

# Pippa Hattan Equestrian

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## **Working in the Equestrian Industry Overseas: Hong Kong, Part 3**

**Equitrader: March Edition 2011**

**Focus: Retraining the Ex Race Horse**

### **Preparation:**

The first part of this series set the scene for my 4 years working in Hong Kong. Last month looked at the basic management of the retired race horse in Hong Kong, from finishing racing and moving into the next phase of his career.

This editorial outlines the basic training method I developed when in Hong Kong. As you'll recall last month, I highlighted that there are psychological and physiological changes where the muscles need to change "jobs" and the mind needs to be reprogrammed for a new lifestyle. Very often during the first 6 months these horses look quite poor while the abdominal muscles (6 pack!), start to relax and they lose their racing muscles – but don't lose heart, or fall into the trap of over feeding them – too much exuberance can make training rather challenging! The Hong Kong vets were a great help in making sure that rehabilitation went smoothly too so never be afraid to ask for a professional's opinion.

### **Training – the beginning:**

Initially the horses are lunged in a small and enclosed area and encouraged to develop a one to one relationship with their trainer. They learn to work quietly, to be obedient to the voice and generally understand who is in charge!

I sometimes introduce side reins, slowly and carefully although not always as a matter of course,

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and then follow this with two lunge lines (one each side) to help with control and straightness. This leads onto long reining and taking them out and about so that they see the world first and become accustomed to stepping over logs/poles on the ground, going through puddles and being in the lead. This is important as most of them have never been in the front before, especially if they never actually raced or were not particularly talented as a race horse. During this time the muscles over the back are developing, and looseness throughout their bodies is encouraged – as per The Scales of Training. Muscles cannot be developed where there is tension and an “outline” should not be maintained for more than a few minutes until there is the necessary strength in the right places – so patience and a good eye is imperative. It’s a good idea to keep a log of photos for comparison especially when you see your horse every day. And it’s great to have those before and after shots too!

## **Training, Flat Work:**

Our horses are then ridden in the main riding arena, preferably by the same trainer as on the ground, to establish the basic walk, trot, and canter. Once they are confident, they are hacked out on very quiet routes to gain strength and engagement using hills, gradients and variable terrains etc. This was a bit challenging in Hong Kong but we managed!

The next step is to work them with other horses in the arena, especially getting them used to: other horses coming towards them head to head, other horses entering and exiting the arena, working in groups in open order, and gaining their confidence while riders canter behind, alongside and even overtake.

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## **Training, Jumping Work:**

Canter poles (as oppose to trotting poles), and single small jumps are introduced reasonably early on as it helps develop proprioceptive awareness and balance. In the initial stages they often jump with the classic open hind leg action until they learn to jump off both hind legs together. From then on in its pretty much the same as bringing on any youngster through the jumping ranks; little by little. I always make allowances for their very long strides, as I have found that they are much better on a forward canter rhythm and only much later ask them to start to shorten their strides once they are confident and consistent in popping fences at around 1m in height.

The time taken at each of these stages will depend on the individual horse – they need to learn, as with any horse or pony, balance, self carriage and self belief!

## **Finally:**

I've found thoroughbreds to be remarkably generous and keen to learn, but also prone to overreacting if stressed and confused. Taking time with the basics is really worth it. It's so rewarding to see an ex-racehorse find a new life, be that as a school horse patiently trotting around while a beginner learns the 'up downs', to a competition horse doing FEI dressage, show jumping and eventing. The "Good Luck Beijing HKSAR HKEF Preliminary Eventing Competition 2007" bears testament to the versatility of these horses. I took part in this Pre Olympic Test Event that used the Olympic stabling, arenas and cross country course which replicated all the facilities (although obviously not quite the same fences!), and these are naturally environments very few horses ever get to see. Our ex-race horses amazed us with how they rose to the challenge and made us all very proud.