



## **An Everyday Story of Retraining a Racehorse**

“You could always ride her; she just stands about doing nothing...” Mmm, it always starts like that, doesn’t it? Just a few simple words, that set off a chain reaction that changes things for a lifetime. And this was no different.

“Band of Hope.” A Chestnut TB mare, 16.1hh, then in her early / mid teens and at a friend’s livery yard.

I used to set up visits for a horse dentist round some local yards twice a year and on our first visit to Dalebrook he heard the offer that was made to me. The mare’s reputation had gone before her a little and looking over the door at her rather cross expression and angular frame, I didn’t fancy my chances.

As we drove on to the next yard, the dentist said “I think you should have a go with that Dixieland Band mare, I really like her. She’d make you a crackin’ horse.” Mmm. There it goes again, the simple sentence and you don’t always act on it immediately, but it hangs around in the air, waiting to come back to you like a text message stuck in the ether when your mailbox is full. You might think it would be reasonable to listen to the advice of the horse dentist, a knowledgeable professional. On this occasion, you could go even further than ‘reasonable’ as the dentist concerned was an ex – jockey.

The months rolled on and minus any riding I began to think about the mare and whether we might get on. I had lost my last horse, which I’d owned for 16 years, about 18 months earlier and wasn’t really sure it was yet time to try forging deep bonds with another.

After a particularly appalling week at work, I needed a new focus and thought what harm can it do to go and take a closer look? I can always say no! – Fool. So armed with my hat, gloves, basic lunge kit and a pocket full of bribery I set off on the ten minute drive to Dalebrook. Band of Hope was in her stable. Somewhat cautiously I approached the door. Unimpressed by my arrival, she stood eyeing me up suspiciously, with her rangy, ginger backside wedged in her manger. (An annoyingly persistent habit, I was to find out later) If my presence at her door didn’t provoke much reaction, entering the stable did and the previously wedged bottom moved with alarming alacrity in my direction!

So, our first ‘session’ began with a little discussion about which way it was polite to face when someone enters your room.

Many, many more ‘discussions’ followed. You’d really got to hand it to the mare, she could hold her own in a disagreement. Even tacking up for lunging was a trial. She was a consummate professional with her teeth and a simultaneous hind leg. I was put in mind of why Sigourney Weaver went into battle with the Alien sitting in the comparative safety of a piece of heavy plant machinery. Despite her reactions to

everything: grooming, tack, strange objects, familiar objects...I did feel there was a terrific personality in there, desperate to let her guard down and make a close friend. One other thing kept me going – watching her work. I'd come across many horses, but never one that could move like her. Our lungeing sessions inevitably consisted of a series of bucks that were just complete hand stands, punctuated with floating strides and airs above the ground. She was totally stunning.

After checking my life insurance, I decided it was time to see what the world looked like from the saddle. Uh-oh. I soon re-named her 'A- Band- on- Hope'. Riding was a dodgy enterprise at best and, on the very bad days, a suicide mission.

The Ginger One loved to nap, her great party piece. Then to go backwards with little or no attention paid to what, or whom, might be behind. One such session, where she backed into a corner by the neighbour's wall threatening to rear and lob me off backwards, ended suddenly, to my advantage. Stomping her feet as she reversed, she broke a stone slab covering a large drain hole and her hind quarters dropped down underneath me as her legs went into the hole. I yelled, she grunted and with a massive effort she somehow lunged up, out and forward in a split second. Amazingly, she had one very minor scratch, we were very lucky. Oddly enough, she seemed far happier to travel forward from that day!

With some help from a friend, I clicker – trained her. This totally changed her outlook on life and our partnership. She began to look for opportunities to do the 'right' thing. Banj realised that receiving treats and praise was something she enjoyed and she tried her best to please. I had never known a horse learn so quickly. My greatest problem was that her body was not physically capable of carrying out tasks that her brain was maybe ready to attempt. We took things incredibly slowly. Banj's physio told me I was doing a good job and that it was unusual to see such improvement in muscle tone in an old thoroughbred. I have, in effect, totally re-backed her and brought her on as if she were a youngster (in a 22year old body!) and we are getting there steadily, if we don't die of old age first!!

A point came where Joan generously suggested that after all my efforts Banj should become mine officially and her passport was duly returned to Weatherbys for the necessary adjustments. There was no going back from that point!

Last year, I bought my first horse-box. Shows were becoming less traumatic and I thought I'd like to do more, so begging transport was not a viable option. We had such fun! She loves it when the lorry comes down onto the yard the night before a show and seems to relish all the attention whilst being got ready. In the morning, she can hardly contain her excitement when I'm plaiting up and then marches determinedly up the ramp as if to say "Come on! Where are we off to today?"

She never came home without a rosette last season, she was 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> at Bakewell, 2<sup>nd</sup> at Moorgreen, 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> at Northern Counties (NCPA) qualifying for the Ex-Racer's Championships and the NCPA Pony of the Year and won an armful at our local riding club shows. (Hallamshire, Sheffield) I'm proud of our modest efforts, but still have a lot of work to do. Her ridden outline is coming, but is not yet consistent and she needs to go forward more freely. I have faith it will come. What matters

most though, is not getting a “big” win and my face in Horse & Hound (that would just be a bonus!).

Forgive me if I list the important things:

- The way she knows my car when I arrive.
- The way she leaves her feed for a few seconds at night to come to say “goodbye” before I go.
- The way she behaved impeccably yesterday during our schooling session with 2 free ranging pigs, a pony and a dog sharing the arena! (Don’t ask, please! I’m normally so safety conscious!)
- The way she used to go racing half clipped- I can now do her loose in the stable and pull her mane and tail too.
- The way I can take her to shows, on my own, do the job at hand and trust her to behave (it used to be a 3 to 4 person job!).
- The way that she seems to be enjoying her “retirement!”

This noble grand-daughter of Mill Reef, who started out her life at the Royal Stud, sadly didn’t hit the heights she was destined for in the racing world. I, for one, am glad! Had she done so, I would have missed a wonderful friend, teacher and counsellor. I’m happy we stuck it out, the pair of us and I do believe our best is yet to come, if we keep taking the Phyllosan and the Supple Joint Formula!

Angela Palmer-Cartwright BHSAI ©