



# Equitation Science: ‘The Road Ahead’

## **A science based approach improves welfare outcomes for abused horses**

The equine welfare sector in the United Kingdom deals with a large number of abused or neglected horses each year. Cases range from extreme neglect and cruelty to owner inability to properly manage or handle their horses. The Redwings Horse Sanctuary has become a home of last resort for many rescued horses and the wide variety of settings in which the Sanctuary’s staff rescue and rehabilitate abused horses has driven the adoption of a science based approach to behaviour management.

Presenting at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Society for Equitation conference in Edinburgh, Head of Welfare, Rehabilitation and Education, Nicolas de Brauwere explained the benefits of applying a science based approach to rehabilitating sick and abused horses and donkeys.

“Many of the horses we are called in to rescue are completely unhandled or have severe behavioural problems due to prolonged neglect or extreme abuse” said Dr de Brauwere. “Traditional handling techniques are not appropriate and may put the horses and handlers in danger. Our methods are based on an understanding of horse behaviour and the careful implementation of techniques such as negative and positive reinforcement”

Applying a science based approach to horse rescues enables Redwings staff to capture and load groups of completely unhandled horses, often in less than ideal situations, such as large fields or rugged terrain.

“We use a combination of purposeful built portable equipment, manipulation of the desire of horses to remain with their peers and negative reinforcement techniques, such as the use of a plastic bag on a stick which is mildly aversive to encourage

horses to approach and load onto our rescue trucks. If we can't load the horses we can't rescue them" said Dr de Brauwere.

Many of horses rescued by Redwings are unwell in addition to being unhandled or extremely fearful of people and require extensive veterinary treatment which may be aversive. During the acute care phase, the focus is on bringing the horse back to health, however staff are trained to address behavioural issues to ensure that veterinary treatment does not compromise their mental state.

"Fear is the most common behavioural issue we deal with," noted Dr de Brauwere. "Many of our rescues are too sick to express the fear they may be experiencing, however once their health improves, their behaviour may become difficult to manage", said Dr de Brauwere. "We've found that a combination of purpose built equipment which minimise risks to horses and handlers and carefully applied negative reinforcement is very effective in reducing fear"

"In severe abuse cases, negative reinforcement is often the most effective approach, because frightened horses won't take food rewards. Negative reinforcement techniques, such as "pressure and release" enable our staff to very gradually habituate the horse to being touched and then handled more generally. As a home of last resort we aren't under pressure to move horses on quickly so can take the time needed to achieve the handling outcomes we need".

The application of science based handling and rehabilitation is a key element in Redwings Horse Sanctuary's operations. Redwings rescues over 200 horses per year and provides a permanent home for over 1200.

The International Society for Equitation Science (ISES) is a not-for-profit organisation that aims to facilitate research into the training of horses to enhance horse welfare and improve the horse-rider relationship. [www.equitationsscience.com](http://www.equitationsscience.com)

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