

An end to rearing

Equine behaviourist and trainer **Emma Massingale** uses her experience to help an owner whose horse's rearing habit has left her confidence in shreds



THE TRAINER

EMMA MASSINGALE has her own training centre in Devon. She specialises in problem horses and breaking in youngsters, and also events her own stallion. She recently starred in the BBC3 TV series *My Life as an Animal*. Visit: www.naturalequine.co.uk.



THE OWNER

JANE SEYMOUR had planned to event Georgie, the six-year-old mare she bought as a filly. But despite being professionally broken and schooled, she has an established rearing habit. Unnerved by this behaviour, Jane longs to be able to school and hack Georgie safely.

THE PROBLEM



REARING UP An escape route

Georgie's tendency to stand up on her hindlegs has left Jane understandably nervous, so Emma's young apprentice, Kis, rides first. While the pair circles in walk, the mare spots something she dislikes and puts the brakes on. When Kis applies pressure with her legs, Georgie responds by spinning round and staging a dramatic rear.

Emma says: "Georgie was put under too much pressure, too soon, as a youngster. Rearing up is her escape plan – it is an effective way of getting out of a situation she doesn't like.

"You can't 'beat' the habit of rearing out of a horse using aggression. A problem as bad as this requires long-term re-education. With training and patience, the horse can learn not to do it.

"Georgie is dominant and controlling with other horses and also people. She needs to learn to accept her rider, and to realise that schooling and hacking are things she can enjoy."

Jane says: "Rearing has become second nature to Georgie now. I'd never had a horse that rears before, and I've found the experience incredibly scary. But I'm very attached to Georgie and she has real jumping talent so I'm determined to try to find a solution."

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BACK TO BASICS

PLAYING FOOTBALL Making work fun

Emma has attached a long line to a halter under the bridle, so as not to put pressure on Georgie's mouth. The mare wears a bareback pad to minimise risk to the rider should she rear up and fall over backwards.

In a pen without corners to encourage forward movement, Emma introduces Georgie to a ball. Once the mare is happy with it being rolled around her legs and over her body, Emma encourages her to kick the ball.

Emma says: "Horses usually rear because they can't accept pressure – they dislike being asked to move forwards from the leg or to yield through the bridle, so we're taking Georgie back to basics.

"The football gives her focus and encourages her forwards. If she doesn't move I tap will her with a whip to apply enough pressure to cause discomfort. Each step to touch the ball is rewarded with a rub, which teaches her to go forwards towards comfort when pressure is on.

"I'm showing Georgie that work can be fun and is not something she needs to stand up



on her hindlegs about. We'll keep this ball handy as a comfort 'safety net' for Georgie."

Jane says: "Because of her problems, Georgie has spent a lot of time over the years being told off. It's nice to see her being praised for doing something well."

TIP from the TOP

If your horse rears up, try to lean to one side and hold something fixed – such as the mane – rather than the reins, so you're less likely to pull the horse over backwards.



3 MAKING PROGRESS

YIELDING TO PRESSURE A relaxed approach

Emma then takes hold of the reins. While walking alongside Georgie and encouraging her forwards with small taps of the whip, she asks the mare to yield to light pressure on the reins.

Emma says: "When I take up the contact Georgie thinks: 'Arghh, claustrophobia!' This negative reaction is typical of a rearer. We need to teach her that this pressure is OK.

"Again, a tap of the whip causes discomfort to make her go forwards – but yielding to the bit earns praise. When she becomes soft in the mouth, we'll play football before Kis remounts."

Jane says: "Georgie looks happy and her ears are relaxed. She's obviously finding comfort in doing the right thing. So far, so good."

GETTING ON BOARD

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READING THE SIGNS
A happy face

When Kis puts a hand on Georgie's withers to mount, the mare instantly raises her head and flattens her ears. Georgie soon stops pulling faces, but resorts to grumpiness when Kis is legged up to lie across the bareback pad.

Emma says: "Georgie is warning us, saying: 'I'm not sure about this, I might have to rear.' We're aiming for a happier look, so we'll repeat the exercise until she becomes desensitised to Kis lying across her back."

"I'm not holding onto Georgie at this point, because it's important she feels that I'm giving her the benefit of the doubt. "Once she's standing quietly with Kis on board, we'll play some ridden football to reassure her that there are no nasty surprises in store whenever someone mounts."
Jane says: "Georgie must have felt some kind of pressure or expectation whenever I mounted – as if she expected my legs to clamp around her and make her move off immediately. She looks relieved that Kis just wants to sit quietly and walk round."

UPPING THE PRESSURE
Forward to trot

Once Georgie is happy to be ridden around the pen at walk, Kis starts to ask the mare to move into a trot. So far she hasn't been using her legs at all, however, as Georgie has been responding well, Emma now feels that they can safely put her under a little bit more pressure.

Emma says: "Kis can start to ride Georgie more like a 'normal' horse, encouraging her to keep her head low and be submissive. It would be wrong to assume that Georgie can do too much at this stage. Just one circuit of 'high-energy' trot is enough before we reward her with some 'low-energy' fun by way of a game of football."

"Change the rein, Kis, and try another trot circuit. Now use your legs a little to ask her to move forwards – rub her neck with your hand and praise her when she does. "Again, we'll go back to playing with the ball as this gives both horse and rider a chance to relax. I'm really pleased with how Georgie is progressing. She is accepting not just the rider but also pressure from the reins and legs, and she's still going forwards."
Jane says: "I'm amazed at the patience that is needed to re-train Georgie. "I've competed in show jumping and dressage before, but this type of technique is all completely new to me."

MORE CHALLENGES



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THE OWNER REMOUNTS



LEARNING TO TRUST
Making small steps

It's time for Jane to get back on her horse. Georgie is a bit grumpy when mounted, but she and Jane are soon circling at walk and enjoying work with the football. As they gain confidence in each other, they try a few strides of trot before moving into a larger sand school – a major breakthrough for Jane, who has been unable to trust her horse in simple situations such as this.

Emma says: "Keep a definite focus ahead of you as you walk and resist the temptation to 'micro-manage' Georgie by worrying about her head position. Just lift your energy and feel the intent to walk forwards. "Jane must realise that we expect very little from Georgie today. We'll be taking small steps and building up this relationship over weeks and even months. She has had so many negative experiences with Georgie that you need to rebuild trust in each other."
Jane says: "I feel slightly nervous, but the football is great as I'm enjoying having something to do instead of just waiting for Georgie to rear. She feels like a 'normal' youngster again and is playing with the bit rather than fighting against it. But Emma is right about this being a long process. We've lost a lot of trust in other which needs to be re-established."

NEXT STEPS

Georgie will be based with Emma for her training programme:

- Emma will repeat these exercises, gradually introducing the mare to more challenging situations and larger spaces. The football will remain Georgie's reassuring 'safety net'.
- Emma and Jane will handle Georgie regularly around the yard to break up her pattern of dominance and establish leadership without using aggression.
- Riding schoolmasters at Emma's yard will help Jane regain her confidence and build a more positive partnership with Georgie.

Tips for preventing rearing

- 1 Improve your balance and develop an independent seat. Rearing can occur when a rider uses the reins for balance and grips with the legs, leaving the horse nowhere to run.
- 2 Teach your horse to rein back as it helps to 'unstick' the hooves. Under stress, the horse can then choose to move backwards instead of standing up.
- 3 Don't overdo schooling or dressage – it can easily become boring or intense. Drop the contact occasionally and let the horse have some fun with other activities.

Safety notes
Horse recommends wearing an up-to-standard riding hat when working a horse on the ground. If your horse has a behavioural problem, have his back, teeth and tack checked as it may be caused by discomfort.