

GARY WITHEFORD

The horse educator

To call Gary Witherford a horse whisperer would be incorrect. He may be fluent in the silent language of the horse, but the world for which he is preparing his young equine students is anything but quiet. The shouts and cheerful banter of his team resound across the once peaceful farm, just like any racing yard or racecourse stable. For 27 yearlings this is not just pre-school, this is finishing school, too.

WORDS AND PHOTOS: LISSA OLIVER

The old term of 'breaking in' really no longer applies, as Witherford 'starts' these young horses by actually giving them the best possible

start in life. It may only take three days, but they leave him fully equipped for their date with destiny, the life for which they were bred.

We are here at the private farm of top Irish trainer John Oxx, deep within the Curragh of Kildare, where these 27 elite yearlings have been enjoying a peaceful and sheltered life since transferring from the studs of their birth. These are no ordinary yearlings – they are the blue bloods of His Highness the Aga Khan. Many have never been fully handled, save for routine health checks. They were never destined for the sales ring and have been left alone to mature naturally in the equally secluded surroundings of their home paddocks. Some have been bought in from the sales, still with hip numbers attached, and if anything they're the harder work for Witherford. He prefers to start a completely fresh horse rather than one that has been handled, and possibly mishandled in the process, and which may have learnt bad habits.

There is a reason why Witherford and his team have been brought over to Kildare for a week from his farm in the south of England: few others can do what he does. It could be argued that traditional breaking methods are not stressful to yearlings either, as they gradually learn to be handled, backed, and ridden over a



Gary Witherford (second left) and his team

period of six weeks or so. But Witherford gets that job done within three days, with his yearlings backed and ridden in ten minutes or less. If there is any stress involved – and certainly none is visible in these yearlings – then three days of it has got to be more beneficial to the horses than six weeks of it.

Today we are watching a group of yearling fillies as they complete their education and

graduate for a life in the string at Currabeg, the famous yard once home to Sea the Stars and now to his equally well-regarded younger brother Born to Sea, both of whom went through Witherford's unique tuition. This morning the fillies are cantering and going through the starting stalls, as the loud banter is drowned out by the even louder cracks of heavily padded air-cushioned racing whips. The





Craig Witheford demonstrates standing on the saddle – a method used for starting stall training

noise might be deafening, but the whips themselves are harmless, as Witheford demonstrates. We conduct our interview, strictly for the purposes of research, you understand, while he repeatedly strikes me with the regulation whip. The deal is, when it hurts, I shout “STOP!” In actual fact, it’s Witheford who tires first, boredom more painful than the padded whips.

“It’s a steering wheel,” he explains, “it encourages them to go on and they respond to the pressure.” A horse will usually move away from pressure and the whip is an important aid in keeping them straight. In a race, the jockey will be using it to keep straight and safe; today the riders are simply teaching the fillies that there’s nothing to be afraid of. Whips are waved by their heads, struck across their quarters,

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tapped down their shoulders, all the while producing alarming ‘thwacks’ as padded leather slaps against padded leather. The fillies go about their work without flicking an ear. One, instantly dubbed ‘Miss Bondage,’ actually seems to be enjoying it and is visibly asking for more. “She’s loving it!” laughs rider Patrick Hills, an apprentice jockey spending time with Witheford to improve his skills. Witheford is a teacher, and not only of horses, but it’s the young horses themselves who will teach Hills the most.

‘Miss Bondage’ illustrates the individual characteristics that will all go into making these either champion, or failed, racehorses. Beautifully bred, she gives Hills a nice feel, stamping herself as a racehorse of promise. He should know – his father is top jockey Richard, his grandfather top trainer, now retired, Barry. Generations of experience course through his blood. The filly seems to know, too. She barges her way through her work mates as though they’re totally unimportant. ‘Miss Bondage’ has the right of way at all times.

In marked contrast is a beautiful little Invincible Spirit filly, whose rider Katie Edwards also feels has potential. Even at this early stage the strength of their ‘engines’ is apparent. No wonder trainers know when they have a good one, from day one. But unlike ‘Miss Bondage,’ this filly has yet to recognise her own merit. She demurely steps aside to let others pass her, a reminder that horseracing can never be an exact science. Pedigree, conformation, and talent are not the only ingredients and humans have control of only one of those essential parts.

The fillies are cantering together around



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schooling ring, three clockwise, three anti-clockwise, learning to meet other horses head on. It might not be something they'll ever encounter again, but Witheford likes to prepare for every eventuality. "A horse could fall in a race or one get loose on the gallops," he points out, "and if they do meet a horse head-on, it won't worry them." It definitely isn't worrying them this morning, particularly not our little friend 'Miss Bondage' who deals with head-on encounters as bullishly as any other type of encounter.

Even more bizarre is the sight of Witheford's son Craig standing upright on his filly. And I don't mean standing upright in the stirrups. It's a party piece often demonstrated by Zac Baker, too – the 'rider' actually standing in the saddle, in this case at a walk. It isn't to train the fillies for yet another possible eventuality: a Frankie Dettori flying dismount! This is a very real piece of training, as Witheford explains.

"We forget that horses are only ever used to dealing with us from up here," he raises a hand to a horse's head height. "Quite often, if a horse plays up in the starting stalls, the stalls handlers will climb up onto the frame to try to settle it. That can be very unnerving for the horse, as well as the horses alongside. They've never seen anyone standing up above them before." He grins. "These have."

Maybe it's not just a circus trick, but it still looks remarkable, particularly when you bear in mind these fillies hadn't even had a saddle on until yesterday morning. As they complete their work they are completing just 20 minutes of riding – ever. With a man stood on their back while weaving through work mates.

How on earth did they reach this stage of being so perfectly schooled? The process begins in a round pen, an indoor lunge ring in this instance, when Witheford meets his pupil for the first time. Wearing only a head collar, never having known more than that, the yearling is asked to canter round the ring. Witheford watches and waits for signs of submission. Very quickly the yearling asks to come in and accept him as a friend and, crucially, herd leader. Though it sounds too simple to be true, from that moment on the yearling trusts Witheford to do whatever he wishes. He demonstrates this by slipping on a bridle and long rein and away the yearling goes again, this time asked to canter round until it can demonstrate an understanding of basic commands. It turns to the left, turns to the right, comes to a stop and takes three steps back. It then accepts a saddle and is allowed to canter again, to get used to the feel of the saddle and the flapping of the stirrups.

To those watching, it seems as though the yearling has been doing this all its life. Then a rider is put up and away they go again. Sometimes there's a squeal and a buck, mainly through excitement. This is all new, all fun, one big adventure. More often than not the yearling simply behaves like an old pro, a riding school hack with years of experience. And the clock



Patrick Hills (left) on a Shirocco filly going through stalls training while other yearling fillies are exercised (below) in the John Oxx canter ring



hasn't gone a quarter way round the hour yet. The quickest Witheford has ever started a horse is seven minutes. The longest it has taken him is 14 minutes. When the horse is happy, settled, and obeying basic commands from its rider, it's started. That's pre-school over. The next stage might be regarded as primary school, going outside to walk, trot, and canter. As we are witnessing today, the final assignment is finishing school and graduation.

The perfectly educated young fillies leave the schooling ring and spend a few minutes walking through the starting stalls. The most noticeable thing is that they are all confident, happy and enjoying themselves. I said they completed their 'work,' but for them it was just playtime, fun and stimulating. "It's all about keeping their brains working," Witheford

explains. "It's easy to see when they're physically tired, but what I'm watching out for all the time is mental fatigue. When it stops being fun it's time to give them a rest."

If any of this, particularly reference to the whip, sounds remotely cruel, remember that even a yearling has a half-ton advantage over a man. No one can force a horse to do something it doesn't want to, particularly not with cruelty and aggression. "You can tell a colt what to do," he reminds us, "but you have to ask a filly. They're just the same as women!" It all comes down to trust. The yearlings have put utter trust in their riders and are not afraid to do anything asked of them. Without fear they are confident and happy. Which is why HH Aga Khan brings Witheford over every year.

Unsaddled and washed down, the fillies return to their boxes. Tomorrow they will join the main string at Currabeg and will fit right in, unfazed by their new surroundings and lifestyle. For Gary Witheford, the work continues, with another group of His Highness' yearlings to 'start' for trainer Michael Halford, before moving on to clients in Barbados. No matter where in the world there are racehorses, there will always be a call for Witheford. ■

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