



# Get inside his mind

A new equitation science workshop demonstrates how, through understanding how horses learn, it's possible to transform the way you train your horse

If we all had a pound for every time we'd wished we could read our horses' minds, we'd be a very wealthy bunch. Thankfully though, with the help of a little scientific thinking, we've discovered that it is possible to understand how horses learn and to communicate with them effectively, and incredibly it doesn't take long to master. In fact at a recent EquineSkills workshop the Your Horse team saw just how quickly a horse's behaviour can be transformed if you simply know how.

"If you want to train horses, it's so important that you have an idea of how they learn," explained workshop leader, Gemma Pearson, Veterinary Liaison Officer for the International

Society for Equitation Science (ISES).

"Equitation Science is based on traditional principles, but uses science to determine what works, what doesn't work and, most importantly, why it works."

Gemma explained that when thinking about how horses learn it's best to start at the brain, which is very small in comparison to their skull size and has a small, underdeveloped area called the prefrontal cortex.

"This underdeveloped prefrontal cortex area means that horses are unable to problem solve, have no imagination, learn through trial and error, have excellent long-term memories but poor short-term



In the wild, horses' needs are basic - to be able to eat grass, run from predators and reproduce. Their brains have evolved to cope with this level of need and no more.

memories," explained Gemma

"These attributes, which are quite unlike those we have as humans, mean horses have evolved to live in the present as a flight animal. They're not able to reason or reflect and it's these stark differences between the way horses and humans think and learn that can often lead to confusion when training. Furthermore, when horses try to escape this confusion it can be quickly labelled as naughtiness. To help us combat this problem, people like Gemma at ISES strive to promote an evidence-based understanding of the welfare of horses during training in order to identify what training techniques simply don't work and those that do.

### Putting science into action

To demonstrate how this approach can be used to tackle problem behaviours, as well as in training horses, Gemma let us watch as she spent some time with two horses - Midnight and Drifter - brought along by their owner Laila Goodridge.

"Having been to an equitation science evening before, I really wanted to find out more about the basics of how a horse learns to give me a better idea of how to approach things with my own horses," Laila told us. "Drifter, my Welsh Section D, is quite green and has a real issue with his right ear, making him very hard to bridle up.

"Midnight is a five-year-old gelding who



For Midnight the new surroundings become too much

belongs to Hope Pasture Sanctuary in Leeds. He's never been properly trained and is wary of everything! I've tried various training methods but I'm interested to see if equitation science can help me with him and Drifter."

To understand how Drifter and Midnight behave and work with their handlers, Gemma watched Laila and her friend Helen lead them around the arena. Immediately the atmosphere in the arena affected Midnight and he became fidgety and reared when Helen tried to lead him forwards.

"The environment is overshadowing anything Helen is asking of Midnight because there are lots of people and it's a new place. His behaviour is his way of saying, 'it's very hard to keep your feet still when it's so scary in here,'" said Gemma, who then took over from Helen and put Midnight in a bridle for more control.

"At the moment what I'd like to ask Midnight is simply to back up. To do this I'm going to stand to the side of him and maintain a safe one-metre distance while gently tapping his foreleg with my whip to



In less than 10 minutes Midnight is transformed



With height on his side, Drifter can easily lift his head to avoid being bridled by Laila

ask him to focus on me and step back, and at the same time I'm going to apply a light, backward pressure on the reins.

"When he turns or tries to evade what I'm asking I want to make it uncomfortable for him, but as soon as he stands still, I'll release the pressure and give him a nice scratch," said Gemma.

Every time Midnight offered a response, even if only small, Gemma stopped tapping to offer him that essential pressure release. Quickly we saw Midnight begin to relax, lick and chew as his adrenaline levels went down - he was a different pony to the one that entered the arena 10 minutes earlier.

### Patience, practise and consistency

As Helen took back control of Midnight, Gemma moved on to Drifter and his troublesome right ear.

"I'm just going to touch his ear and as soon



Gemma begins by simply touching Drifter's ear until he stays still, then releasing

as he stands still I'll move my hand away," Gemma explained. After a few touches Drifter started to lower his head as he learned that keeping still releases the pressure of his ear being touched. Gemma added: "It's about building confidence one step at a time. As it didn't take long I'll try to put on his bridle." To make things simpler Gemma removed the noseband from the bridle - one less bit of leather for Drifter to have to deal with.

Gemma began by lifting only the reins up and over Drifter's nose and if he didn't respond she took the reins away again. Slowly she lifted the reins higher and higher until she could pass them up and over his left ear, then the right, and it wasn't long before she could do the same with the bridle.

"Drifter just snorted, which is good because that's usually a sign that the horse has been holding his breath, so it shows he's relaxing," explained Gemma as she handed Drifter back to Laila to have a go.

"He's a quick learner which is great and if Laila practices regularly I'm sure she'll find it's soon no longer a problem. It's important to practise when she doesn't necessarily need to get out and ride or go anywhere so she's not under any pressure. She should also keep giving breaks when working with horses - if you do bicep curls in the gym repeatedly you'll fatigue and the same is true of horses. Also, when a horse learns a new skill, they use a lot of energy in their brain, which quickly becomes fatigued, even if they're not doing much physical work, so breaks are vital."

This demo made it very clear that the equitation science approach can work on a variety of issues. In no time the owner of these horses could tackle issues she'd been struggling with for months - just think what she could do in the following weeks, months and years! It doesn't take a scientist to get it right but an understanding of the reasoning behind it will help you use it to best effect.



Gemma puts her scientific method to work



It's not long before Gemma can put on Drifter's bridle

### Find out more

The 'How horses learn' workshop was delivered by the team at XLEquine. For more information, visit [www.equineskills.co.uk](http://www.equineskills.co.uk)



### Gemma Pearson

BVMS MRCVS is the senior clinical scholar at the Royal (Dick) Vet Equine Hospital and vet

liaison officer for the International Society for Equitation Science (ISES).

To find out more about equitation science and ISES and its work, visit [www.equitationsscience.com](http://www.equitationsscience.com)