

'You can't be angry around horses'

How horses helped one young offender get his life back on track

Jim* was a young offender convicted of Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH), when as part of his sentence plan he was put on TheHorseCourse - a course that's been running for three years at HMP Portland to address offending behaviour, particularly for violent offenders who are disruptive and disengaged. It's designed to help them learn, and practice, fundamental mental and emotional skills and encourages them to be responsible for their own calmness and communication.

The course is made up of seven sessions packed into one week, and by the end of it, Jim achieved his Parelli Natural Horsemanship Level 1. This level tests the pupils' ground handling skills and the relationships they build with their horse. Jim had to achieve several tasks, including sending his horse around cones in a figure of eight and over a jump, leading without pulling, and much more. He was video assessed, not just on the tasks he performed, but on the quality of the relationship he built with his horse. The assessors look at whether the horse appears trusting and confident with him, whether he could adjust his body language to reassure his horse, and how clearly Jim 'asked' for a task, rather than bullying or confusing his horse.

The importance of Jim's experience with TheHorseCourse extends far beyond the horsemanship achievement. It has helped him gain emotional control and self-awareness skills, and make changes to his behaviour, as well as gaining insights about himself that he's been able to use outside the course, and especially since he's left prison.

The Parelli system demands precise

body language and clarity in communication - something all of us could benefit from, but perhaps especially people like Jim who've ended up in prison. The horses on his course are Parelli Level 3 or above, so they're trained to be extremely sensitive and responsive. That, combined with the rule that there must always be slack in the rope, is a recipe for a lot of feedback!

"The horses can read your emotions, so you can't be angry around them and expect them to be calm and do what you want," explains Jim.

"When asking the horses to do something tricky, like place a hind foot onto a target, I'd often get frustrated and angry. The course has taught me to find a

way to stay calm and guide my horse without putting too much pressure on him. One of the main things I've learnt from the course is how to be patient."

While he was still on the course, Jim started putting his new skills into practice back on the prison wing. He found that if he let go of his

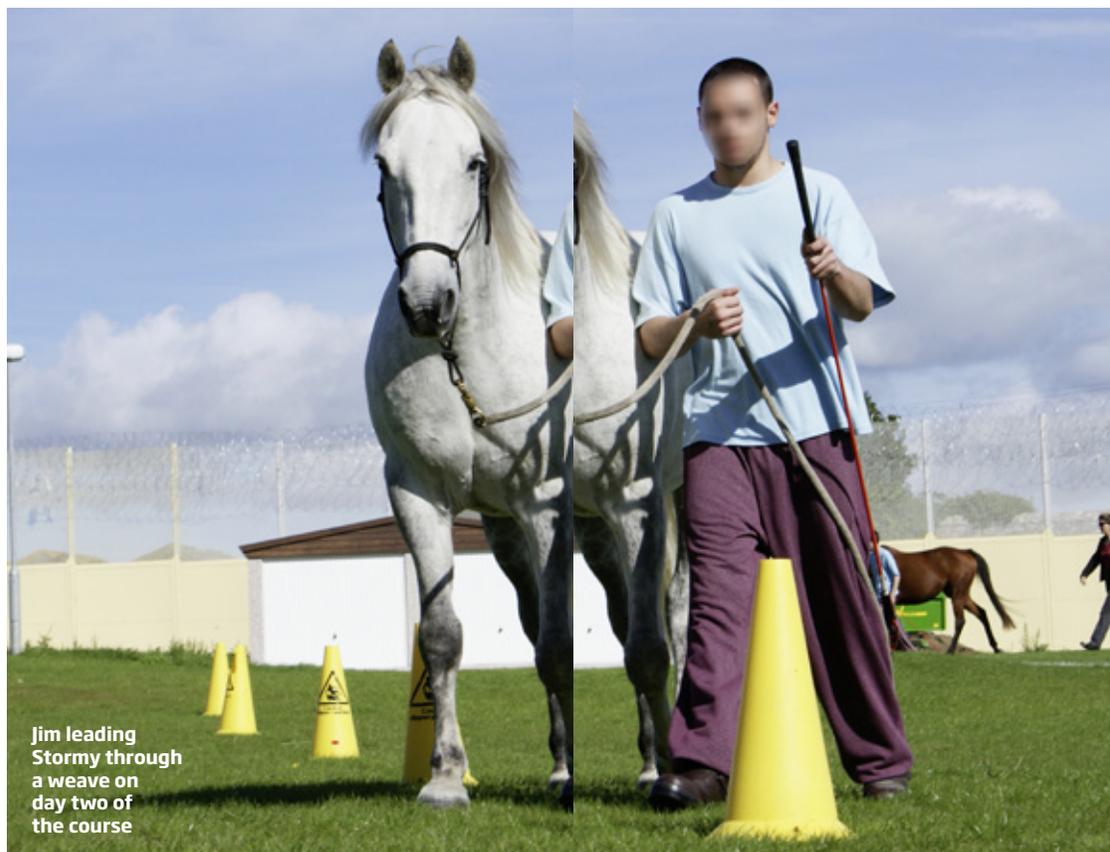
tension and had a calm, relaxed attitude, there was less confrontation with staff and other prisoners.

"Fights break out so easily in prison, but the horses teach you not to let things escalate," says Jim.

Learning how to take control when the red mist descends is vital for young men like Jim, who often lash out without thinking about the consequences. This work with horses helps them to practice being calm and focused even when pushed out of their comfort zone.

Jim's experience is not unique. A carefully crafted evaluative study** of the course demonstrates that the results are astonishingly successful, with a 70%

'Horses teach you not to let things escalate'



Jim leading Stormy through a weave on day two of the course

reduction in adjudications and negative staff entries about people who complete the course.

In his exit interview from the offenders centre, Jim said he'd learnt a lot about sticking with a task. "I'm normally the kind of person who starts something and I'm really focused at first, but then if anything goes wrong or I reach a stumbling block I get frustrated and just give up. The course taught me to keep going and never give up, no matter what."

This new attitude paid off while Jim was still at HMP Portland, as he was given the chance to do a Railtrack NVQ. This is a six-week course with lots of

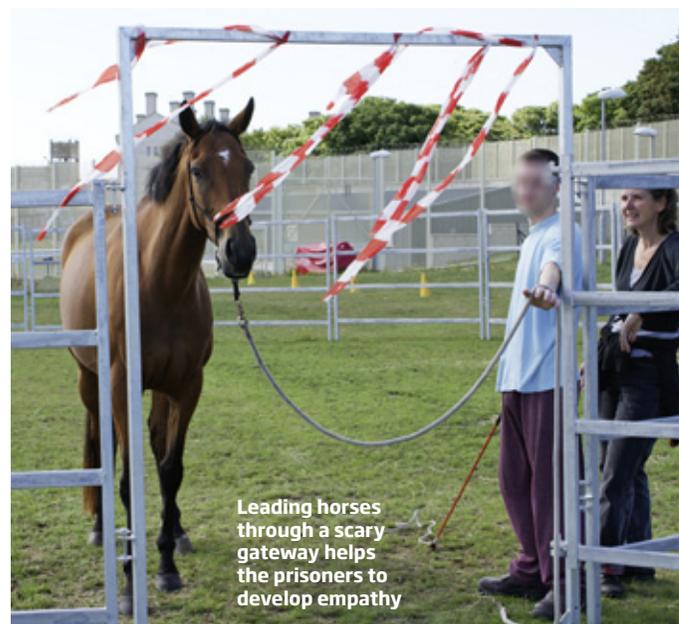
classroom work, but he stuck at it and gained the qualification.

Since leaving prison six months ago, Jim has kept himself on the straight and narrow - his probation officer describes him as a model ex-offender. Together they're trying to start Jim's career in the rail industry, but meanwhile he's avoided returning to his old lifestyle and he's working as a kitchen and bathroom fitter.

We asked Jim whether he's still benefiting from his work with the horses. "Yes, very much so," he says. "A great example is my driving test. I failed the theory section three times, but instead of giving up, I kept on re-booking and studying until I passed. I shocked myself to be honest - in the old days I'd just have given up and driven illegally. Even my mum has noticed the change in me."

Jim was sceptical about the value of working with the horses at first. "Initially I didn't really want to do the course and I had no interest in horses, but by the end I developed a really strong relationship with a horse called Stormy and I learnt so much, it's a great course."

*Real name withheld for legal reasons
** "Interim Evaluation Findings, TheHorseCourse, HMP / YO1 Portland", Professor Meek, Teesside University)



Leading horses through a scary gateway helps the prisoners to develop empathy



The horses arrive for a day at work!

Add your support

TheHorseCourse is a registered charity and relies on donations. To support its work please donate at <https://mydonate.bt.com/charities/thehorsecourse>