

The Intelligent Horsemanship Magazine – Spotlight on an IHRT

Dr Rosie Jones McVey

“The real future of course, lies with the next generation”

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

I didn't come from a horsey family, so, like many IH Mag readers, it was really only once I was old enough to work for rides that I was able to get properly involved with horses, at about 11 years old. First, I volunteered at a donkey sanctuary that also had a few ponies, a small riding school and a riding for the disabled program. We drove the donkeys in traps at county fairs to raise money for the centre, and my first ever time being the 'first rider' was on a donkey! I helped 'break in' many donkeys to ride and drive, (as well as rescued ponies) and maybe that's how I learned to be tactful and problem solve, as donkeys are not pushovers! I was begging rides off anyone and everyone, which led to riding a few tricky ponies for a local, small scale horse dealer, and then eventually buying ponies myself from the sales and training them up to be sold. I have extremely fond memories of my teenage years, me and a few horsey friends spent all hours at the yard, bringing on scruffy ponies into what we thought were serious show champions (when really, they were destined for the 80 cm local unaffiliated jumping!). Now that I am a mother, I am particularly grateful to my mum for giving me the freedom to spend so much time doing what I loved, even when it made her wince as she is quite afraid of horses, and as a teenager I was already developing a love for taking on the ones that were causing trouble.

Why did you decide to qualify as a Recommended Trainer?

This is an interesting question, because it is something that I considered very carefully, and turned out to be one of the most positive decisions of my life. I knew I wanted to be a horse trainer, but I had decided early on that I didn't want to affiliate to any system or particular trainer. I was too keen on 'pick and mixing' and I felt that any system had the danger of being too prescriptive about what I could do. Initially, I wanted to learn as much as I could from IH, just as I learned also from other sources. The more I got to know Kelly, the more I trusted IH as a whole system – because it is more a way of thinking than a prescriptive set of things you must do. It is all about positivity, creative problem solving, and respect – for horses and humans alike. Within that frame of mind, all sorts of new ideas can be tested out without fear of being humiliated by those around you, which I recognise is a luxury as far as working environments go!

What is a typical day for you?

In my time as an RT I have alternated between spending more time doing hands on training and more time invested in research and learning. At the moment, I have a job teaching anthropology at Cambridge University, specialising (of course!) in human-animal relations and ethics. I squeeze horse training into the university holidays, and I always prioritise teaching on IH courses when organising my

calendar. This means there isn't really a typical day, it depends on whether it is term time, an IH course, or a 'home visit' day! Variety is the spice of life!

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

Making both of them (owner and horse) feel like I am listening and getting both to feel safe in one another's company as quickly as possible. This is the starting point from which to build a training plan.

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

I love working with nappy horses. These are horses who say 'No' when asked to go forwards – away from friends, or the gate, or the yard – or sometimes, they refuse to go forwards anywhere whatsoever! The challenge in these cases is that the humans AND horses have got used to being in a battle, and BOTH need to learn to soften up without feeling like they are making themselves vulnerable to being dominated. That is a common challenge for me, but a rewarding one, to get to a point where BOTH, horse and human are winning!

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

No more pink, sparkly whips sold to little girls, no more whips as accessories that come with barbie and her pony. I am not saying there is no place for whips used as a training aid in the right hands (that is an open debate!) but I hate the way it is trivialized and taken for granted that it is normal and OK (or even cute?!) to hit horses, where it wouldn't be with any other animal.

What would be the first piece of advice you would give someone looking at buying/loaning their first horse?

Think very carefully before buying a young horse. By young I mean anything under 6 (if well produced) and 7 (if 'green'). People often think of 4-year olds as young, but really for the first 3-4 years of ridden life, they are still so malleable. However wonderful their temperament might seem, it can all change very quickly as they are learning all the time. If you do get a youngster, get help as soon as anything starts to go iffy – way before a problematic pattern has set in.

What are your plans for the future?

I'd like to get some research funding to investigate equine assisted therapy, I'd like to continue the work I have done with vet schools and other equine professionals to improve their understanding of horse behaviour, and there are some exciting writing and research projects ahead... but the real future of course lies with the next generation. I am looking forward to seeing what sort of horsemanship the riders of tomorrow will want to pursue. Little Hester (my 18-month-old daughter) asked for a 'hat' when riding on her rocking horse (see picture) and has taught her pull-along-pony to ground tie. So, watch this space!

What has been the proudest moment/biggest achievement in your career?

Hannah (my wife) and I went on an epic adventure exploring horse training in different cultures around the world and wrote up our stories in a book, "Globetrotting", I was immensely proud of that! Recently, I have completed an anthropology PhD at Cambridge University investigating British horse/human relationships, which was incredibly hard work, and I am so proud of myself for finishing it that I sometimes have to pinch myself to believe that I have not just made it up!

How you came to be involved with Monty and Kelly?

I wrote Kelly a handwritten letter – I couldn't get to a computer. I was working in a not-so-good place that wasn't nice to the horses, and I had hoped it would have been an insight into 'real horse whispering'. I was disillusioned by the idea anyone could call themselves a horse whisperer, but before giving up on my dreams, I decided to try to learn from the best – so I wrote and asked for a job, I was 18. Kelly found a little bit of work for me, grooming, poo picking and helping in the office, and since then, while I have been off to do other things (training mustangs in Colorado, studying at uni – twice! travelling to write 'Globetrotting') I have always been lucky enough to consider IH as my horsey 'home'.

What do you love about teaching on the courses?

I love the camaraderie and feeling of support that the courses generate on every level - staff, students and horses are treated with respect. This makes it a peaceful and positive place that everybody finds hard to leave on a Friday evening! My favourite course is the leading and loading course, because there is the added element of meeting new horses each time with their owners. Students do the vast majority of the hands on training, coached by Sandra, Kelly and I, and there is sometimes a slight feeling on the end of the first day of 'GOSH how on earth are we going to get these horses loading happily in time to go home tomorrow?!' and then it all comes together and it is lovely to wave the horses and owners off with a sense of achievement with my team.