

British  
Equine  
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# Training horses for specific purposes

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Debbie has worked professionally with horses all of her life. She came from a non-horsey family and, as a schoolgirl, begged borrowed and worked her way into rides on horses of all types. This was a good grounding, because with her team the Forge Flyers, she won the UK National Team Chase Championships for an unprecedented 4 consecutive years. She has also produced championship working hunters and showjumpers, competed in eventing at advanced level, and even rode sidesaddle as an extra for a film. She describes her ability for Western riding and barrel racing as being fairly modest. She now works with her partner Graham Smith schooling young horses and training racehorses for the flat and over jumps in Leicestershire.

**Whatever your final goal, always follow the 4 golden rules of training:**

1. Always be consistent and patient
  - horses like routine and need to have their confidence built as they progress
  - you can't be in a hurry, horses don't care how busy you are
2. Don't forget every horse needs discipline
  - this particularly applies to Warmblood breeds, but all horses soon learn to take advantage if they can
  - Strong consistent discipline is important, the horse will prefer it; they are herd animals and you need to become the alpha horse in their life.
3. Every day is a training day
  - Young horses are learning all the time 24/7. Make use of every opportunity to introduce them to new things in a safe environment whenever you get the chance
4. Climb inside your horse's head and stay there!
  - See life through your horse's eyes, then you will begin to appreciate how he feels when he sees something new and frightening and you will be there ahead of time to positively give him confidence

You will also need to remember:

Every horse is different

- Some horses learn fast, some take longer
- Thoroughbreds need steady calm work, whilst a cob might require sharper work to keep his interest

You will need to be ready to adapt your training to the horse's character and also your final goal. Whatever you want, whether it is a grand prix dressage horse, a riding club all rounder, or a grade A show jumper, every horse will benefit from an all-round education. Not only will he be more pleasant to have around, but if he grows out of you, or you grow out of him, he will be much easier to successfully re-home. As a result, although the way we achieve success in individual horses might vary, I always aim to give every horse an all round basic education.

**The bare minimum: the basic education will give you a horse who**

- learned to work acceptably on the flat
- will have good manners alone and in company

- will be sensible and safe over different terrains
- learn to tackle a variety of obstacles without fuss

Only after you have achieved all of the above this should you consider more specific or specialised training.

The basic training regime of young horse should start with the following steps:

1. Start by riding in the school or a small area to allow you to get used to your horse and vice versa;
2. Once you have confidence and can steer and stop, start to hack out to maintain your horse's interest and forward thoughts.

Hacking is a very important tool to school the young horse. Straight away you can start to:

1. Introduce hill work to help your horse's balance and fitness;
2. Open gates and negotiate hazards whenever possible to improve your horse's responsiveness to your leg and hand;
3. Practice straight lines, bends and transitions on tracks and in fields;
4. Introduce jumping when its fun. Natural obstacles are best;
5. Keep changing things, so your horse has to listen to you, because he doesn't know what is going to happen next.

## **Jumping basic rules**

- Keep all of the early fences small and straightforward to bring out your horse's confidence, but use a variety
- Don't forget to praise him when he gets it right
- Never present your horse at a fence that he is physically or mentally unable to tackle safely
- Building your horse's confidence in jumping is time consuming. Unfortunately destroying his confidence can be all too easy and getting it back, once it's gone, takes even longer
- Fence building doesn't have to be expensive: Use your imagination. Use what is already hanging around

Once you and your horse are happy to tackle a variety of single obstacles, you can progress to simple combinations in a school or field.

If you want your horse to hunt, do hunter trials or event, now is the time to start introducing the obstacles they are going to encounter in later life. The horse should be introduced in a non-threatening and gradual way, so that your well adjusted horse takes them in his stride. These must include:

- Water
- Arrowhead fences
- Ditches
- Banks
- Corner fences
- Combination and angles

Use every opportunity to socialise your horse and introduce him to new things. Not only will it be fun for both of you, but it will have the added benefit that when you take your horse to his first event, he will take it all in his stride. Examples of great activities include:

- Hunting or hunt rides
- Sponsored rides and group hacks
- Trips to the beach or to the moors
- Hire a small cross country course or an indoor school with a group of friends

Finally don't add more challenges before you and your horse are comfortable and oozing confidence. Remember that if a strategy isn't working you need to change it. If you are still struggling, then get some help and/or independent advice sooner, rather than later.

**IMPORTANT** take home messages:

1. Training problems don't get better – Denial is a very bad strategy and it will always come back to haunt you!
2. Ask yourself 'Is training my horse fun?', because it should be.
  - Remember that if you are not enjoying yourself, the chances are, that neither is your horse.