

Sprinters vs stayers:

DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Flat and jump racehorses are built for different jobs — but how does that affect their retraining? **Catherine Welton** finds out why an ex-racer's past can shape — but not limit — their future

“Think of [Flat racehorses] as your Usain Bolts, whereas your National Hunt horses are more like Mo Farah” — Jess Westwood



EX-RACEHORSES | FLAT VS JUMP

FOR SOME THOROUGHBREDS, the ultimate glory is sprinting down the home stretch on Ascot's hallowed turf. For others it's charging down Cheltenham's challenging 4'6" fences or clearing Aintree's infamous Becher's Brook. Once their racing days are over, they can go on to any number of new careers, from dressage to polo, eventing to endurance — but when it comes to retraining them, are there any differences between former Flat and former National Hunt (NH) racehorses?

Jess Westwood runs Molland Ridge Stud and Rehabilitation and is a trustee of The Thoroughbred Breeders'

Association. She's retrained around 400 horses and says that when Flat and NH horses first come out of racing, they tend to have different physiques.

"The Flat horses are generally smaller and their muscle group is a lot bigger. Think of them as your Usain Bolts, whereas your National Hunt horses are more like Mo Farah," she explains.

Muscling up

Whether you have a sprinter or an endurance athlete, both equine physiques are specific to racing and require transforming for a career outside it.

"They've all got a muscle group that encourages flat, long strides, but to do

a different career requires the Thoroughbred to balance in a different way and slow down," adds Jess.

"Retraining starts when you're able to develop muscles they haven't engaged before. This can be challenging in a fit racehorse when ideally you would let down their fit muscle groups first."

Pam Atkinson, co-founder of New Beginnings, where racehorses have been retrained since 2010, agrees.

"It can take months for them to become a horse that used to race," she says. "Then they need to rebuild their muscles to be able to carry additional weight, compared to a jockey and a racing saddle."



FLAT VS JUMP RACING — WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES?

	FLAT — no fences	NATIONAL HUNT — with fences
Season	Summer racing on grass; all-weather racing all-year round	All-year round on grass
Start	Stalls	'Flip start' — horses line up behind strong elastic start line.
Minimum age of horse	Two	Three
Distance	Shorter, requiring speed	Longer, requiring stamina

The size of the matter

Flat racers tend to start younger and retire earlier, whereas jump horses can continue racing into their teens. Jockey weights differ too, with Flat horses carrying a maximum of 64.4kg and NH horses carrying up to 76.2kg. This is something that Amanda Mills, who runs Mills Stables Retraining Racehorses, considers when matching an ex-racer to a new owner.

"Smaller and/or lighter riders will be more suited to most of the young Flat horses, because Flat horses often retire needing more time to mature and have always been ridden by small, light jockeys. It can take a lot of time until they are physically ready to carry an inexperienced rider," says Amanda, who has retrained and rehomed hundreds of off-the-track-Thoroughbreds over the years.

"Jump horses, usually being more physically mature when they retire, will still have the same issues with inexperienced riders retraining them, but their bodies are a bit more capable of withstanding the new style of riding."

A horse-first approach

That said, Amanda doesn't let the horse's racing career dictate what they might be capable of going forwards. Instead, she takes a horse-first approach.

"We start them all the same and sometimes I don't look at their racing records so that I don't judge them on what they have done," she says. "I prefer to leave it down to them to let me know what they want to do."

"We have some jump horses who never want to jump again and some Flat horses who love it," she continues. "Some of the best jumpers we've produced have been horses that only raced on the Flat."

For former NH racehorses, a new jumping technique has to be learned



Perhaps surprisingly, teaching a former Flat racer to jump can be easier than teaching an ex-hurdler, because they're not having to "unlearn" a previous way of going.

"When they're racing, they tend to jump a lot lower and flatter and off a long, galloping stride, so when it comes to retraining, we have to reteach these horses how to jump if we are wanting to produce them for showjumping and eventing," adds Amanda.

Keep an open mind

Either way, patient, consistent training is key, as Jess is keen to emphasise.

"The biggest issue in retraining is people not giving the horses enough time to change their bodies," she says. "Until they can sit on their hocks and canter, they can't learn to showjump and go cross-country."

Jess advises giving the horse at least a year before jumping competitively.

"Go to some local dressage competitions, which are a perfect way to teach a horse to behave in a relaxed environment. Then the following year, you'll have a different horse. As soon as they've built up the correct muscles, they can all jump."

And don't discount a former jump horse as your next dressage superstar either, says Amy Bannister-Bell, a BHSI and a Regional Development Officer for the Retraining of Racehorses (RoR).

"It is a common misconception that racehorses do not receive any education on the flat. Many yards are utilising and seeing the benefits of flatwork as part of the training regime for their National Hunt horses," she explains. "It is important to keep an open mind to the potential second careers of these horses as they are good at demonstrating what they will be good at given a chance. And they can often surprise you."

Some ex-jumpers never want to jump again and plenty of Flat ex-racers love it





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Seeing the world

Although all horses should be treated as individuals (see box, below), there can be differences in how much of the world Flat and NH racehorses see, which comes back to their maturity.

"The Flat racers start careers younger and tend to come to us younger, so sometimes they've had a bit less exposure," explains Pam.

But she also points out that where they've been in training can have an

equal impact on how worldly they are: "Some horses in training go out hacking through the village, but if a trainer has their own gallops, they might not have seen as much. That said, they still go to the races, where there's a lot to see."

Lucinda Sims is an accredited instructor with the RoR and she agrees.

"Many horses from big training centres are excellent in traffic, but those trained in quiet areas rarely see traffic, so it's best to introduce it quietly and sensibly."

Nonetheless, she points out that all racehorses have generally seen more of the world than an 'ordinary', privately-owned young horse. Lucinda currently has 12 RoRs in her care and holds regular clinics and open days to promote and champion the breed.

"Most Thoroughbreds have better natural manners and temperaments than your average warmblood or cob. I find them to be sensitive, empathetic, clever and brave — I don't really want anything else on my yard."

No two horses are the same

While researching a former racehorse's background can provide helpful information, trainers agree it's best to consider each horse on their own merits.

As Amy says: "I'm yet to find two Thoroughbreds that are the same, even when they have had similar early life experiences."

And whatever the horse's background, Pam adds: "If you're getting a racehorse for the first time, get it from somewhere that gives you a full understanding of the horse and provides continuing support, and surround yourself with knowledgeable people to help you."

Train the horse in front of you

Lou Robson has been riding former racehorses since she was 15 and competes them at all levels of dressage. For the past 15 years, she has run Thoroughbred Dressage and is dedicated to retraining racehorses with a dressage focus.

"I have known of jumpers who've fallen out of love with jumping and made fantastic dressage horses," she says.

When it comes to temperament, she advises treating them as individuals.

"I've seen some horses leave racing fit and fresh. Then once they start their retraining, they are relaxed and



Zen-like. Some just want to be happy hackers.

"The main thing is that we train the horse we have in front of us, love them for who they are, listen to them as to what they love and enjoy, and pursue that in their retraining journey."



PROTECTING AN EX-RACER'S STOMACH

Astonishingly, reports indicate that up to 93% of racehorses have or have had gastric ulcers during their racing careers. This extreme susceptibility is rooted in a combination of factors inherent to their training and management.

➤ Intense exercise — this increases stomach acid production and pressure, stressing the stomach lining. The stress of racing and travelling further disrupts their delicate digestive system.

➤ Energy-dense, high-starch diets — this is common in performance feeds and prolongs high stomach acidity, which can exacerbate gut issues.

The physical presence of fibre is crucial for digestive health. Chewing fibre stimulates saliva production, which acts as a powerful buffer for stomach acid when swallowed. Fibre also contains soluble pectins, an ingredient abundant in beet pulp, which reduces stomach acidity.

■ Fibre-Beet from British Horse Feeds is a conditioning feed with a carefully formulated combination of Speedi-Beet and alfalfa supplemented with biotin, sodium and calcium. With all the benefits of Speedi-Beet's high level of easily digested, soluble fibre for slow energy release, along with low starch and sugar, Fibre-Beet provides a balanced combination of essential amino acids and minerals for optimal health and muscle support.

Fed wet, it slows eating, increasing the time feed spends buffering acid in the stomach compared to high-starch feeds, reducing stress and promoting healthy gut function. In short, Fibre-Beet, with its blend of alfalfa, pectins and emulsifiers, is an excellent dietary choice to support ex-racehorses in retraining and in their new career.



Amanda Mills has retrained hundreds of racehorses over the years



Jess Westwood on the 2019 Arkle winner Duc Des Genievres, whom she retrained



Lucinda Sims at Badminton on Queen Hill, a 15.1hh ex-racer bought at Ascot Sales by Theresa Curtis

“The main thing is that we train the horse we have in front of us, love them for who they are and listen to them” — Lou Robson

‘Little balls of strength’

Heidi is a member of the RoR and has owned and ridden several former racehorses. Her first, Tokalosh, came to her as a five-year-old Flat racer. Since retraining, she has successfully competed him in showjumping, eventing and hunter trials, as well as doing fun rides. Meanwhile, Casper arrived as a four-year-old who'd been in training but never raced, and Joey was a four-year-old who had raced on the Flat before injuring a tendon.

“Tokalosh and Casper were both around 16hh and little balls of strength, with the ability to turn on a sixpence and sometimes even beat the ponies,” Heidi recalls. “I think the differences I have noticed have come more from whether they have raced or not. Those in training only were generally calmer, whereas the two who had raced were a little more opinionated.”

“I enjoy the process of building a relationship with them and knowing that the results we get are due to our hard work and trust in each other.”



Casper arrived at Heidi's as an unraced four-year-old and has the ability to turn on a sixpence



Joey, who raced before injuring a tendon, is more opinionated than Casper

The majority of Thoroughbreds are work horses. They enjoy exercise and having a job to do



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