

REINING IN ROAD NERVES

If your horse gets spooked on the road, it's important to restore his confidence as soon as possible. Trainer Stef Eardley helps four Petplan Equine customers overcome common traffic issues

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Terror of big vehicles

Seven-year-old Cob Monty is owned by Sally Parker. They enjoy hacking out together, occasional lessons and attending local shows.

Sally: Although Monty is generally good on the road, he's petrified of big vehicles, particularly lorries and tractors. He's stabled near a dairy farm, so we come across them often.

Stef: Many horses are scared of big vehicles, but you can beat Monty's anxieties by giving him lots of positive experiences around them. To start with, turn him out in a field next to a busy road so that he can see and hear the traffic. Next, ask the farmer if he minds you taking Monty to the dairy farm to show him the machinery. Lead Monty in a bridle and begin slowly by walking him up to the vehicles, encouraging him to get closer and closer. Reward him with a treat when he's calm, and consider feeding him his dinner by the vehicles so that he associates them with good things.

Once he's happy, ride him past the vehicles. When you eventually take to the road again (making sure both you and Monty are wearing high-viz clothing), hack out with a horse that is totally 'bombproof' to show Monty there's nothing to worry about. Wherever possible, signal to drivers to slow down or even stop,

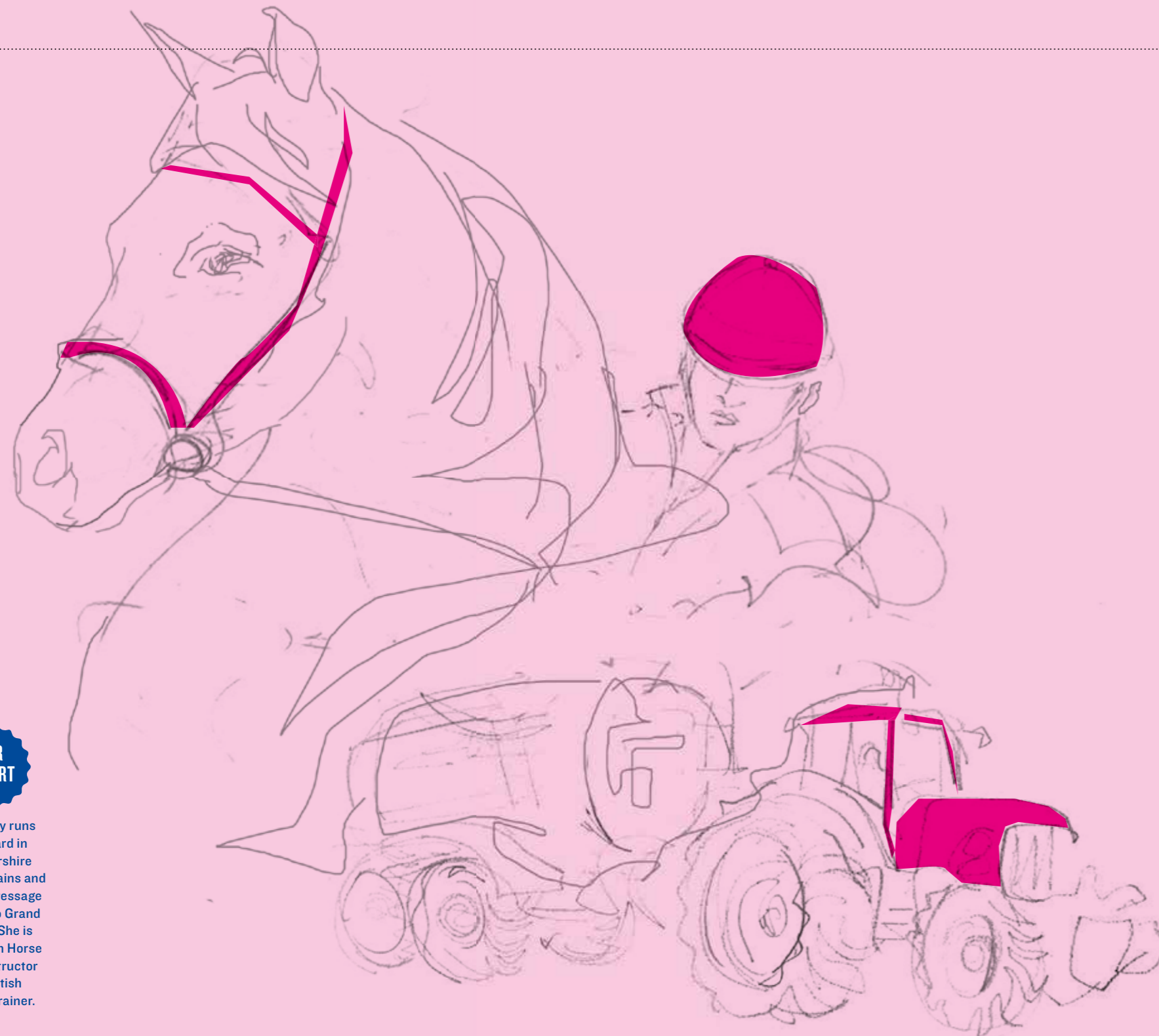
making sure to thank them. Give yourself plenty of room when you pass each other, or pull into a lay-by. If it's safe to do so, let Monty turn and face vehicles coming up behind so he doesn't feel as if he's being chased.

One week later...

Sally: After we spent time at the farm, Monty was more confident with the vehicles, even when we hacked out. Unfortunately, we had a setback when a lorry driver turned his engine back on too quickly and it scared him. It's made Monty nervous again – what can I do?

Stef: You need to desensitise Monty to the sound of an engine – you can do this with your own car. Stand him by your car and ask someone to turn the engine on and off. Each time the vehicle is started up, Monty will react. Every time he calms down, reward him with a treat, until eventually, he isn't bothered by the noise.

In due course, take him back to the farm and do the same with the farm vehicles. You can prepare him for an engine starting up or, as is common with lorries, the air brakes hissing, by imitating the noise yourself just beforehand. Monty won't jump so much when the real engine starts or the brakes hiss because he'll be concentrating on the sound you're making.' ▶



OUR EXPERT

Stef Eardley runs a livery yard in Gloucestershire where she trains and competes dressage horses up to Grand Prix level. She is also a British Horse Society instructor and a British Dressage trainer.

He won't stand still

Karen Turner owns Rambo, a four-year-old Welsh Cob X Thoroughbred gelding. Karen hopes to compete in a variety of disciplines.

Karen: I did a lot of training with Rambo on the roads when breaking him, so he's very good in traffic. His only problem is that he won't stand still at junctions. What can I do?
Stef: When riding on the road, you must have control. If your horse has issues halting, spend time at home practising until he stands still. When asking for a halt, make sure your aids are clear – prepare for the transition by sitting up tall and deep in the saddle, and gently asking with your voice and reins. Don't get into a

pulling match with Rambo – use short, gentle squeezes on the rein rather than one continuous pull. When your horse stands, reward him by relaxing the rein and giving him a pat or a treat.

Keep Rambo practising the halt by asking him to stand in various situations at home too, such as when walking through a gateway. You could also set up poles in the shape of a T-junction and practise standing in front of them.

Two weeks later...

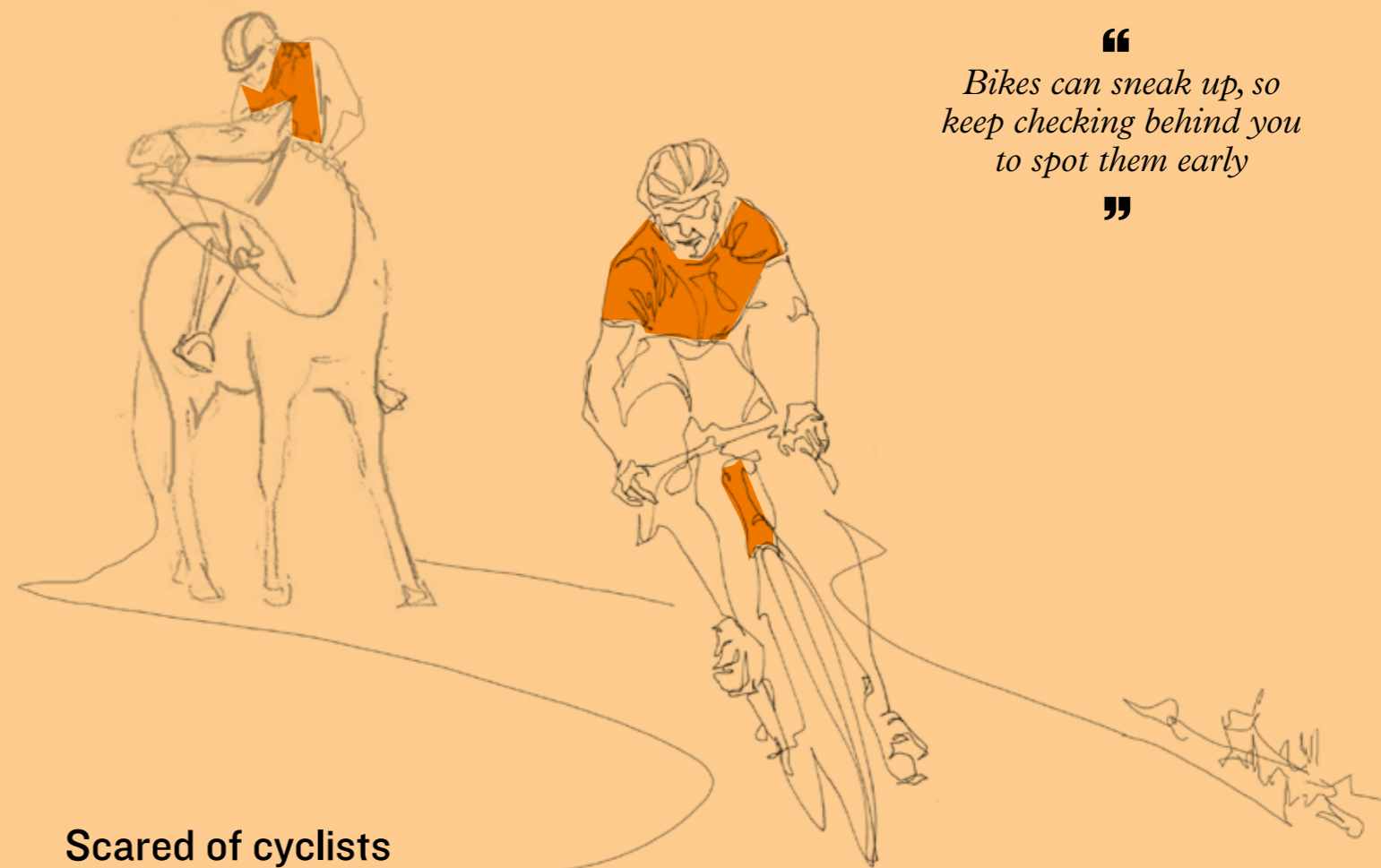
Karen: Practising our halt transition regularly has made such a difference. Now, instead of getting anxious, Rambo stands and turns his

head for a treat. My only issue is that he isn't quite so keen to stand on the way home.

Stef: It's quite common for horses to speed up when heading home, but hacking out with company will help Rambo to relax. I also suggest finding a safe place to stop on your way home, such as a lay-by, where you can stand quietly for 10 minutes and feed Rambo treats. When he's relaxed, you can carry on your way – this will help stop him rushing back.

Vary your hacks so that he doesn't anticipate the route, and reward him with pats and praise whenever he does stand still – even if it's only for a few seconds – so that he starts to associate his improving patience with a good feeling.

“
Don't get into a pulling match – use short, gentle squeezes on the rein
 ”



“
Bikes can sneak up, so keep checking behind you to spot them early
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Scared of cyclists

Ben, an 11-year-old ex-racehorse, is on loan to Laura Jones from a racehorse charity. They enjoy rides and Riding Club events together.

Laura: Ben is good on the road except when it comes to bicycles. Once, a cyclist came up fast behind us and made him jump, and now he's frightened of them. What can I do?

Stef: Park a bike up where Ben can see it on a daily basis so he gradually learns it isn't a threat to him. After a week or so, walk him up to it, letting him sniff and touch it, offering

a reward when he stays calm. Once that's working well, get a friend (preferably someone Ben knows) to ride the bike near him and practice riding him alongside them. Ask them to come towards him and from behind him, too.

When you're on the road again, hack with a bike-safe companion and wear hi-viz clothing. Bikes can sneak up, so keep checking behind you to spot them early. Try turning Harry's head slightly to the right when a bike is approaching from behind so that he sees it in plenty of time, and always thank cyclists for slowing down. ▷

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Spooking at objects in the road

Troy is an eight-year-old Irish Draught owned by Amy Ward. They enjoy showing classes and competing in dressage at Intermediate I Level.

Amy: We have some lovely quiet lanes to hack out on, but Troy is spooked by objects such as wheelie bins and traffic cones. He'll stop still, and refuse to go past. Do you have any advice?

Stef: This is a common problem, but one that can be resolved with a little homework. First, you'll need some props – ideally, the very things your horse finds scary. Set up an obstacle course of your props and quietly show Troy each one. Do this in-hand to start with.

Let him go up to and sniff each object, and praise him when he does. You could also ask a friend to rustle a plastic bag and bang shut the lid of the wheelie bin, so Troy gets used to the noises they make.

Once he's used to the objects, you can practise riding past them, sitting tall and encouraging Troy with your voice and legs to keep him moving forwards.

When you're both feeling more confident, hack out with a less spooky horse that won't react to these triggers. The more Troy sees these things and the more confidence he gains in himself, the better he will become. ○



RIDER ROAD SAFETY

Before you hit the road, make sure you...

Do

Work through issues at home before setting out

Ask for help from a trainer if you get stuck

Always wear a riding hat that meets current safety standards

Kit out yourself and your horse with hi-viz, reflective clothing

Thank polite drivers – a smile and nod is sufficient if you need to keep both hands on the reins

Carry a charged mobile phone in case of emergencies

Don't

Ride out on an inexperienced or frightened horse without a steady companion

Hack during busy times such as rush hour

Ride more than two abreast

Be on the road in poor or fading light

Push your horse when he's scared – positive experiences are key

Hack alone if you or your horse are nervous

