

**NEW
SERIES**

Learn to *let go*

The key to a great relationship with your horse is to have mutual trust

In our new series, Michael Peace helps riders become really effective with his Think Equus approach to riding

About Michael



Michael Peace uses his 'Think Equus' philosophy to help horses and riders to achieve their goals. He explains:

"Forget about dressage and looking tidy on your horse to start with. You can refine your aids later once the basics are in place."

To book your horse in for training or a home visit with Michael, call % 01865 842806 or visit his website www.michaelpeace.co.uk

Our models

Lucy King owns 18-year-old Embers and does a bit of everything with him. The trouble is, Embers is quite spooky and Lucy is a nervous rider – not always the best



combination! Michael says: "If a rider gets nervous they tend to grab and hold more, which escalates the horse's tension. In this case, the rider needs to loosen so that the horse does the same."





Top tip
 ● Use your leg aids firmly if you need to, but try to avoid nagging. Only use them when you need them.

Two-way trust

The key to a great relationship with your horse is mutual trust, and most problems arise when this isn't in place. If you're a nervous rider, it's hard to trust a horse and if you don't, the horse knows it and he won't trust you back. Behavioural issues, such as shying or spooking, then escalate, making the nervous rider even more nervous.

This all sounds doomy but I think it is important to recognise it, as once we know what's causing the problem we can set about fixing it.

I'm sure most of us can relate to feeling nervous at some time in our riding career. While I've never suffered with nerves, I can relate to the feelings of increased self-preservation which come with getting older. As a young rider, I was fearless and I'd put myself in dangerous situations without considering the consequences. Nowadays, with my own family to consider, I don't take the same risks. I always make the situation as safe as I can for everyone and I urge you to do the same. Before you continue with your training, consider the advice below. Be honest with your answers!

- If you feel your horse is dangerous, seek professional help.
- For good training methods to work, you have to believe you can overcome your issues. If you can't see that happening, or don't want to, then maybe you have the wrong horse.
- Be prepared to work hard and make lots of changes.



Michael rides Embers 'randomly' to get him listening. Raising the inside hand stops him falling in



Finding his feet

I like to allow horses to move naturally, without any restraint from the rider or tack. Once they start to open up and move more freely, I find that everything else begins to fall into place, too.

Our equine model here is a bit lazy and Lucy tends to ride him rather defensively, because she is worried he might do something scary. As a result, he looks a bit shuffly and stiff, and he pokes his nose out at times. I wanted to see Lucy motivate him, so I got on Embers to show her how.

The first thing I do with any horse I ride is give him the freedom to carry himself by allowing enough rein contact so he's not restricted at all. I keep my hands high and forward. My legs send the horse on into an active trot and I may even ask for more energy than I need so that we can afford to lose some through the turns.

Once the horse is going forward well, I stop using my legs, but the moment he starts to slow down, my legs send him forwards again. I ride with a purpose.

Next, I start to 'fool' the horse by riding a bit randomly (pictured above). For example, I might be heading across the diagonal from H-F but why go all the way to F? Why not make a right turn just after X and half circle to E then ride to M? What I mean is I don't always go the way that the horse is expecting to go – I try to keep him guessing. Doing this encourages him to listen to me much better – he'll spend less time spooking and more time concentrating. He'll also start to work much more actively, just as Embers did, and then his whole outline will improve.

I use an open inside rein to guide the horse around the turns so that the messages are clear for him.

Round the bend

Lucy said she feels that Embers falls into his turns.

When she can't get him to bend, she feels he is doing his own thing, which leaves her feeling out of control, so I showed her a little tip to prevent this from happening. Just before you make a turn, bend your elbow and raise the

inside rein high. This keeps the horse's inside shoulder where you want it and stops him falling in.

During the turns, keep a check on the energy. This is a classic time for the horse to slow down and it's easy for him to catch you off guard while you are concentrating on something else.

Top tip
 ● Older horses may think they know best, so be patient when teaching them something new.



A relaxed approach to riding



People often ask me if it's OK to get off their horse when he naps or spooks. There is an idea in the horse world that if you get off, the horse has won, which implies a battle was taking place. My advice is don't create a battle in the first place. If your horse won't go past something and it scares you, then dismount, lead him past whatever it is and get back on. Getting off is better than being thrown off, that's for sure! Saying that, I think it's important to

see this step as a bridge to getting your horse to go past things with you on his back in the future, rather than allowing getting off to become a habit. If you're quick

Michael says give your horse the freedom to carry himself



and don't make an issue out of it – ie get off, walk past, get back on, continue – then your horse will start to nap or spook less, as he won't see the point and won't gain anything from it.

Giving yourself permission to get off takes pressure off you, too. Just knowing it's OK to do this can help you relax so much more. Here are some relaxation top tips.

● **Move with the horse.** I'm sure we have all had an instructor who has told us to sit still, yet if you think about it, sitting still on a moving horse is like asking someone to stand still on a boat on the water – you lose balance! On horseback, you appear to sit still by moving with the horse and by letting go, you become freer and more relaxed.

● **When your horse spooks,** stay relaxed. If you're nervous, your first reaction is likely to be to grab the reins, and that's when spooks, naps, rears, etc start to get bigger and stronger. It's not easy, but next time your horse spooks, try to stay relaxed and go with the flow. You may find your horse doesn't look at it twice then.

It's not easy, but try to go with the flow when your horse spooks

Forget dressage for now – get your horse moving forwards first!



Go for it!

I told Lucy I wanted to see her 'yahoo' Embers a bit more. Forget calm and sedate, rise up out of the saddle to free up his back and off you go! This is all part of trust-building, and is a good way to motivate a lazy horse. I wanted Lucy to feel she could go into any 'gear' whenever she wanted.

Lucy said riding faster with longer reins made her feel weird, and this is because I'd taken her out of her comfort zone. Lucy wanted everything to be quiet and correct, and was scared to rock the boat in case Embers reacted. Afterwards, Lucy told me she found it liberating and confidence building.

I'm not suggesting we all get on our horses and hooley around the arena, but you can't fine tune things until the horse is going forwards.

Michael's top riding tips

- Keep your hands forward and up and use your leg to go
- Make random movements around the school opening the inside rein to turn
- Raise your inside rein during the turns if your horse falls in.

Top tip

- Reward your horse for effort. This boosts his confidence and next time, he'll want to do it even more.



Self-carriage

The exercises I have described will teach your horse to carry himself rather than relying on the rein for support. Give him the freedom of the reins and he'll start to take responsibility for himself and work things out. Turns, circles and shapes ridden in a forward-going trot engage the hindlegs, which encourage the top line to stretch and improve the outline. Embers demonstrated this beautifully (below).

Embers starts to really work through with Michael's Think Equus approach



More information

To give your young horse the best start in life or if you have a problem horse who needs help ☎ 01865 842806 or www.michaelpeace.co.uk

To buy Michael Peace's new Semi-Flex saddle and have it fitted by expert saddler, Barry Swain, while Michael Peace rides and assesses your horse, call ☎ 01865 842806.