

IH Trainer Sarah Todd, Nr Bath, Somerset
Covering Somerset, South Gloucestershire and West Wiltshire

If you could change one thing in the world of horses, what would it be, and why?

I think it would be that people should keep learning, from all sorts of sources. It's one of the things that attracted me to IH, that it is a hugely supportive 'family' with a willingness to look at what others are doing and to evaluate and select useful information from good sources. The webinar series is a great example: expert vets, bit fitters and more at our fingertips. People in the horse world need to learn and work together/build connections more for the good of the horse.

How long have you been involved with horses? And how did you get involved with them?

I'm not sure what first attracted me to horses, but I do know that I was around five and that it took me three years to persuade my Mum to let me ride (she was terrified of horses). I spent loads of pocket money on horsey books - including the one on Sefton "The Horse for Any Year" which I read cover to cover apart from the political chapter - Sindy horses etc, etc. My eighth birthday present was a riding lesson at a local riding school in Bahrain, where we were living. That was nearly 40 years ago now! I have been lucky enough to have ridden many different types of horse in many different places: heavy horses in Cumbria, classically trained Portuguese Lusitano stallions in Buckinghamshire, Icelandic horses in Iceland, Arab horses in the Emirates, horses from a stable that worked with the film industry, to mention a few. It's given me a very broad background.

Why did you decide to qualify as a Recommended Trainer?

From the time I first became involved with IH, back in about 2002, I was in awe of these RAs (as they were then), but never thought I would be anywhere near becoming one, or indeed working with horses at all, although I had long harboured a desire to 'do something' with horses. Then in around 2012, about a year before I was due to leave the Royal Air Force after 16 years of service, I was starting to look at what I might do next. I considered Project Management and was lucky enough to be able to speak to someone in the industry. He asked me pertinent questions regarding my transferable skills and I struggled to string two words together – one of which was usually 'ummm'. Somehow the conversation turned to horses and I was off. Half an hour later the realisation hit that perhaps I was looking in the wrong direction and I should take a serious look at 'doing something' with horses. So, I started the journey to becoming an IHRT, doing some of it as part of my resettlement along with a Level 5 BTEC Professional Diploma in Equine Behaviour and Welfare. It took me about 7 or 8 years from that first 'maybe I ought to do something with horses' to actually becoming an IHRT. Whilst I was researching my Psychology Project, I was able to draw on one of my lovely husband's connections to contact University Centre Sparsholt regarding the possibility of working with them for some data collection. One thing led to another, and I completed an MSc in Equine Behaviour, Performance and Training through Sparsholt, with some great opportunities to make industry connections.... which has led to a PhD looking at

human-donkey relationships, with a particular focus on human attitude towards donkeys. I am in my first year (part-time). I love learning about equids and the chance to help people and their horses is amazing, as well as the opportunity to be part of a network of people with the same goal of non-violent training. Even when I was putting together my case studies, on more than one occasion I thought 'I love my job'. The satisfaction and joy of seeing owners connect with their horses, achieve something they did not think was possible, or seeing a horse understand something new, is a fabulous reward. I get an extra boost when people subsequently recommend me to friends and colleagues, helping to spread non-violent, sound techniques and ideas.

What are the common challenges you face in your work as an RT?

The most interesting challenge is often to try and work out what's going on behind the behaviour: could there be pain, or have been pain and now a learnt behaviour? Some sort of nutritional issue? There are so many possibilities. Next, it's working with the owners. Many of them are amazing and truly dedicated, but I have had to learn to look at the horse to tell me what they 'think', rather than relying solely on the owner's interpretation of what's going on. The most common work I have been called to do is loading issues and there are so many things to think about and break down on that score. It can take time to work through, even once the horse is walking on to the trailer or lorry. The most common comment I seem to make is 'release'! Making sure that the release of the ask is quick enough for the horse to make the connection between the ask and their response. The most random challenge I have ever had was desensitising a horse to a massive grass 'hula skirt' (rug with loads of dangling raffia-style bits) for a fancy dress competition!

What three things should everyone practice with their horses?

Observation – watch their horses for the most subtle responses to help refine their practice, watch them for their behaviour to pick up on changes which might indicate possible problems.

Leading – get the leading right and so much else will follow. Indeed, groundwork in general is useful for all sorts of reasons, introducing a horse to new movements, strengthening them for carrying a rider, variety and mental stimulation, connecting with their owner and much more.

Developing the ability of the horse to stop, stand still and relax in many different situations can be so useful.

What would your advice be to someone hoping to become a Recommended Trainer?

Go for it! You'd be surprised what you can achieve and if you never give it a go, you will never know how far you might have gone. The IHRT family is so friendly and you will be very welcome. We all have different skills and interests; these contribute to our collective knowledge and we all support each other, so don't think that you need to fit a certain mould. I did Your Horse Live for the first time this year and the teamwork was outstanding; it was amazing to be part of it. The other pieces of advice I would give would be observe horse behaviour as much as possible and handle as many different horses as possible to build your repertoire.

What is a typical day for you?

There isn't a hugely typical day. I can be preparing to go out to clients, working with a loader (for which I generally allow a whole day so that no one feels under pressure and we can take things slowly), working on my PhD or driving an hour and a half to work at Sparsholt. I liked the place so much I got a part-time job there – another thing I owe to my journey to becoming an IHRT – I support students on equine, sport and public services courses.

What's important to you when you see an owner and their horse for the first time?

Early on, some of this before I even go out for a visit, I try and gain as much background information as possible such as history and management regime. It's also important to establish a rapport with the owner, again this starts in advance whether via phone, email or social media message. When I actually see horse and owner, I try to spend time observing the horse to pick up even more information and idea of what is happening. This includes observing the owner interaction with the horse to see what is going on there.

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