



# Ex-racehorses and their new lives

By Sarah Gillbard

*Buying an ex racehorse may on the face of it appear a cheap option for a good quality looking leisure or other careered horse. You can go to the Ascot, Doncaster or other sales and come across one for a mere £200. Be warned, unless you know about horses and their history it could turn out to be a very expensive option for the novice rider.*

This article is to inform you of the basics about dealing with an ex race horse, and will be followed up, by example, with some great success stories.

When asked to research and write this article it took me a moment to realise just how relevant I was to this story. I used to live in Australia and bought two horses mostly to save them from the 'Dog man', as well as the fact I wanted to enjoy riding them for leisure. They cost me £50 each and they were a fantastic buy for me. One was a Quarter Horse the other was an ex flat racehorse, whose sister had done particularly well in "The Melbourne Cup" race. It took me months to get used to their quirks and I learnt the hard way. In fact, I was so nervous out riding the racehorse one day that I began to sing, I realised he was listening to me for once. This is when it clicked that they don't respond to your legs, because jockeys' legs are up under their armpits (well nearly) and apart from the tension on the reins and the jockey's voice there is little else about control.

It never occurred to me the variety of 'racehorses' that there are. The ages at which they are originally broken and the life that they actually race for. Some are as little as 2 years old when they hit the scrap heap of racing. Which means they are backed very young and under pressure to perform very early in their lives. Others are successful in their racing career and spend many years on the track, but may

still only be 7 when they retire. Young for a horse. Of course, there are others who have to retire on the grounds of health and injury, which would be a problem maybe in a future career.

So I have been to take advice from a professional couple who have spent their lives with racehorses and the rehabilitation of them. Fred Cook and Rowena Jane Cook are based at Pilsgate, just outside Stamford in Lincolnshire.

As I walked into their yard in December the air smelt divine, of eucalypt. All the horses' bedding is specially impregnated with the oil, for them. You wouldn't have a cold last long in their yard!! The farrier has made comment to them that the horses' hooves improve with time on their bedding due to the oil impregnating the hoof. The whole atmosphere of the yard felt very relaxed.

Rowena said "There is a lot to consider when deciding to take on one of these horses, but perhaps the main issue is whether you are going to buy one directly from the sale ring, from the training yard, obtain one from a rehabilitation centre or one that someone has already worked with.

The horse that has already been through a rehab centre will have been correctly assessed, re-trained (to a certain degree, depending on the individual

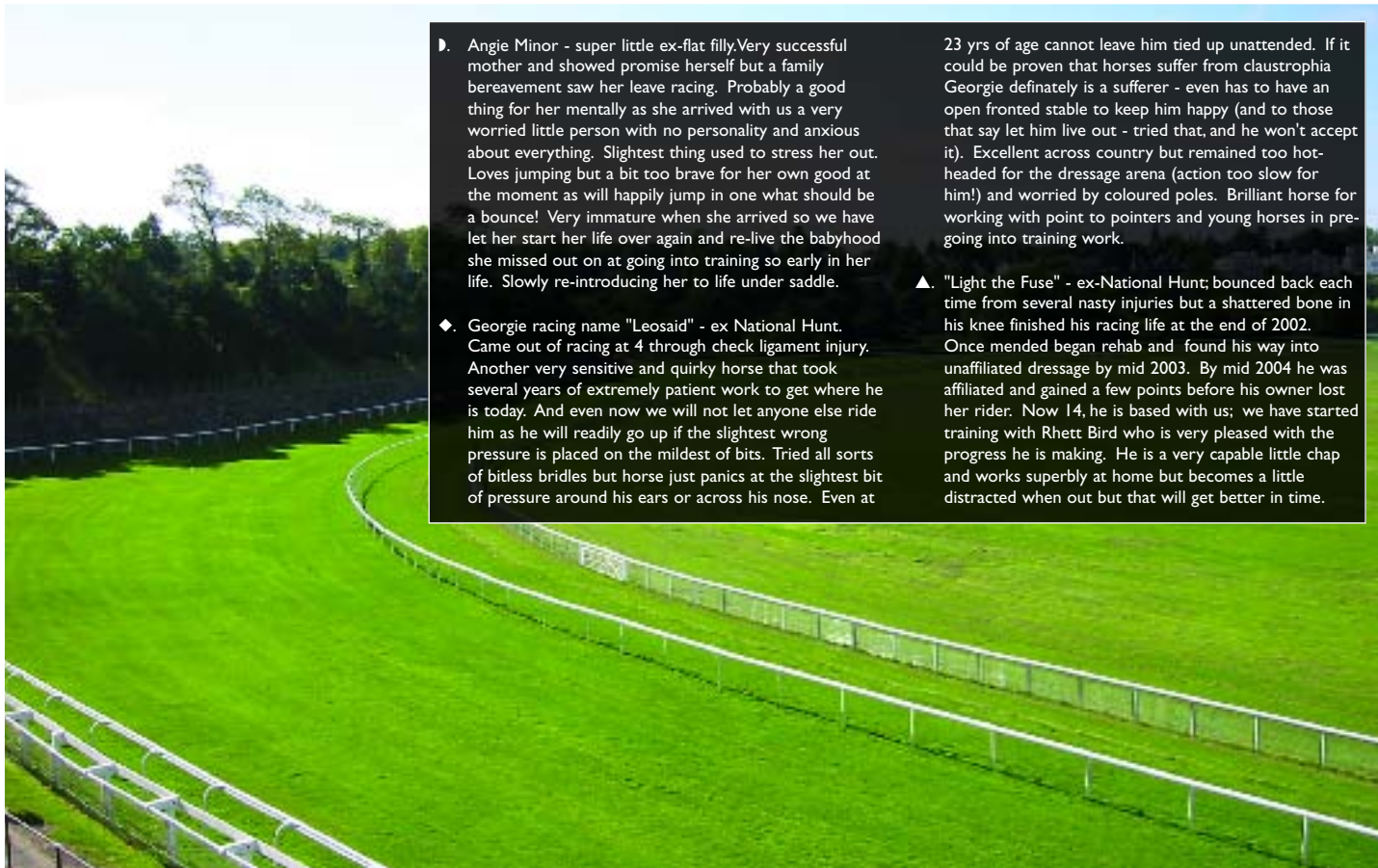
situation), re-assessed and then the potential owner assessed and hopefully a good match found. Obviously, if major difficulties arise the Centre will have the horse back and find you another one; less significant problems are usually corrected by you by way of seeking the assistance of someone experienced with working with these horses."

There are many of these centres. The Thoroughbred Rehabilitation Centre at Halton, Lancashire is dedicated to the welfare, care and rehabilitation of Thoroughbred racehorses. It is the original charity and gained charitable status in 1993. It was founded in 1991 by Carrie Humble and she was recognised for her work for racehorse welfare in June 2003 and was awarded the MBE in the Queen's birthday celebrations. If you type 'Rehabilitation of Racehorses' into a search engine, there are many others that appear.

The advice from Rowena and Fred is "If you buy a horse from a private owner, then there are two possibilities to consider. The horse may well be legitimately for sale, but often it is more the case that the horse is being passed on because the vendor hasn't been able to get to the bottom of an on-going problem.

Buying a horse via the sale ring or directly from the training yard is also rife with potential problems as you really are taking on an unknown quantity. If this is your chosen path then you really do need to be experienced in working with and training these horses.

What makes the situation harder is that the Thoroughbred horse is extremely sensitive and has a quick mind so is often much more prone to exhibiting signs of stress than other breeds of horse".



- ▶ Angie Minor - super little ex-flat filly. Very successful mother and showed promise herself but a family bereavement saw her leave racing. Probably a good thing for her mentally as she arrived with us a very worried little person with no personality and anxious about everything. Slightest thing used to stress her out. Loves jumping but a bit too brave for her own good at the moment as will happily jump in one what should be a bounce! Very immature when she arrived so we have let her start her life over again and re-live the babyhood she missed out on at going into training so early in her life. Slowly re-introducing her to life under saddle.
- ◆ Georgie racing name "Leosaid" - ex National Hunt. Came out of racing at 4 through check ligament injury. Another very sensitive and quirky horse that took several years of extremely patient work to get where he is today. And even now we will not let anyone else ride him as he will readily go up if the slightest wrong pressure is placed on the mildest of bits. Tried all sorts of bitless bridles but horse just panics at the slightest bit of pressure around his ears or across his nose. Even at

23 yrs of age cannot leave him tied up unattended. If it could be proven that horses suffer from claustrophobia Georgie definitely is a sufferer - even has to have an open fronted stable to keep him happy (and to those that say let him live out - tried that, and he won't accept it). Excellent across country but remained too hot-headed for the dressage arena (action too slow for him!) and worried by coloured poles. Brilliant horse for working with point to pointers and young horses in pre-going into training work.

- ▲ "Light the Fuse" - ex-National Hunt; bounced back each time from several nasty injuries but a shattered bone in his knee finished his racing life at the end of 2002. Once mended began rehab and found his way into unaffiliated dressage by mid 2003. By mid 2004 he was affiliated and gained a few points before his owner lost her rider. Now 14, he is based with us; we have started training with Rhett Bird who is very pleased with the progress he is making. He is a very capable little chap and works superbly at home but becomes a little distracted when out but that will get better in time.

### What are the initial considerations to bear in mind?

**Whilst, in general, the ex-racehorse is usually good to load and shoe, and has good stable manners - the horse, although already rideable, does not have a clue about conventional riding style which means that:-**

- It doesn't know anything about contact
- Has a limited or non-existent braking system
- It will be clueless about the aids be it hands, leg, seat, weight
- Physically the horse will be "rigid" – not supple
- It probably won't stand still for you to mount; some will rear up if you try and stop them from walking away
- It may never have had anyone ride it with longer stirrups



Invariably it will be used to riding out in company. Its life has always been based on a strict routine and regime. It is used to an active lifestyle. It will have had little, if any, turnout in fields.

Life in larger racing yards is hurried and time short so your new horse may well not be used receiving the huge amounts of affection you now wish to shower it with and may well actually shun you to start with. Just because it has been clipped doesn't mean that it is an easy task – it may have taken more than one person to do this or sedation may have been required. 24/7 turnout may become an option, at a later date, but certainly not in the early stages so access to stabling is essential. Being thin-skinned, your new charge will need a wardrobe.

You will need a safe, enclosed area in which to start schooling work. The day the horse leaves the training yard, its whole life is tipped upside down, (even its diet now changes) and that is when behavioural or stress-related symptoms can really kick in. The racehorse diet in itself can have caused digestive/systematic problems, albeit they may be very subtle and take a skilled person to pick up on. The racehorse doesn't see much forage, so colic is a real threat in the early days.

Racehorses notoriously have poor quality feet so going barefoot may never be an option. Depending on how long your horse has been out of training and what has happened during the intervening period prior to you getting it, it is quite possible that the horse has an ulcer, albeit low grade. It is quite likely that the horse has incurred some form of physical injury (back, pelvis, leg are the most common) particularly the national hunt horse, which may not present initial difficulties but may well manifest later on during the course of re-training work.

You will need regular consultations with a saddle fitter. The horse directly out of training will be fit

and muscled up but that muscle will soon go due to the change of lifestyle so its shape will change dramatically; of course, how the body shape alters from then on will depend entirely on the manner of schooling work undertaken and just how well and accurately it is effected. Remember, too, that your horse may not have even had a conventional saddle on its back before!

Finding a suitable bit is often quite a task, as racehorses do not have "mouths". You may well go through several bit changes, over a period of time, until you find the right one. Bit-less is not always an option in the early days either as there is no understanding of the other aids.

Your new horse will not have encountered travelling in a trailer. The horse will most definitely not be used to being tied up outside of its stable". What a comprehensive list of considerations to take on board!

That isn't the end of it as far as a trainer goes. All the above has to be coupled with the basic temperament of the individual and the effects racing has had on it both physically and mentally.

Bear in mind that horses off the flat will have been backed when just one year of age. National hunt horses will be jumping hurdles at just three years of age. Just take a moment to think about the effects that such physical trauma will have had on a baby; think about the stress factor. You could well be taking on a horse that consequently exhibits adverse behaviour which needs special expertise and understanding". One or two of the horses that Rowena and Fred see are in such turmoil when they arrive on the yard. Sometimes it takes them several days to feel safe in the stable with the horse, without fear of attack.

So once you have taken delivery of your new horse, settled him into his new surroundings, the work really starts.

**Other influential factors are :-**

- flat or national hunt
- mare or gelding
- size of yard the horse has come from
- whether it actually saw the racecourse
- how often it ran
- how many horses in the race

Rowena and Fred "recommend a full m.o.t. (as we call it) with the horse having a blood test, its teeth checked, a visit from a chiropractor experienced with racehorses and the sorts of injuries they can incur and a visit from your farrier to assess the general state of the feet".

The actual re-schooling is a long process as the horse has to be taught to use its body in a completely different way from what it has been used to. Ingrained ways have to be erased and new ones put in place. You won't be able to go in the school, do a few circuits and the horse suddenly drops it head into a wonderful outline. It won't use its back for one thing and so engagement will be completely non-existent. Actually the back will hollow resulting in an even higher head carriage and a very rigid body. Remember that it is quite likely you will be heavier than anyone else who has been riding especially as you will be sitting on the horse as opposed to riding with your weight off the horse's back; it won't know how to carry weight. In effect you are working with a newly backed horse that relies totally on you to teach it everything, except that it thinks it does know the rules.

Plenty of ground work and long reining is the key to success but such exercises in themselves can present problems as so few racehorses have a proper amount of time spent on them during the breaking/backing process so a pair of lunge lines suddenly going round the hindquarters can prove to be quite a lively challenge.

Fred and Rowena state: "A person considering taking on an ex-racehorse needs to be very realistic about their own abilities, their available time and their budget. As a generalisation, we would advise anyone that they are not really the right horse for the first-time owner (of course, there are always exceptions) and that they can be expensive to maintain, certainly initially if injuries come to the fore, or an ulcer presents, etc. Most people find that they need outside help even for basic work let alone ironing out specific problems whether behavioural or schooling related so this should be taken into account. Schooling fees are in the region of at least £120.00/week these days and to be fair on the trainer you send your horse to, you shouldn't expect them to have the horse for a period less than 12 weeks. This allows a settling in period, proper assessment, good practices put in place and time to work with you and your horse together prior to you taking him home again. Of course, that period of time could be longer depending upon just exactly what needs addressing. We have had one little horse here a year because his problems have been so deeply seated; we have had to go so carefully with him because his stress and anxiety levels have been so high. Now though he is a transformed little lad and his owner is ecstatic!"

People see racehorses on tv and are amazed by their seemingly calm behaviour. In their racing environment many are excellently behaved as a matter of course but can change quite dramatically once the horse is uprooted from the surroundings he knows and it can be quite a shock.

We have many ex-racehorses pass through the yard mostly from people who have encountered seemingly insurmountable problems. For a considerable number we are the last port of call before they are given up on completely; they have been passed around from pillar to post as a succession of people have not been able to understand them and retrain them successfully. It is quite alarming how many qualified trainers are not well-versed enough with these horses. We encounter horses that are bags of nerves to the extent that they hardly eat, physically tremble when tacked up, etc. have extremely high aggression levels that they are virtually unhandleable or lunge at you the moment you go into the stable!

Unfortunately the biggest problem is that so many people acquire an ex-racehorse with absolutely wonderful intentions but are just not experienced and confident enough to cope with what can be presented to them. Of course not every horse is a challenge; some do adapt to the changes very easily; and obviously those that do take the extra time and understanding also "come good". Sadly though there are a few that never really make the adjustment and so an even more specialist home is

**"Patience is the key. You must remain calm but confident at all times whatever behaviour is thrown at you. The sharp-minded Thoroughbred will soon pick up on any deficiencies you exhibit in that department".**



required for them as they always remain unpredictable – or shall we say more unpredictable than most horses as no horse's behaviour can ever be 100% guaranteed".



Over 4,000 horses come out of training every year and there are not enough charity funded



Rehabilitation Centres to cope with anywhere near a quarter of that figure. This means that there are a lot of horses needing to find a roof over their heads. A large number find their way into riding schools which is totally the wrong environment for them; polo and horseball are excellent vocations for these horses but a large number appear on the riding club circuit in unaffiliated eventing, jumping and dressage competitions.

Few ex-racehorses show any real show-jumping talent because the thoroughbred just isn't designed for that sort of jumping (how many Grade C horses can you name?). Quite a few are having successful careers in the show ring (look at Young Dragonara), eventing and in the dressage arena (Mr. Bojangles is now at Medium level). Provided the temperament is there, there is a huge amount of potential.

Dressage-wise it is unfortunate that judges are so warmblood-orientated because many people are put off by always being marked down. It can be hard to get these horses working through their backs because it is so alien to them but once you can start to make the connection, then the transformation is wonderful. "Currently we have 6 ex-racehorses in the yard each completely different and each requiring a different approach to their training. Whilst everyone knows to "treat the horse as an individual" this is even more imperative with the Thoroughbred, because of their make-up. Not everyone is really prepared for the challenge that their temperament itself can present; they can often lack the consistency in their behaviour, but that is all part of the fun of owning one; each day can be quite different! We love the Thoroughbreds and working them.

As with any horse and any situation there are no hard and fast rules and there are always exceptions. We advise anyone who would like to take on an ex-racehorse to talk to others that have done so and listen to both the good and not so good aspects so that they are fully versed in what to expect.

Owning a horse is supposed to be fun, a pleasure, and with some realistic appraisal it can be. We are here to help both horse and owner so please do not hesitate to contact us. Di Arbuthnot, Director of Operations of the RoR will happily provide a reference should you require one.

**I would like to acknowledge the help and expertise of Fred and Rowena for the information in producing this article. They can be reached on 01780 740773 and their website is [www.equine-training.co.uk](http://www.equine-training.co.uk).**