



## Winning Confidence

There now began the long process of trying to win the filly's confidence. She was extremely jumpy but intelligent. However, when faced with a new situation that either worried or frustrated her, she would fight rather than give in. So Shuna's first priority was to teach her riding manners without dominating her, as any type of force used on Don would create an all out battle which as Shuna says "I was not certain I could win". After several days of careful handling Shuna started to lead her out in hand around the farm, and then began to teach her to Lunge. After several sessions of mad galloping on the end of the lunge line Don began to relax and at last began to move around Shuna at a walk. Once she accepted the idea of training, Don proved to be a quick learner and accepted the saddle with only a small buck, and backing her proved no problem. Within a few days Shuna was taking Don out for short rides with the reins attached to the lungeing Cavesson. As Shuna describes it, "This is when we hit our big problem. Don enjoyed hacking with other horses, but always wanted to be in the lead, at whatever pace, and would resist any restrictions placed on her. She fought against the reins, whether they were on the Cavesson or on the bit. And as I hoped to do dressage on her eventually, I was afraid that all this fighting would ruin her mouth, and I knew I had to find some other way of riding her".

## Chance meeting

As so often happens in life, serendipity paid a large part in the next stage of Don's training. Whilst Shuna and her husband were on holiday in Bermuda, a chance meeting with an American horseman helped her to put into practice the ideas that she had been harbouring for several years, about riding horses without bridles. John O'Neill had lived with horses all his life, worked as a cowboy, ridden in rodeos and was now in "Show business". And John rode all his horses without bridles. "Over the years I built up a strong friendship with John and I learnt a great deal about horsemanship from him", says Shuna. "On visiting his home in New York State, I immediately realised that this was the type of horsemanship that I had been looking for." During her holiday with John and his wife, she spent many hours studying John's methods of gaining the horse's trust. Importantly, when he starts off the horses, he teaches basic aids by using a Bosal hackamore, which he takes off when he feels the horse and he have

gained a mental communication. He doesn't use the bridle again for any further training. After 10 days with John, Shuna returned to Aberdeen with a strong liking for Western riding and many new ideas to try out with her fiery little mare. However, these plans had to wait for a few months as Shuna discovered she was pregnant with her twin boys.

## Acceptance

Shuna still managed to find a few hours every day to work with Don, but she did not get back in the saddle again until the boys were a few months old and settled into a routine. Luckily, once Shuna was back in the saddle again Don accepted the control aids through the Bosal, in a way that she wouldn't with a conventional bridle and bit. Don was by now four years old and after a few more months of work in the Bosal, Shuna felt that it was time to try Don without the bridle. By now Don was listening to the leg aids and Shuna felt they definitely had a strong mental communication. So she left the bridle at home, and set out on a ride with just a light strap around Don's neck. On the first day Shuna and Don rode for three miles along trails at all paces, followed by 20 minutes of schooling. "Never in the whole ride did I feel that she was not going to do what I asked of her", smiles Shuna. From then on, Don did all her training without a bridle until much later on, when she was retrained for Dressage, where use of a bridle is a rule in competition. "Those few months of building up this close relationship with Don probably gave me the greatest pleasure that I have ever had in horsemanship".

As Shuna now says, "most of my friends thought I was mad". So she kept quiet about her bridle-less riding.

## Letting the world know

By now Strathdon was jumping well and was much happier schooling without a bridle. Shuna decided to "come out" whilst teaching a local Riding Club class. In the class were two young ladies mounted on big four year olds. The horses were both wearing pelhams, standing martingales

and one also had a drop noseband, and Shuna was informed that they had to be ridden in this tack as they were "unstoppable". Shuna then committed herself to proving at the next Club rally that horses could be ridden in control, over jumps and in company, without the use of such severe tack.

Word had got around, and at the next Riding Club rally seventy five people turned up, instead of the usual twenty five, to see Shuna riding Strathdon without a bridle. Strathdon was by now a well-developed four year old and exceedingly full of herself. However, she behaved impeccably and Shuna demonstrated simple movements, lateral work, obedience work and a course of small jumps. The crowd loved it, and Shuna's secret was out. Unbeknown to Shuna one of the audience was taking photographs, and the following month a full page picture of her and Don appeared in one of the popular monthly horse magazines. Her secret was out!

## Communication

By the time Don was rising five years old Shuna had re-introduced her to the bit in order that she could compete in showing and dressage. But Shuna decided never to jump her in a bridle with a bit as she would not have the same freedom of head and neck movement that she had so far enjoyed by riding free. Interestingly, at this time Shuna also noticed that there was much less mental communication between them when Don was being ridden in a bridle. That summer of 1971 Don competed in local shows, being ridden side-saddle in small hunter class, and at the same time being ridden bridleless in the show-jumping classes. Soon she was entered in larger shows and combined training competitions. As

