careful, however he needed nursing and I had to start him off at Novice Level this Autumn. He progressed to Intermediate at the end of the autumn and after a season's hunting has gained so much confidence he will be ready for open level this year. Once he understands what he has to do you have cracked it. He has a nervous disposition so needed training with this in mind."

Charlotte has an even more exciting prospect in her stable now – Cheltenham Gold Cup winner Denman, who will be aimed at team chasing in 2013.

Octavia (Ocky) Walters, a physiotherapist based in Worcestershire has truly got the ex-racer 'bug'.

Ocky purchased Icey Run (Reggie) from her former employer, trainer David Bridgewater. "I used to ride him as a two year-old, but when I bought him five years later he had been in the field for two years. We ran him over hurdles and fences and I discovered that he had a slight wind problem and was a bleeder. My former partner Joe and I then got into team chasing but we were always way too fast for novice classes. Reggie has brakes and steering issues but jumps like a stag!"

In the 2011 season, Ocky and Joe's team Simple Systems Happy Hackers were placed in several intermediate classes before Reggie tweaked his suspensory ligament. With a change of bit, Ocky hopes to improve his turning this season.

"We hit form at the Worcestershire and then we were in the ribbons every week. For me if I get round and stay on it is great and if we're in with a chance its brilliant!"

Hi Blue was gifted to Ocky and Joe by his owners when in training with Robin Dickin, and Ocky comments: "He could gallop for days and jumps for fun, but even as a 13 year-old he still spooks at everything. He had so much potential but he is lazy – he'd rather follow than be in front."

Team chasing has turned that quirk into a virtue, providing the finishing speed for Lycetts A Class Act.

"He has had various injuries, pulled muscles and leg issues but he just keeps fighting back," says Ocky. "Race horses love team chasing as they still get the thrill without the pressure. Speed is important and they certainly have that. They also have guts and a competitive streak."

Training and preparation

Yvonne Goss points out that although ex-racers are more accustomed to jumping in a straight line, they soon get used to turning at speed, as long as the rider uses their body rather than pulling the reins.

She emphasises that it is essential for riders to prepare them properly: “I do plenty of roadwork to harden their legs off and aim to have them fit enough to get round the first event safely but not so fit that they go over the top before the end of the season. Haxton has a great walk, and I like to make them really walk out but trot slowly to build strength without risking injury.”

Charlotte Alexander reckons that it may be necessary to take an ex-racer back to basics with their jumping and build from there. “How quickly you can progress without overfacing them depends on their character, although this would be the same for any discipline. It’s similar to bringing on a young horse, but with lots of grids and flatwork schooling them back onto their hocks after years of being on their forehand! You cannot always make it perfect but every little bit of school work you put in pays dividends even with the older horses – sometimes you just have to meet them half way.”

Avoiding injuries

One downside of an ex-racer is that they can be economical with their jumping, leading to injuries, points out Charlotte. “Earthmover used to wear knee boots as he always went through fences and I and was concerned about him hitting walls. He also has to have sports medicine boots for protection as a thorn injury led to him having his fetlock flushed under general anaesthetic last Autumn! Saying that, No More Prisoners is extremely careful - probably why he never won a race - and does not touch a thing.”

With the thoroughbred’s reputation for somewhat delicate feet, Charlotte’s other secret weapon is a ‘fantastic’ blacksmith. “Earthmover was incredibly lame when I first had him due to collapsed heels and now is completely sound on hard ground thanks to farrier Andy Hicks. No More Prisoners is going through the transformation with the same problem - it takes at least a year for their feet to repair, and this seems to be a common issue with horses coming out of training.”

Yvonne emphasises the importance of post-competition care, especially for a fine skinned thoroughbred: “I’m very careful to check for any injuries or thorns when washing off after the finish, and again when we get home.”

Octavia concedes that tendon injuries can be an issue for ex-race horses: “You have to be aware of the risks of speed and turning and of whether the going suits your horse. Keeping the legs cold and tight is important. We also regularly get their backs checked by Ronnie Longford and they enjoy massages from Selina Hopkins.”