

# HELP ME RELEASE HIS POTENTIAL

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training sessions



## The trainer



> **Name** Andrew Gould

> **Experience** At just 27, Andrew competes internationally at Grand Prix level and has won three National titles. He's competed on five consecutive Young Rider European Championship teams, been part of the World Class Potential Squad for the last three years, and trains Katie Price.

## The rider and horse



> **Name** Nicola Snowdon

> **Experience** Nicola has owned nine-year-old Dutch Warmblood Story since he was two and has brought him on herself, with the help of friends. Outside the school Story is forward going, but he tends to be stiff and tense in the arena, particularly at shows. Nicola feels Story's tension is preventing them from progressing and stopping them from getting good, consistent scores.

## Before they start

Andrew asks Nicola what her aims and ambitions are. "As a youngster, I felt Story was ahead of his game, but although his jumping has continued to progress, I feel our dressage has hit a bit of a wall," she says.

"We're currently competing unaffiliated at Prelim level and have recently entered our first Novice dressage test. Some days we do really well, but when Story is not in a co-operative mood, our marks suffer. I feel if I could get him to loosen up and stop him from being so tense, this would really help our consistency."

# 1 THE WARM UP

To begin, Andrew asks Nicola to warm up as she normally would at home so he can assess their way of going and pinpoint any problems. "Your warm-up routine tells a big story," says Andrew.

Nicola rides a few circles in walk and then asks for trot. At first, Story resists Nicola's aids, but then tries to break into canter. Once Nicola has Story trotting she rides a few more circles.

As Story makes his way around the school, he has his head in the air looking at his new surroundings. "You give him too much freedom," Andrew says. "He can run off, or back off, whenever he feels like it – you don't actually tell him what you want him to do. He's got you exactly where he wants you."

As Andrew's speaking, Story shies at the viewing hut at the



Nicola's loose reins mean she's unable to keep Story's attention

side of the school. "That's the perfect example. You think you're telling him not to look, but actually you're just trying to get him past it – there's a big difference between trying to get past something and telling him

there's no other option.

"The minute my bum hits the saddle, I say to my horse 'right, I'm in control' and that means when I'm walking around I'm pushing him a bit sideways, I'm making him supple, making him

flex – I'm communicating with him so he's 100% focused on me. That way, when I go to a show, he's not looking around, he's looking to me to tell him what to do.

"At the moment Story is looking around, waiting for you to tell him what to do, but you're giving him mixed signals. Although you're asking him not to look at anything, you're riding on a very long rein that suggests to him he's free to do as he pleases. And as soon as you pick up the reins for trot, Story says 'I don't think so'. He spits the bit out and resists your attempts to take up the contact. He continues to resist against your hands until you let go, then he says 'thank you very much' – he's won.

"Basically, Story has to learn that when you pick up the reins, you're in charge," says Andrew. "It shouldn't take you 15 minutes to get him to work in an outline, he should do it straight away for you. If you choose to let him have his neck for the first 10 minutes, that's a different matter."

Story resists Nicola's aids for trot

### Top tip

Hollowing the back and throwing the head up is a common fault in upward transitions – make your aids positive and reward him with your inside hand when he gets it right



## 2 TAKING UP THE CONTACT

Andrew tells Nicola to pick up the contact. "Now as you ride round the school, play with the reins to keep a conversation going. Really get him to focus on you. That's it, your reins can be even shorter, though. He must focus on you."

Confused, Nicola says: "But I thought I was doing the right thing by riding him long and low."

"I curse the day the phrase long and low

was coined," Andrew replies. "By all means ride him low, but keep your contact. If you throw your reins away and ride him low, all you're going to do is get him really on the forehead and strung out – you'll have disengaged him as far as he can possibly go.

"After you've done that for 10 minutes there's no way you're getting him back. By keeping your contact down the rein as

you ride him low, you'll keep him in balance then he won't mind when you ask him to come up higher.

"Now your reins are a better length, but you're riding with the tips of your fingers," says Andrew. "Close your hands around the reins and take a proper hold. You can have soft, gentle hands, and still have a good hold of the reins."

### HOW TO

## GET A PRIVATE LESSON

› Write to the address on page 15 or email [yourhorse@bauermedia.co.uk](mailto:yourhorse@bauermedia.co.uk) with details of you and your horse, your level of experience, location, and whether you'd prefer a dressage or jumping lesson

Andrew tells Nicola to shorten her reins



Story eventually listens to Nicola

## 3 SIDEWAYS IS THE WAY FORWARD

Story suffers with stiffness and tension, particularly in the show ring. This makes it impossible for Nicola to get him to stretch down when walking on a free rein and means they struggle to get consistent marks.

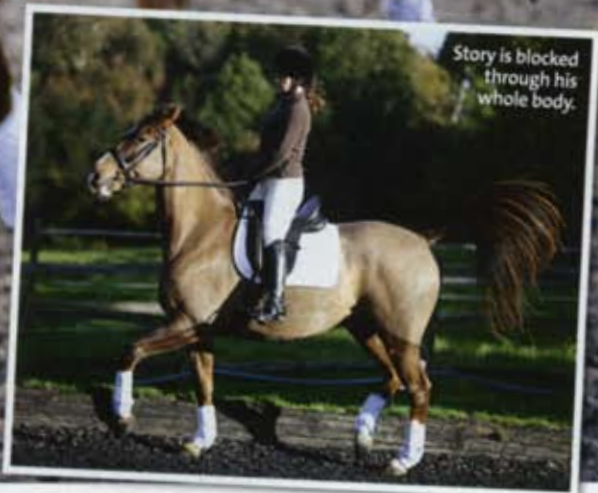
"Tension can be one of two things," says Andrew. "A horse can be tense because he gets mentally uptight. When he comes into the arena, he basically gets stage fright, grinds his teeth and goes rigid through his body. Alternatively, you can have blockage. This is a basic training issue. I think with Story it's a physical block rather than a mental one."

"Story's paces are good and, when you're riding a dressage test, the idea is to maintain the purity of these paces, and then improve them under saddle. Many riders, however, lose the purity of the paces because their horse doesn't go properly through and on the bit. The rider's driving aids are insufficient to get the horse to use his body properly and the horse develops a block somewhere – the neck, the back, the mouth, wherever – and that takes away the freedom of the pace. The horse becomes restricted through the rider's aids, rather than enhanced by them. That's why when you use your leg, you're getting a negative reaction. Rather than him moving forward, he shoves everything back in your face, so the more you ride forward, the worse it actually gets. It's not that he's lazy or bone idle – we know that because outside the arena he's got plenty of energy, but he's got a barrier up that you need to break down."

"We need to do lots of work to get him supple and using his whole body. Let's start with a bit of leg-yield. Bring him across the diagonal at F and use your left leg behind the girth to push him over towards the track."

Story resists Nicola's aids to step across. "He's just testing you now – push him through it. You've got to let him know you're not going to accept that behaviour from him. He wants you to think that you're doing something wrong, but you're not asking much of him at all." Story shakes his head and backs up as if he might rear. "When he threatens you like that, push him forwards."

After a few more attempts, Story begins to accept that Nicola isn't going to take no for an answer, and begins to move off her leg.



## 4 ASKING FOR BEND

"Let's do some work on a circle now," says Andrew. "This is the perfect place for you to practise riding some transitions."

"Pick up a 20m circle in trot at E. Stay rising and concentrate on your rhythm – ignore his head for the moment." Story's shaking his head and sticking his nose in the air to evade Nicola's contact.

"Use more inside bend – more, more – that's it. Now balance yourself and, when you're ready, ask for canter. Sit back and go. Well done. That was a nice transition. Your upper body's moving too much, though. Try not to rock. Now keep the bend, tight in around me."

At first, Story resists Nicola's attempts to get him to bend round her leg, but soon he begins to make a real effort to bring his inside leg underneath his body and use his

hip. "You have to remember this is going to be quite hard work for him, he's not got the right muscles," Andrew reminds Nicola. "He's spent too long using the wrong muscles, and the only way to rectify this is to make sure you have him working correctly from now on. You're going to have to be firm with him until it comes more naturally."

"Now I want you to bring Story back to trot, but without using your hands," says Andrew. "With a horse like this, you need to ride with your seat, you don't want to give him any reason not to go forwards into the contact. Push down into your stirrups and think 'slow'. Excellent. Notice he's no longer looking round, he's fully concentrating on you."

Story is reluctant to use his body properly round the circle



### Top tip

Travers is great for getting a horse to take notice of your leg. Travers to shoulder-in to travers will get him listening and bending. See issue 311 for schooling cards on these exercises.

After a few laps, Story looks like a different horse



## 5 FORGING FORWARDS OFF THE LEG

"Until you get him in front of your leg and in a contact, you're going to continue to struggle, so let's do some more intensive transition work with him to get him moving off your leg effectively," Andrew tells Nicola.

She rides several walk to trot transitions. "He's not got the right muscles to hold himself properly through the transitions," says Andrew. "I guarantee, if you start to push him and ride like you mean it from the moment you sit in the saddle, within a month you'll have him going forward from your leg in a consistent outline. You just need to be a little bit braver and pick up the contact as soon as you get on."

Andrew asks Nicola to ride some more walk to trot transitions. "Don't let the contact slip, close your fingers and keep a firm hold of your reins. Good, now



Story begins to engage from behind

he's trotting with purpose and is looking for the stride himself.

"Change the rein across the diagonal, push him over – good – he's listening to you now and moving forward off your leg.

Make your reins a little shorter and ask for walk. Remember to use your seat, not your hands, and push down into your stirrups. Good, but you let him out a little bit too much and all the impulsion

you'd built up went out the front door. Pick up the contact again and trot him on. Excellent. See how he wants to go deeper now? Let him. And now keep him round as you come back to walk. Good."

## 6 TIME TO STRETCH

Getting Story to stretch is something Nicola usually struggles with, so Andrew wants to see if the work they've done will help encourage him to reach down a little.

Nicola lowers her hands to the

withers and lets Story draw the reins through her fingers. "Good," says Andrew. "This is the trot you should have at the start. Now you need to work on getting him to come into the school like that."



As Nicola lowers her hands, Story begins to take the reins down



Andrew and Story make friends

## The verdict

### THE TRAINER



Nicola's biggest downfall is the lack of structure in her schooling routine. She comes into the arena with no real plan and gives Story half-hearted instructions.

Story has good, quality paces but there are a few things that Nicola needs to work on with him. She needs to get used to riding him forwards into a firm contact, without any blockages. Riding lots of circles will help Story use his hips and release the tension through his ribcage, and riding lots of transitions will help improve Nicola's contact as well as Story's balance.

If Nicola manages to introduce discipline into her schooling, I'm sure she'll get on very well.

### THE RIDER



I've felt that Story was tense and resistant for a long time, but didn't know why or what to do about it. It was really useful to get a professional opinion. Now Andrew has told me that Story is physically blocked, I feel that I'll be able to do something about it.

He's given me lots of advice and useful exercises to help overcome this problem and I can't wait to get started. I'll try really hard to be more disciplined and promise to push both of us harder from now on.

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