

‘Does your pony have some ‘personal space’ problems? This issue, our HW Helpline’s Pony Princess Michelle O’Neill from Cherry Tree Equine has some great advice on paddock horse behaviour - plus she has some terrific tips on canter transitions and the power of ‘positive thinking’.

Hi Michelle,

Sometimes I dream about being an Olympic equestrian rider. I really aspire to be like Megan Jones and Andrew Hoy and others like that. Other than just working as hard as I possibly can to improve my skills, what kind of things would I have to do to possibly get onto the Australian team? Phoebe

Hi Phoebe,

Well done on having such high aspirations. It is awesome that you are already starting to plan how to achieve your equestrian dreams! I also believe that you have already touched on the first thing you will have to do to achieve your dreams; and that is to work hard. You will need to take every opportunity to learn from other successful people in your chosen field of equestrian, which may include doing some work experience with as many trainers or riders as you can, as well as attending any clinics or lessons that you can.

The good news is that all great riders start at the same place – the beginning! Andrew Hoy did not just wake up one day, only to discover that he was riding at the Olympics. Andrew, along with all our other amazing Australian Olympic Equestrian athletes, has worked his way through the ranks of competitions and has studied, trained and worked hard at his craft. Many elite riders begin at Pony Club or at their local competitions or riding club, and it is from this level that you can begin to progress.

Hi Michelle,

My name is Kiran and I am 11 years old. I ride a 16hh thoroughbred named Dilly, he is really gentle and quiet - considering he only retired from racing not long ago! I’m taking it slow on him, but I am hoping to do some eventing on him soon. We don’t have an arena, but when I go to Pony Club and try to canter on the arena, he won’t canter when I ask him to. He is perfect every other time, but he just won’t canter on the arena. The arena is 20 x 60 approximately. I’m starting to teach him kiss to canter, so do you think that would help? Do you have any tips that could help me get him into a canter when on the arena?

Hello Kiran

Dilly sounds like a lovely horse and you are doing a great job to have him going so well, and so soon after his career change!

At 16hh, Dilly is quite a big horse. If he has spent his life being a racehorse, there is every chance that he has done very few (and possibly no) circles, and has done a lot of work on straight lines and around a track. So it will naturally take some time for him to learn how to ‘balance and carry himself’. There is a big difference between galloping around a racetrack and cantering a 20m circle! Imagine if you asked a marathon runner to suddenly start doing ballet – it’s going to take them a little bit of time to develop the correct skills and the right muscles to handle this kind of change to their training, isn’t it?

The first step to helping Dilly develop his training, is to make sure he can canter a circle (either on the lunge or in a round

Of course, there is one other essential ingredient that every successful competitor needs; and that is a truly great horse. These are few and far between and usually extremely hard to find! On your equestrian journey, you will ride a lot of horses that you will love and bond with, but realistically, most will not have the World Class talent that top competitors need to win. But once again, if you are committed to achieving your goals, and you can gain some experience with good trainers and riders, you may also gain the chance to ride a range of different horses and improve your skills as you go.

As you get further up the competition ranks, you will also begin to work closely with organisations such as Equestrian Australia. EA (www.equestrian.org.au) not only has a list of qualified riding instructors in each state on their site, but they also host regular training camps for up and coming riders, as well as promoting a whole range of EA approved events – including interschools – that will help you to progress ‘through the ranks’ of competition.

Phoebe, there is one more thing that you will need on your journey to becoming a top equestrian; and that is a little bit of luck. My friend Ian Francis – a highly regarded Australian horse clinician and competitor in his own right – once said to me that luck is the combination of hard work and opportunity. What Ian means by that is: if you work hard, opportunities will present themselves and you will make your own luck!

yard) when you are ground working him and without a rider on his back. This will not only help him get his balance and his confidence on the circle, but it will also start training his muscles and will assist in his fitness too.

With the ex-racehorses I have ridden I have always found that using straight lines and then quite large circles is the best way to get them cantering in a balanced and calm way. So, I think the arena you are using may be too small at this stage of Dilly’s training – as we want our ‘ballet dancer’ to learn how to dance comfortably and safely BEFORE we start asking him to ‘pirouette’! If you can access a large, flat arena or area of safe ground to work Dilly in for the next little while (even it is only once or twice a week), you will find your training will progress a lot faster and Dilly will likely become a lot more balanced.

When you are trying to ask Dilly to canter, it is fine to get a few strides at a time as you have been, as long as you are gradually building those strides each time and you are consistent with your aids. Try to get an extra few strides each time you ride (having an instructor or horsey friend watch you from the ground is always a good idea), until you build up to going all the way around the arena at canter – and make sure you reward Dilly for good work, by giving him plenty of rest and praise between canter sessions!

I am really proud that you have been using a voice cue to help you get the canter, as I ‘kiss’ to all my horses to get them to canter and they will now do it on voice command alone. But also be sure that you use a different cue for different commands (eg click to trot and kiss to canter) – so you don’t end up confusing Dilly with your kissing!



Hi Michelle,

My name is Ashley and I have a loving Quarter horse x Appaloosa called Wally. I love him to bits but we have a bit of a problem...Wally hates other horses but he is fine with foals. Wally seems to put his ears flat back and either tries to bite or kick. When he lived in a stable, he used to be really bad and would lunge and attack passing horses. We've now moved and he lives in a paddock but he is still anti-social. Help!

Hi Ashley

How fantastic that you now have the opportunity for Wally to enjoy life in a paddock environment. It sounds like he wasn't really enjoying being stabled! Now, to be really sure of just how Wally is coping with any new or prospective paddock mates, you may need an experienced horse person to come and watch Wally and see exactly what he is doing. But, in the meantime, I'll give you some general 'horse socialising' tips to help you learn more about Wally's behaviour!

You mention that Wally is aggressive when he is put in the paddock, but you haven't told me just how long you have left him in the paddock for. When horses are first put in the paddock together, they will often display signs of aggression (but usually not extreme aggression) in order to establish a 'herd' pecking order. Once established, the pecking order remains relatively constant – but things can take a few hours or even a few days to settle down.

If Wally is not being outright dangerous, he may just need some more time to get used to other horses in a safe environment – for the sake of both him and his new paddock partners! This is especially true if he has

been stabled for a very long time and hasn't had a lot of social interaction with other horses during that time.

It is also important to introduce any new horses into a paddock slowly – so nobody gets scared or (even worse) injured in the process. You could let Wally become familiar with his new paddock mates over a secure, horse safe fence or even using an adjacent yard next to the paddock. Once he's met and 'socialised' with any new horsey friends, you can then introduce him to his new paddock mates one at a time in the paddock 'playground'.

It is also important that when you DO introduce Wally to new horses, you do it in a large area - rather than in a confined space or unsafe environment. Small areas are dangerous for both horses and handlers, as if horses do not get along, they need enough 'flight' room to get away from each other's kicks or strikes and find some 'safe' territory. I also hope the photos I took of some of our Cherry Tree Equine ponies will give you some idea of how 'herd behaviour' can happen...but also how it can work itself out in the long run!



Photo by Andrew Hennell



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