

Establishing balance with Nadine Francois

WORDS: ANNIE STUDHOLME • PICTURES: JOSEPH JOHNSON

Our Rider

Mark Wilson is a programme manager for Meridian Energy in Christchurch, and didn't start riding until he was in his mid-30s.

He started off hunting, turned quickly to eventing, and then after knee surgery put paid to his jumping activities, now concentrates on dressage.

"To my surprise I found I rather enjoyed it once I got over the 'Blokes don't do dressage' thing. I find the technical aspect of dressage more satisfying although have to say I miss the adrenalin rush of the cross-country."

Mark says he got off to a pretty decent start thanks to some "really tolerant" trainers, but his search for a simple, more classical approach led him to Nadine.

He has two riding horses: schoolmaster TB Glenmore Jim, who competes at Elementary, and the rising-five Littorio mare Westfield Lorenzo, or 'Whin', who he rides in our lesson.

Whin is still very green; Mark has had her since she was 18 months old and has been bringing her along slowly. He says she has a great attitude to training but can be a bit "of a stress bucket".

Our Trainer

Belgian dressage trainer **Nadine Francois**

has been teaching for more than 30 years. She was fortunate to have spent a decade learning from the Portuguese maestro, Nuno Oliveira, and her methods are very much based on his way of training, including the use of in-hand work.

Nadine's approach to training is simple: it's about producing a soft and happy horse working in the correct balance between the rider's legs and hands for his age and stage of training.

Nadine has her own stable in Portugal, where she rides and teaches. She has regular clinics in New Zealand, Australia, Denmark, Belgium and the United States. She has been visiting New Zealand for 10 years and her students include professional riders, national judges and keen amateurs.



Horses should work in the correct balance right from the beginning of their training, says Nadine. A young or untrained horse will work on a longer outline to achieve balance, and as he progresses through training, little by little the outline will change as he learns to work more with the hind legs.

To get the balance right, the rider has to learn to push, take and give separately, she says, bringing the horse between the legs and the hands. If the rider pushes with the legs and takes with the reins at the same time, most horses will contract, so balance can't be achieved.

Nadine explains that when the horse is positioned well between the rider's hands and legs, it's easier for him to work. Consequently he's not only more relaxed but working all the muscles of his body, which in turn equals a happier horse and a better partnership between horse and rider.

Establishing consistency

Nadine explains that Whin, like many young horses, has a tendency to be slow and short in her steps. As she learns to balance herself and use herself correctly, her frame will lengthen and she'll produce a better





Whin lacks impulsion and shows short steps and hollow back, and Mark is tense



Better position of the Whin's neck and body and also of Mark



Whin is starting to stretch (left) and also relax (right)



trot. As she is still very green, Nadine wants to focus on establishing consistency.

Straight away, Nadine starts working on Mark's position. She emphasises the importance of "little by little" pushing the horse's body into a frame. If you ask too much, too soon, the horse tends to be tense.

Every time Whin drops behind the vertical or he feels she's losing the contact, Nadine asks Mark to "push a little" without allowing her to get faster or shortening the reins.

"Voila! That's a better frame," she praises.

Keeping on a 20-metre circle, Nadine asks Mark to make transitions from rising to sitting trot, down to walk, and back to sitting trot again, and she doesn't want to see Whin's neck position or cadence change throughout.

After a few repetitions, she tells Mark to let Whin stretch. Stretching is especially important for young horses, as it gives them time to rest. "Because their muscles aren't stabilised you can't work them too long in one position or they'll tend to get tired and start resisting. It's best to give them a rest, practise their stretching, and then when you start again, it will be easier," says Nadine.

She wants Whin to be 'long and low', stretching down to the ground without increasing her speed; even in stretch, Mark is not to let Whin meander or rush as she pleases but must continue to push her into a steady contact.

As Whin is still quite hollow, Nadine says she needs frequent short breaks in which to stretch.



Practising stretch. At left, Whin is not stretching enough as the head and neck are low but the head is behind the vertical. At right the head and neck are not low enough



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Left: Nadine explains to give and push, so that the horse is less contracted goes into the direction of the contact. Right: Good trot. Whin's body has a consistent position, she is showing a bigger trot and better contact, and working more through her topline

Rinse and repeat

Back working on a 20m circle, Nadine again has Mark concentrate on transitions. "Take your time, each time rebalancing your horse," she says.

"When you do a transition, if the horse moves the position of the neck, you lose consistency. Often you have to keep repeating it until the moment you get that consistency. And every time you do that you are rebalancing the horse between your hand and your legs, and you improve his balance; even with a very young horse."

Nadine ensures Mark makes frequent changes of rein, and that he is always in control of the pace.

"The horse can't slow down by themselves. If they want to want to walk before you, you keep it going."

Moving sideways

Whin has only just started doing lateral work. In line with Nadine's way of teaching, she was first taught in-hand.

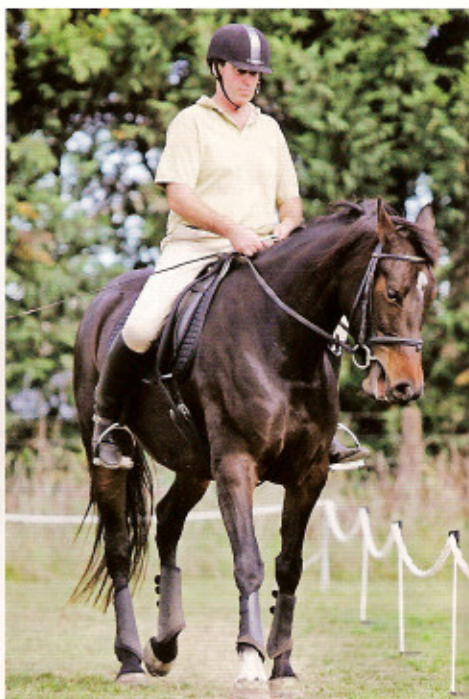
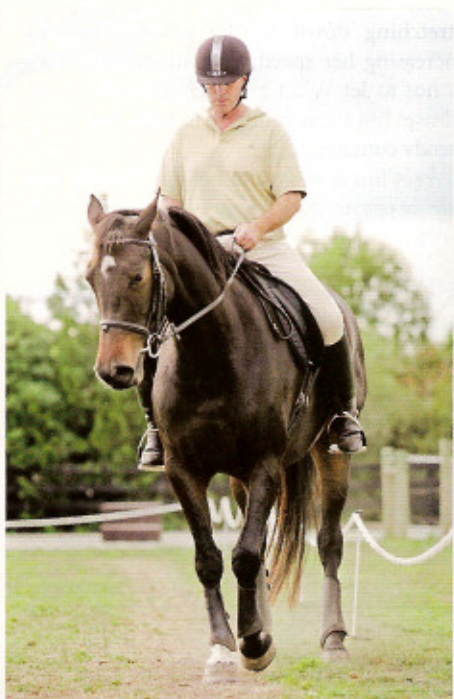
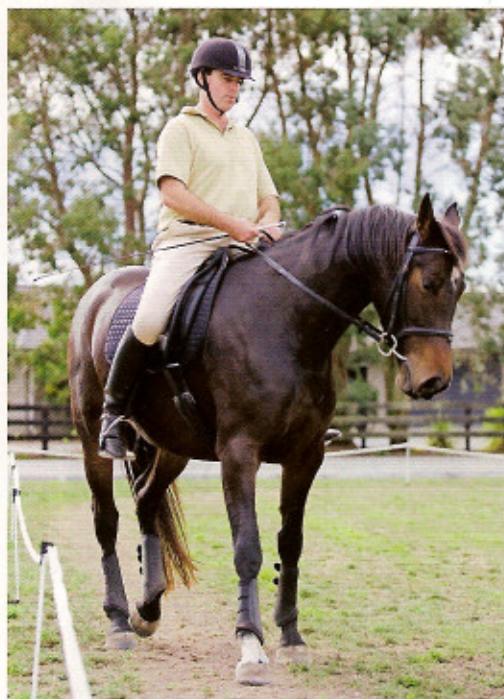
If the horse will allow it (some don't) Nadine thinks it's best to teach the horse from the ground, working them between the whip and the hand, because they don't have the added problem of worrying about the rider.

She also prefers to start off at the walk, as it's much easier for both horse and rider to learn when things are happening slower. She starts with shoulder-in and counter shoulder-in (haunches-in).

Nadine says when preparing for the transition to shoulder-in the rider needs to fix their position at 30 degrees, their hands following their body position, and then bring the horse over.

Nadine's top tips

- If you are losing your focus, your horse will be losing his focus. It's time for a break. Stretching is good for both of you. The break does not need to be long. Better shorter and often.
- Sense your horse's mood. If he's in a bad mood don't ask for too much, but work instead on confirming the basics. Tomorrow you can ask for more again.
- "Take your time and prepare, especially when you are working. A lot of people do it when they are competing because they have to do the exercise in a moment, but not when you're working. When you are working, take a little more time."



From left: Too much angle in in shoulder-in, and Whin running through her right shoulder; a better 30 degree angle in shoulder-in, and Whin relaxed; counter shoulder-in, good position of the horse, but still a little tense, visible by the opening of the mouth

"If you are doing it too much on the hands, you are working only on the neck and not the whole body."

Frequent changing of the rein from the right to the left will help to improve the horse's flexibility through the shoulders. It will also help improve the contact on the reins, explains Nadine.

Initially Whin is tense in her shoulder-in, but she gradually improves.

Nadine reminds Mark not to ask for more angle than 30 degrees. If he does, Whin tends to run to the right. Nadine says he needs to be quicker to correct his mare using his position, not his hands. When his hands aren't following his position, he's giving contradicting aids so the horse gets confused and starts to resist.

"There, when you are using your position to correct, it's much easier. Voila," praises Nadine. Immediately Mark can feel a difference.

For the moment Nadine only asks for shoulder-in at the walk because Whin lacks consistency at the trot.

"At the moment she is not ready. You have to confirm sitting trot, rising trot, small circles and stay a little longer in the trot before you can ask a little more in the lateral work," says Nadine.

Timing is everything

Mark has been having some major issues with his upwards canter transitions, due to his tendency to 'push' and hold with the reins at the same time.

Nadine prepares Mark for the transition to canter by alternating between slow and fast trot, making sure he slows the speed using his rising, his position, rather than pulling on the reins. This helps to position the horse more in front of the leg.



Too much contact in the canter, and Whin is hollowing and resisting



Better canter, with good position of the neck

"This way, in the moment you ask for canter she is already moving a little bit more forward."

"A little pushing. And slower, and canter. Push. Voila," says Nadine as Whin strikes off with the right leg almost immediately.

Mark is all smiles, but Nadine is quick to make more alterations to his position.



Nice position at walk

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"Don't bend too much to the right. If you start bending too much to the right, you start putting your weight over the right shoulder and she'll go on the wrong lead." And the instructions don't stop coming. "Lean a little more back. Put your leg a little more back. Left rein. Give her a little more rein, it's still a little too short in the rein. Longer."

"Longer?" questions Mark.

"Yes, longer!" says Nadine. "She needs her neck."

Whin's canter is visibly more tense on the left, and when asked which is her best rein, Mark says: "They are both lousy!"

Nadine says the key to getting good canter transitions is timing.

And when you're working on a circle with a young horse, ask for canter in the corner, NOT on the open side of a circle. That way the rider only has to think about the canter, not the direction as well.

Mark's thoughts

"Nadine's great," says Mark. "She has a very clear idea of what you should be doing and without making it complicated, she does a good job of getting it across, in an encouraging and supportive way. She breaks it down into simple steps – she doesn't give you 15 things to worry about!"

He is really pleased with Whin's improvements, and says that while people may have misconceptions about classical training, Nadine's emphasis is on establishing good, sound basics of balance, cadence and rhythm.

"The thing that's different is the attitude.



Mark gives Whin a well-deserved pat at the end of the lesson

With Nadine, you are giving yourself and your horse the time to learn how to do things." **H&P**

Thank you to Sarah Gray (james.gray@xtra.co.nz) for organising this Dream Lesson and also to the Flaxton Equestrian Centre for the use of their wonderful facilities.



Both horse and rider enjoying the lesson

Mark's homework

- **Mark needs to keep working on his position.** When Whin starts coming behind the contact, he needs to learn to push her on a little, not automatically shorten his reins. He still has a tendency to pull and push at the same time, which is compressing for the horse.
- **Lots of transitions** – walk to trot and back, rising trot to sitting trot and back – keeping the contact the same, pushing her forward from behind into the hand.
- **Remember to keep up lots of short breaks.** When Whin starts losing focus or consistency, it's time for a break, not an argument. She is a young horse and can't work for long periods of time. Little by little she'll be able to work and stay consistent for longer.
- **Don't be afraid to return to simple exercises as often as you need to** in order to confirm the basics. This you may need to do at times, even until the end of the training.