This is a great chance to give something back

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 left hand.

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 ‘directioning 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 easy chit-chat 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, haltingly at first and then less effective. He shows her what he wants her to do, badly at home and it’s fantastic that we’re being tutored.

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.

Stanford sits astride a mechanical horse, a young apprentice looking for assistance as she makes her way in the racing world. This is ‘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.

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 go’ver’ 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 untouched. 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.

“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.”

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 available when we needed it.”