

This month, HW's Pony Princess Michelle O'Neill has some terrific tips on helping your horse reach his or her full training potential. Plus Michelle has some practical, easy to follow advice to help our beloved 'older ponies' feel fit, young and active for as long as possible.

building a great bond

Dear Michelle,

My Name is Ashlee and I really want to turn our family horse (that I only see in the school holidays) into a trusty, safe horse that I might be able to do a little competing on. The problem is... I don't get a lot of time with her and was wondering if you can help me make some improvements in a short period of time.

Chilli is a thoroughbred with a gentle heart and would never hurt me. But my cousin has let her get away with whatever she wants, so I have had to go through a lot of re-training so she will listen and respond to my commands. I know she can jump but haven't done it a lot. I don't want to do dressage – just mainly a bit of jumping and games.

Ashlee

Hi Ashlee

It sounds like you have a great challenge ahead of you; but with a little planning and careful training you can achieve some really positive results with Chilli!

Every moment counts

As with any horse that we train, we have to make the absolute most of every minute we spend with them. My good friend Dena Kirkpatrick (a world class barrel racer based in the US) always says "Training begins in the barn". This means we can train our horses even when we are doing simple things like catching and brushing them.

Consistency is the key

You can make the most of the time you have with Chilli by being consistent with what you ask her to do and how you ask her to do it. Horses learn when we ask them for the same thing, the same way, over and over again. As an example for you, if Chilli was to try to push you over when you catch her, then you would have to correct her every time and let her know that you need your personal space. The one time you don't correct her, is enough to let her think that she is the boss and will put you back in your training program.

Day after day

When training horses you will always get more out of them if you can work with them for several days in a row than if you work with them several days apart. If you are visiting Chilli and you can put a few days one after the other working with her, that will work better than putting in a single day every now and then. She will be able to remember what you teach her because she will have had several lessons together.

Make the end count

One last training tip for you is to always finish a training session on a good note. When Chilli has done something really well and you are both happy and in a good mood, that is a fantastic

time to give her a big pat, let her know what a good girl she has been and end the session for the day.

No matter what you want to do with Chilli, if you follow those simple steps your time with her will always be worthwhile and you will build a great bond. Good luck!

rule out health reasons

Dear Michelle,

My name is Ali and I have a 23 year old Australian Pony called Chloe. I was just wondering how I could look after her better so she lives for many more years. Thank you!!

Hi Ali

I am thrilled to hear that you have an older pony that you care about so much! Did you know that Chloe's age in horse years is the same as a 69 year old person! Not bad eh?

Older ponies are lovely to have around and they can be wonderful teachers and friends! But when caring for our older friends, there are a few things that are really important to remember.

Nutrition

Good quality pasture and hay is important to include in any horse's diet – as regular roughage intake helps maintain gut health, good teeth and a happy, occupied horse. But as horses and ponies get older they can experience a 20% loss in their ability to digest food, so we have to be careful what we feed them. They need a good quality diet, so a horse feed specific for older horses is very important. A great example of a quality feed for older ponies is Mitavite Gumnuts. It is made especially for older ponies and our 'equine retirees' (!) have always kept fit and healthy on Gumnuts.



Mitavite Gumnuts, made especially for older horses and ponies, come in pellet form and can be soaked in water to soften them for ease of eating.



Photo by Jenny Solomon

The other nice thing about a product like Gumnuts is that they are in a pellet form. That means if they are too hard for Chloe, you can wet them before you feed her, so they will be nice and soft for her to eat.

Teeth

Teeth are very important. Just like older people, older ponies' teeth can wear and sometimes fall out which makes chewing their feed more difficult. Find a good qualified dentist and get him to check out Chloe's teeth regularly. Horse's teeth continue to grow their whole life, so they need regular check-ups to make sure chewing is easy.

Arthritis

Another problem that faces ponies as they age is arthritis. Just like us, ponies get sore and as they more aged, these sore spots can sometimes get a little worse. To reduce the effects of arthritis you can feed joint supplements or rug ponies when it gets cold. But

the most important thing is to make sure they continue to enjoy gentle exercise. They need to move around and stay 'paddock fit'. So if you can, make sure Chloe has a gentle paddock mate who will encourage her to exercise by walking around her paddock in between your rides on her.

Worming

As ponies age they pick up worms more easily (just as young horses do!). Be sure to keep Chloe's worming schedule up to date and rotate her drenches. If you need some advice on this issue, talk to your local vet about a good worming schedule for Chloe. Keeping in regular touch with your vet is also a great way to help your vet keep an eye on Chloe's general health as she ages.

If you take good care of Chloe she will give you many more years of enjoyment. As a bit of trivia the oldest horse ever to have lived was "Old Billy" who lived 62 years! Here's hoping Chloe lives that long! Good luck!



This is my retired barrel racing gelding Jake (on the left). He is now 17 years old. One of the ways we keep him feeling young is to make sure he gets regular exercise by having younger horses paddocked with him. He is seen here with 4 year old Sam (in the middle) and 2 year old Biscuits (on the right). This way Jake walks often and keeps fit.



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