



# Making the most of limited space

If a stable is the only space you have to work in, what can be achieved? Rather a lot, as **Anna Bonnage** explains.

In October, Sari and Ben from this magazine and Robyn Sherrill, a friend from America, spent the day with me travelling out to clients in Devon. I enjoy having people shadow me; there's always so much to discuss in the car as we drive between venues. Every horse and owner we visit has a story to unravel.

On this occasion we were up against 50mph winds and intermittent driving rain, but I continued to work with the five horses who were booked in. I don't mind the wind itself - it's the trees and flying debris which concern me, as I wouldn't want an incident to set a horse back in their confidence.

We were greeted with traditional English tea and biscuits at one facility - a much needed and kind gesture to warm us up. This yard was surrounded by trees, so I suggested we spent the two hours lesson time in the stables. Most people would wonder what on earth we could do in a stable for two hours that would be worth paying for! These particular clients knew me well and came up with ideas

that they'd like to work on.

Julie suggested: "I'd like to help my mare feel better about me putting her rug on". Brilliant, I thought; I'm all too aware of how one small area where a horse is struggling can affect many other areas in a horse's life.

We first observed the process they go through in order to rug her, and how the situation develops. Even the sight of the rug entering the stable caused an ill feeling in the mare; she tightened her body and her ears went back a little. As the rug got closer, she turned her head

away and leant her shoulder and hind quarters towards Julie. When the rug continued to approach, her tail became active, her legs and neck became rigid, her back dipped, and the skin on her face creased together under her eyes, ears, and all over her muzzle.

"Ok, stop," I said. "I've got a good idea of what's going on. Would you mind if I work with her a little?"

We needed to change our approach so dramatically I felt it best I gave a visual demonstration, and Julie agreed. It's a big thing for people to allow someone to

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work with their horse - I expect people who don't know me to be a little cautious, ask plenty of questions, and receive satisfactory answers before agreeing. Sometimes it takes a while to help a horse find clarity but often it takes a very short time to upset and confuse them, so I'd encourage everybody to ask questions before putting trust into a trainer. I frequently hear stories of horses having been physically or mentally scarred because an owner assumed the trainer knew better than them and overrode their gut feeling. I'm hoping that we're coming into an age where we question professionals; the more questions the better, as this means a person is learning in the true sense of the word.

As I entered the stable, I slapped the lead rope in my hand against my boot with a loud crack. The mare spun to look at me with ears and eyes attentive to my actions. I heard a few noises signifying surprise from the onlookers.

"Look at her face, she's not grumpy now," one person said. I had left the rug at the door and walked in with only the halter and lead rope in my hand. Just the act of stepping into the stable caused the horse to begin to experience ill feelings, which was when I chose to slap my boot with the rope. This action wasn't directed at the mare - it wasn't personal to her, it happened in response to her feelings. I didn't move closer to her or look at her in a particular way. My response surprised her, which created a moment where she was willing to try and think about the situation differently. Ringing in my ears were my teacher Harry Whitney's words: "Nothing changes if nothing changes" or, as my Grandad use to say, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got."

I began to walk a steady circle around the mare, staying as close to the stable walls as possible. I hoped that her interest in where I was going would draw her feet to follow me. I found myself at her tail - it's hard to put a halter on a tail, so I flipped the lead rope straight up towards the stable roof. She saw it in the corner of her eye and again turned around to face me, this time also coming one step closer.

"That's better. She's starting to see a need to pay attention to me."

I stroked her forehead and then walked a half circle around towards her tail again. She followed, but part way around the feeling in her changed; she flipped her nose to drive me around the stable. I turned instantly and slapped my thigh loudly with my hand - once again her ears came forward attentively.

She could tell I was aware of these negative feelings which passed through her, and she was realising that this behaviour caused a response; it was no longer going to be ignored. It wasn't that I was unwilling to tolerate her grumpy behaviour, I just wanted her to feel good about me asking things of her. It doesn't matter if it's a horse or human: I don't want to have a relationship with anyone if they feel sour about what we're doing together. I struggle to ignore how bad the other feels and it affects me.

I walked around the stable towards the door. She followed with her ears up,

attentive and willing. Until this point, other than stroking her forehead a couple of times, neither I nor the halter had touched the mare. I reached around her neck and waited for her to tip her nose into the halter.

With this done, I reached up to pull the rug off the stable door. The mare swished her tail and her ears went back and forth, unsure whether to commit to the ill feelings in her.

"She's very sensitive, isn't she." Even the act of raising my hand had concerned her. "Julie, this mare has done a good job of teaching you to move quietly around her!"

I had to laugh as I said it because it was so true. If I tiptoed around, the mare was alright some of the time; but if I moved normally, she was so sensitive that it upset her. I had made a change in her realising that grumping at me was no longer effective in quietening me down,

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but underneath her grump was a nervous horse who needed help to feel confident.

I left the rug on the door and began energetically rubbing my hands and the end of the lead rope all over her body, from her neck to her quarters, under her belly, chest, face; there wasn’t anywhere I wasn’t going to touch and rub. She didn’t like it and I kept myself safe by staying in close to her as she moved around the stable, continuing to rub her all over, not stopping on account of her very obvious grumps. In fact the more she grumped the more I rubbed, as if I had to dry her off with a towel in a hurry. Suddenly she sighed, her head and neck lowered, ears went floppy and she blinked frequently. I had successfully proved to her that my activity was not a threat, so I stopped rubbing and rested my hand on her back.

Reaching for the rug again I kept one eye on her. She wasn’t as committed to being grumpy; she was oscillating between relaxation and concern, so I continued in my usual casual yet positive approach.

It’s important to let a horse think through situations and not intervene if they are undecided. Carol, a long time client of mine, recently told me a story from when she was shopping. A little boy in the shop kept asking his Mummy in a quiet way if he could have something, calling her name and trying to get her attention. She shouted, “Stop being grumpy!” He called her name again and her response was the same. He replied, “I’m not being gumpy.” She shouted again to tell him to stop being grumpy and the next thing the little boy is in tears, shouting back: “I’M NOT GUMPY!” It’s too easy to cause a horse to become ‘gumpy’ if we shout back at them in any form when they are trying to think something through and haven’t yet committed to ill feelings.

I reached up to the mare’s shoulder with the rug as if to prepare to throw it onto her back. Once again she committed to ill feelings; she felt the need to defend herself against the rug so I got busy

stroking her all over, this time with the rug in hand. I wasn’t going to fold it up into a tiny ball; she’d had the rug put on her hundreds of times before. This wasn’t terror within her, this was concern combined with understandable defensiveness.

The rug went all over her body while she squirmed around the stable, head raised, tense and grumpy. After a couple of laps I got the feeling she was trying to protect her face. So with care but not slowing down, the soft side of the rug went up to her nose, under her eye, and off by her cheek several times in a smooth circular motion. Each time I would draw it up her face between her eyes, over her ears and down her neck several times in a row.

Then the change came. The sighs and blinking returned as she realised the outcome of this activity wasn’t what she had predicted, it was ok, and in fact it was all good. I rested there with her and, as the rug lay across her back, I explained the importance of how we handle something like this. It’s too easy to cause more of a problem and create aggression if someone’s timing or intention is wrong. As Tom Dorrance used to say, “Timing, feel and balance”. Throughout the sessions I had stayed relaxed even in moments of activity. If my body had become tense then the mare would have felt it and responded with further defensiveness. As I worked with her, in my mind I just kept thinking: “You’re alright mare, nothing is going to hurt you, look I’m proving to you it’s ok.”

After three or four minutes I pulled the rug off her back and then put it on again as if to rug her normally. She kept a sweet look on her face and I heard her owner say, “That’s brilliant”. Sliding the rug off I lead her to the door, turned and threw the rug back on from a different position. The mare was suspicious but not grumpy, so I went ahead and rugged her to prove it was ok. It’s good to change positions as horses, donkeys, and especially mules can learn that something is ok but only when

standing in a particular place. Plus, having the equine move into a different position keeps them mentally bright and attentive.

“Now you have to train me how to do that,” I heard Julie say from the stable door.

The evenings are drawing in. Winter is coming, and it provides us with an opportunity as there is plenty that can be worked on in a small space, for a few minutes here and there, to help a horse gain more clarity and confidence in you and what is expected of them. To know what to work on, you’ll need to observe your horse and think about the things they aren’t content to do. Check the handling of their feet, or saddling up; see whether your horse will reach to put the halter and bridle on themselves, or if they will they wait on a long rein for you to mount and dismount five times in a row; practice standing on the mounting block and directing your horse into and back out of the stable by the feel of a long lead rope only; the list goes on. It is likely that you will be pleasantly surprised at how helping your horse to gain clarity in these small areas will affect how they feel about life in general. To the horse, there’s no such thing as an insignificant problem. How they feel about having a rug put on is as important to them as how they feel about leaving the yard for a hack. Humans generally consider small issues to be inconsequential, especially if we’re short on time, and don’t feel endangered by them; but to the horse every detail is important. 🐾

### Testimonial from Julie

“The outcome for my mare is that she is more confident and accepting with other things in her life. She is much happier having her rug on after touching her all over with hands and rug.

I feel more confident in knowing how to handle the grumps and what to do so she feels better and happier. Still a work in progress as it’s us that have so much to learn. It was a really good session and so worthwhile doing.”

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