

'This is a great chance to give something back'

ON LOCATION

Steve Dennis visits the British Racing School in Newmarket to see eight former riders learning how to turn their skills to jockey coaching



BELLAMY? What time do you call this, Bellamy? A blushing Robert Bellamy eases himself quietly into the classroom, ignores the amused glances, finds a seat, opens his books. It's back to school for eight ex-jockeys, soon to become educators themselves.

Our scholars – Bellamy, John Bramhill, Alex Greaves, Michael Hills, Warren O'Connor, Neil Pollard, Gordon Power and Kim Tinkler – are diligently making notes as tutor Sue Ringrose, an equine sports educator who wrote the learning programme for this course, leads them through the nuances of this second session of the nine-stage project and pushes them gently towards the goal of becoming qualified jockey coaches, ready to mentor the next generation of apprentices and conditionals.

This morning, at the British Racing School in Newmarket – the course is divided between here and the Northern Racing College in Doncaster – the lesson is about how people absorb information in different ways, and how best to get a message across. The old method of a jolly good bollocking and a clip round the ear has fallen out of favour, it seems.

The kernel of the argument is that our ex-jockeys must find a way to transfer their knowledge – in many cases instinctive, unlearned skills – of horses and riding to their students in a manner they can understand and utilise. Ringrose works from the book, proceeding point by point in the prescribed fashion but often stopped short in the middle of a sentence by the irrepressible Yogi Breisner, the most twinkly and talkative of tutors, a mine of anecdotes and homilies all delivered with a winning enthusiasm.

"Coaching is a little like acting," he says. "You have to adapt your style to the individual, a method that works for one person may not be as successful with another."

Ringrose discusses the two poles on the 'coaching continuum', the 'directing style' and the 'facilitative style', essentially a sliding scale of coaching input from 'watch how I do it' to 'you do it and I'll observe'. Breisner brings Hills out in front of the class and asks the Derby-winning jockey to teach him how to ride. Hills puts what he's absorbed into action, makes a fair fist of it, earns Breisner's praise but also his advice to avoid empty rhetoric such as 'don't be nervous'. "If I'm already nervous, you telling me not to be nervous is probably going to make things worse," he says.

There's a lesson on goal-setting from Ringrose, backed up by Breisner's catchy TTTT approach – tiny tangible tickable targets, the science of marginal gains as applied to the learning process. "Make



learning fun," he says, following his own advice. "It's vital that your students buy in to you and your methods of coaching."

Before theory gives way to practice there's a short break, during which our scholars fall upon the chocolate-chip cookies in the way only ex-jockeys can and BHA vocational training manager Gill Greeves puts flesh on the bare bones of the Jockey Coach Training Programme, instigated by the BHA and now run by the BRS and NRC.

"It started as a pilot scheme in 2011 and that ran for three years until we opened the programme fully," she says. "There are 130 apprentices and conditionals on the programme at the moment, just over half the total number of those riders, and 23 qualified coaches including Mick Fitzgerald, John Reid, Rodi Greene and Mark Bradburne, to name just a few."

"This draft of eight former riders will enable us to expand the programme, to hopefully make sure that every young jockey has the opportunity to work with a mentor."

"Ex-jockeys have to go through quite a rigorous selection process before they're accepted on a course; they pay the registration fee and then the course is funded for them. The overarching programme is funded through a contribution from the Levy Board and by a deduction from riding fees."

BREISNER takes charge as the class moves outside for a spot of fieldwork. Lulu Stanford sits astride a mechanical horse, a young apprentice looking for assistance as she makes her way in the racing world. This is a 'watch how I do it' exercise, Breisner setting the example and the class watching closely. He asks Stanford about her level of experience, what aspects of her skill-set need attention here, what she wants to achieve from this spell of tuition, and Stanford identifies a weakness when using the whip with her left hand.

(Clockwise from main picture) Aspiring jockey coaches in the classroom at the British Racing School; Kim Tinkler, Robert Bellamy and Michael Hills with tutor Sue Ringrose; Bellamy helps Mhari Pickering; Lulu Stanford is coached by Yogi Breisner

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Breisner praises her riding style, asks her to use the whip right-handed, works briefly on that side before moving to the other side, where Stanford is noticeably less effective. He shows her what he wants her to do, she follows his instructions, haltingly at first and then with more confidence, and after around 20 minutes Stanford is using the whip in her left hand with far greater ease and accuracy. When she has her first ride for gov'nor Michael Bell, in the not-too-distant future, she'll have few problems in this area.

This is the desired framework for such encounters – find out what's required, decide on a course of action, ensure that the pupil can carry out the advice, work together towards improvement. Our ex-jockeys provide feedback on the aspects they have identified – Greaves notes the clear instructions from the pupil, how the tutor made the exercise enjoyable, how Stanford got it right without realising she was doing so. O'Connor queries the absence of warm-up or warm-down, drawing praise from Breisner, a stone he'd left unturned. Ringrose conducts the debrief, condensing the exercise into a few salient points that will form the foundation of countless such tutorials in the future; there is a lot of scribbling in notebooks.

"There's nothing like this in Ireland and hopefully we can take our qualifications back over there and get something going," says O'Connor, who, with Power, travelled over this morning and will return to Ireland tonight.

"It would have been a great help to me if this had been available when I was riding. There were people who helped me along the way, of course, particularly Tommy Carmody, and this is a great chance to make use of all my experience and give something back. Hopefully I can make a difference."

Power stresses the point that so many other sports provide tuition and mentoring to youngsters on a personal basis, that this represents a great way for racing to follow suit. "It's something that's needed badly at home and it's fantastic that we're being