

Case Study - Nickie & Bruno

It was luck that would have us meet Nickie & Bruno. Nickie bravely decided to attempt a summer holiday with her two favourite fellas! So Nickie, her husband and new horse took to the road heading from Manchester to Ardlamont Estate, which offered a holiday cottage with onsite livery for Bruno. Unbeknownst to Nickie, earlier that same year, we at Wilder Ways ran an 'own horse' short break from Ardlamont Estate. And so our paths were serendipitously woven.

I will never forget their arrival at our pop-up trail centre at Portavadie. Here we are, set up camp with our herd and up pulls a shiny red horse trailer and out pops a wide eyed but very stunning Welsh D gelding. The Herd are of course being very aloof and playing hard to get.

When a new horse joins us for their first ride, my thoughts go....

1. The new horse is likely to be on the back 'hoof', he is away from home and all his friends.
2. The rider is likely to be tense, wants her horse to behave and to enjoy her holiday without anyone judging her riding, or more importantly, her horse.
3. We have full faith that Our Herd will give the new horse utter confidence and by the end of the day he will feel like one of the gang.
4. We are just nervous that they might show us up in the process (animals have that knack)...
5. Or we (she means me) forget our manners or tactful people skills.

And on this occasion, none of us should have worried. Perhaps all experiences won't be so successful but this is a lovely story of the amazing outcomes possible when we open our minds and hit the wilds.

Nickie was finding Bruno to be a completely lovable well-mannered and friendly chap but was having trouble getting him into water and found he could be quite spooky at new things. I asked Nickie to prepare Bruno tied up to his own trailer, the only thing familiar to him in this new environment.

We had another lady riding with us that afternoon (in fact Janice was one of our regular Facebook prize winners) who was riding one of our horses Amber. After briefing all the riders on our approach, we set out without even introducing the horses. We walked off purposefully down the track and as we rode along in pairs, Bruno slotted into things watching intently. After we had navigated a short stretch of road we headed off road and the horses could relax. By not making a meal out for the first meeting, by the time we stopped for our first cuppa the herd looked at one and you would never have noticed our 'guest'. Also, by setting the horses straight off into work mode, expecting them to behave impeccably and get on with the job, the horses were confident in us that there was nothing to worry about, just a regular day out with a new buddy.

This is not to say that there were not any disagreements. Bruno learnt the hard way that running up Amber's bottom is not a good idea. Amber gave him a single, fair but firm 'hoof shaped' reminder in the chest. After checking there were no injuries, and both riders being keen to assist in this, we set to work to facilitate an 'apology' between the horses. We played for no more than 5 minutes. Janice reaching out to stroke Bruno from where she sat on Amber, and vice versa, Nikkie stroking Amber from Bruno. I wish I had a video to show you. But with very little direction, rewarding both horses for being close to each other and relaxed, we ended with Bruno draping his head across Amber's back (just behind the saddle), while Amber reached round to nuzzle his nose. An apology, a hug and handshake, call it what you like, but both horses realised that they had nothing to fear from each other and that all this socialising was really quite good fun and therefore they could be very accepting of being in each other's space. There were no more disagreements between the horses on this ride, in fact only an increasing level of friendship blossomed.



Then the beach came into view. I joked with Nickie that the magic she was about to see would make her feel embarrassed. "Why?" she asked. Well because Bruno is just going to walk straight into that sea right up to his belly. She smiled sceptically. And of course, he did. Before Nickie could change her smile, there she was, wondering if Bruno would actually stop before he started swimming. So OK, I hear you, following others into the water is easy. You are right.

Next, we leave the water and head to a rowing boat pulled up off the beach, it is covered with a tarpaulin, you know those really scary ones! The put your nose on it game is very simple. All the horse has to do is touch an object with his velvety nose and he gets a stroke (I use the word stroke and not pat very intentionally....we'll come back to this). All the horse has to do is point the horse at the object. Sounds simple yeah. It is. The only slightly tricky bit is ensuring your timing of pressure and release (or on/off as I like to say).

Cara and Ava demonstrate the game. Ava is a very confident horse, so it is a very quick game. About 3 feet from the boat Ava stops and snorts a little. While she is not moving backwards and still looking and the boat Cara does nothing (not even a reward). Ava looks away quite uninterested. Cara squeezes her legs just enough for Ava to look forward at the boat again. She takes a step forward, sniffs, snorts, takes another step and puts her nose on it. Only at that point does Ava get a stroke and is allowed to walk away from the boat. Next up, without delay is Bruno. He has seen very clearly what happened and there is no place hiding at the back for this new boy. As one might expect of a young horse, with a new owner, in an alien environment (the boy is from Manchester!), he is pretty spooky. About 10m from the boat his head comes up, his eyes are wide. There is lots of snorting but he is moving forward, creeping in on his own accord. Leave him be, I call. Even once he comes to a stand, leave him be. Only when he looks away from the boat do you apply pressure, and even then, only very slight pressure to begin with. We play the put your nose on it game for about 5 minutes. And to be honest, most of that time was really about allowing Nickie to get a feel of the timing. I can look at the horse, how he is moving his weight, engaging with the game etc. and I can call on/off/on/off for you, but how does that help you? So we took some time to allow both Nickie and Bruno to win this game while Janice was also enjoying the learning experience as she looked on. In turn Janice and our Nikki then followed suit and as we all strolled off back down the beach we enjoyed the glow of a moment of success.



We then enjoyed a wee tea break to stretch our legs and more importantly, to let Bruno ponder over a bite of grass. Thinking time is REALLY important for your horse. If you have just taught him something new and have successfully communicated that to him, it's almost like he's just learnt another bit of a new language and that opens lots of doors in his mind. Give him time to think, time to chew it over, literally!

After tea we head straight back into the water and again Bruno is confidently striding out with the others. I then ask Nickie to take Bruno back onto the beach on his own. Initially he resists slightly, not

wanting to leave his new friends but soon he is back on the beach with his next quandary. "In order to be back with my friends, I need to walk back into the water on my own...but I think I'm afraid of water?" A little reverse psychology can go a long way. It is now Bruno's choice to enter the water. We play in and out of the water for about 10 minutes with different horses being in and out of the water at different times. By the end, Bruno is loving the water. It's all about playing with his new friends and that dark scary water hasn't bitten him once.

Horse and rider feeling pretty chipper with themselves we start leaving the beach to head to the hills when we are all once again reminded to stay on our toes at all times. As we are walking along chatting, we talk about horses rolling after being in water. The urge is especially strong when horses are first ridden in deep water, they suddenly feel lots of dripping water and it tickles. We were discussing what to do in the event and without any warning, his knees buckle and he's down. Nickie is still on but Bruno is not getting back up so I call to Nickie to dismount and BANG! Nickie's air-filled back protector goes off and it's a proper explosion, sounds like a gun shot at close range. Well that gets him up alright! And did he run to the hills, did he have a panic attack? No he snuggled right up beside our Indi as if to say, "Was that me?" I learnt at least three lessons out of this moment. 1) I learnt that those back protectors really are very noisy, albite wonderful safety equipment. 2) We often underestimate our horses. Having never heard this noise before, and with no time for Nickie to react, in the instant of a gunshot Bruno had to decide how to react and he chose to stay. 3) And, sometimes timing really is impeccable, I bet Bruno won't make a habit of rolling with his rider for fear of getting shot!

Within the course of about 1.5 hours, Bruno had been faced with a new environment, a new herd and their etiquette, some new games, some epic life experiences, nearly swimming and nearly getting shot out in the wilds; and perhaps both he and Nickie had got to a slightly new way of thinking. The remaining hour ride home was over some steep and challenging boggy terrain. The boy just took it in his stride, breathing fresh wild sea air and enjoying the view. He was a tired boy that night. Not only was it a test of his physical fitness, but mostly it was mentally tiring, he'd had a lot to take in.

Having taken nearly an hour to load to get Bruno over to the ride in the first place, Nickie discussed her re-load strategy with us while he cooled down back at base. OK, he was tired you might say, or even glad to get home, but a different horse got back in that trailer that day and a much more confident woman got back in that car.

This was a really special day that we will always remember. Bruno is an intelligent and affable horse who blossomed very quickly with just a little bit of clearer direction. Nickie is a very competent rider and has a lovely way with her horse. She just needed some company and reassurance to give her the confidence to do with her horse what they were both already very capable of.

When I asked Nickie if I could use our experience with her and Bruno as one of her Case Studies she said she would be delighted to and offered these few words to be included.

"My experience riding out with Nikki and Cara was totally brilliant. From the word go they helped my horse Bruno relax around their own horses and were so calm and cool I never once worried about trying things with him I'd never done before. They were extremely generous with their knowledge of natural horsemanship and made it exciting and fun for both of us. I'd never have believed I would be able to encourage Bruno to approach a wooden boat on the beach that he'd normally freak at and take a sniff, to go in the sea at all let alone then do it without following the other horses...and to canter carefully up a little mountain track. The adventure was as much about the joy of learning new things with Bruno as it was the thrill of experiencing little explored paths and trails to reveal breathtaking views and hidden coves. Totally unforgettable. Can't wait go back and learn more!"

While this is all very flattering, in fact what I most loved was her off the cuff remark at the end of her recent e-mail. "Absolutely - go ahead and use whatever you'd like of me and my lovely boy. Thanks to your techniques in gaining his trust I was able to ride him across a weird metal footbridge thing which goes over the busy motorway in Manchester to access other bridleways...we'd never have done that before! Thanks a million!"

Now that's what we like to hear. A horse and rider pushing the boundaries on their adventures together!

And as a parting comment (I said I'd come back to it), if you are a 'patter', we would like to set a wee friendly challenge...start stroking your horse instead and let us know if anything changes.

Best wishes
Cara, Nikki & The Herd