

PART TWO In this feature... > Assessing your horse's personality

> Gaining his trust > Building his confidence at liberty

Our trainer

Farah DeJohnette is an American trainer who has developed her own brand of horsemanship that includes liberty work, in-hand training with a headcollar or bitless bridle and under saddle. Her experience spans many disciplines and while she has trained to a high level in dressage, she works with all types of horse – regardless of discipline – to help them be light and responsive. For more information, visit fdhorsemanship.com

Our model

Lena's Little Acre (Chuckles) is a 14-year-old Quarter Horse imported from the USA. She is trained as a Western cow horse but doubles as a schoolmaster for students to learn how to ride Western. She is a sensitive mare and would prefer to have one consistent rider rather than be used in a busy riding school. She is handled by yard manager Jess Jupp.

As told to Céleste Wilkins. Photos: David Miller

True colours

In the second part of our series, Farah DeJohnette shows how to ascertain the true character of your horse and gain a sensitive horse's trust through liberty work

Do you know the true character of your horse? American horse trainer Farah DeJohnette says: "Until you take the tack off your horse and put him in an area where he can choose to interact with you – or not – you don't really know him. Once you do this, you can actually build a better relationship and in turn a better training programme that suits your horse's character. It's very important to me as a trainer to see the horse at liberty."

Farah continues...

Watch and learn

Chuckles is more sensitive in comparison to last month's horse, Ebo. When I put Chuckles at liberty, she wandered off, choosing to do her own thing and when she was given free choice to interact with me, she chose to put a fair distance between us. I use a few minutes at first to observe her – is she curious or is she nervous? Chuckles sits somewhere in the middle. She isn't naturally coming and inspecting me, but she isn't fearful either. She's fairly calm and she's keeping an eye on me – albeit from afar.

In the first few minutes, I like to let horses roam and I would like Chuckles to seek me out, rather than me going to her. I'm looking to see if

she will show a little more interest in me. I wander around, putting myself in a position where I am available to her. My approach is very much based on how horses 'talk' to each other. If she chooses to come to me, then I'm happy for that, but I don't force her. Horses are the same way – they can't confine each other into a round pen or with a rope headcollar – all they can do is use their body language to communicate 'May I approach?' or 'Go over there' or 'That's my hay pile'. I won't put tack on a horse until I have built a rapport with them in this way – and it carries through into our in-hand and mounted sessions, too.

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Farah DeJohnette

Two-way street

I'm interested in a two-way dialogue with Chuckles, which means that when I say something, whether it is with my voice or my body, I wait for her to respond. I don't worry if she isn't doing what I want, I can always ask again. That's what makes it feel like a herd dynamic for the horse, they have the option to respond or not. I'm letting her choose my leadership and this is a very dynamic way of working with her, rather than a dominant, forced leadership. It tends to work very well with all types of horses, especially those who are difficult and challenging.

Farah and Jess assess Chuckles





Chuckles begins to make eye contact

Let her settle

So Chuckles has settled a bit and I'm waiting to see where she puts herself in this big arena. I start to walk around and watch her. She's naturally hard to catch in the field at home and a bit difficult to approach, so I work with that. When she's in the open she's likely to leave, so when I approach her, I listen and find out her comfort zone. I only approach her head on because if she is looking at me, I'm more likely to capture her attention. At one point she comes quite close to me and looks at me with her right eye so I stop and stand still. I don't move when she makes an approach to me, trying to gain her trust. She's interested, but unsure. She comes in cautiously but then at the last moment, loses confidence. This tells me a lot about her.

She's emotional and doesn't trust people, so I have to build up a rapport with her, and listen to her when she says 'no', instead of pushing her. This is what I like to call an approach-retreat exercise. I leave her when she feels uncomfortable, taking the pressure off. I have no intention of catching her, it's about proximity. I'm respecting her personal space because by backing off she's telling me, 'I don't like people in my personal space'. It's not a problem – right now I'm working completely on her terms.

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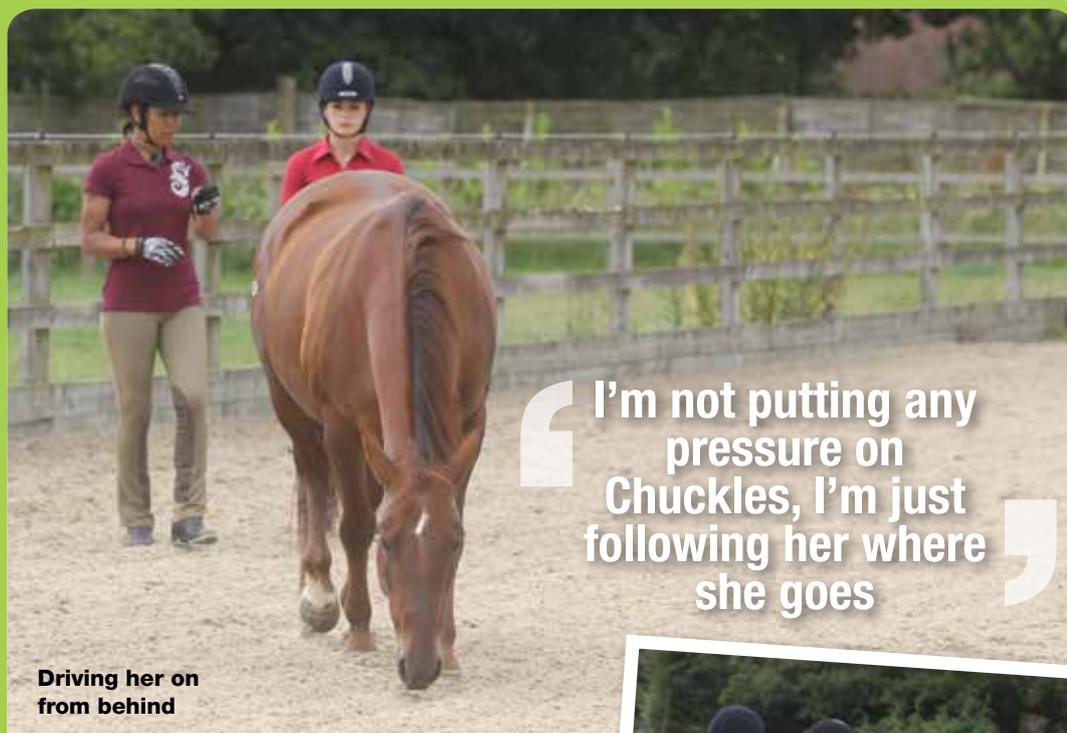


Gaining her confidence

Top tips

for working with nervous horses

- ▶ Taking your horse's tack off and letting him loose in an enclosed space allows you to observe him at liberty and see his true character.
- ▶ If he's reluctant to approach you, let him settle. Then you can slowly approach him and figure out his comfort zone. Gain his trust by respecting his personal space.
- ▶ Once he's a bit more confident, you can start to influence him by moving him quietly using your body language and driving energy.
- ▶ Do liberty exercises daily to gain your nervous horse's trust.



Driving her on from behind

‘I’m not putting any pressure on Chuckles, I’m just following her where she goes’

Gain her confidence

Once Chuckles gets a bit more confident, I can start to follow her. I'm not herding her and the difference is in the energy. I'm not putting any pressure on Chuckles, I'm just following her where she goes. She can feel the difference in my energy, and once she starts to trust me and respond to me, I can start to push her on a bit. Horses do this a lot with each other, they move each other around – not aggressively, but just at the walk. I stand safely to the side and behind her and ask her to move quietly – I was giving her a lot of space initially to let her know I respected her, but now I can shift into a leadership role.



Chuckles starts to interact

After a while of walking in big arcs, she comes into me. I don't make a fuss of her or reach out and pat her, I just let her investigate. She's finally introducing herself to me after about 30 minutes or so of playing with these various liberty exercises. I go away, leaving Chuckles to think, 'Where has she gone? Why didn't she catch me and put a headcollar on?'. It piques her curiosity because she's used to being caught. Now I have gained her attention with lots of eye contact. She's finally starting to engage. I leave it there because I have accomplished so much in the space of about 45 minutes. She's gone from being uncommunicative to seeking me out.



Develop a game plan

I would do these exercises daily to strengthen our relationship. I have many tools I can use to build a rapport with Chuckles, like the approach and retreat technique. I'll stop when she gives me focus to reward her, balancing between following her and asking her to walk on, then she'll gradually allow me to come in and get closer to her. When I look at Chuckles' eye it belies constant internal anxiety. Her body language may seem calm, but she's still quite unsure and even when she starts to trust me, she's still quite worried. She's sensitive and I respect that, working daily to build a firm foundation to carry on into the rest of our work.

Next month

Farah works with an event horse.

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