

Helen Cole

Diversification and dedication are the keys to succeeding in the horseworld says Helen Cole, newly crowned BHS Young Instructor of the Year

FI would urge anyone thinking of a career with horses to find themselves a mentor. I've found that if you're willing to put yourself out for someone they will reward you with opportunities and advice that may otherwise be hard to come by.

Maggie Doel BHSI has been my trainer since I was 12 years old. She has been an invaluable guide through my career decisions. Thanks to the bursary I've received and Maggie's encouragement, I'm now working towards gaining my BHSI.

Teaching has been a large part of my life. I started in my teens at the Pony Club after I got my B test. As my teaching has progressed, I've created a strong base of freelance clients.

I'm interested in the psychological side of teaching and want to be as supportive to my clients as Maggie and others have been to me. For me, it's not just about teaching a 1hr lesson, it's about being involved in decisions and acting more as a coach. This may mean helping clients deal with disappointment as well as enjoying their successes, which can often involve lengthy phone calls.

Making a success of a career in equestrianism has involved a combination of things. I've been fortunate to have a good education and I have a BSc in geography. During the time I spent studying for my degree, I kept up the teaching, competing and training for my exams.

I never really considered an equine degree, as I was already working my way through the BHS exam system and I believed a geography degree would add another string to my bow.

It is hard to make a living out of freelance teaching when you're first qualified and it has been necessary for me to have other sources of income. The foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2001 curtailed my teaching, as I live on a farm. As a result, I started temping and secured a job as a policy adviser with the Countryside Agency (now Natural England). This part-time job provides an income and gives me the added benefits of paid holiday, sick pay and a pension.

It's not until you get to the point where you feel you haven't got enough hours in

the day to keep the other jobs going that it's safe to rely on freelance teaching — I am approaching this point.

With the help of family backing and a Defra rural enterprise grant, I have been able to establish a livery/training yard at my family's former dairy farm. My hope is that by starting my own business, I can sustain employment within the industry and make it a long-term career.

Had I not held the BHSII, it is unlikely that planning permission or the Defra grant would have been awarded; I had to prove my competency to run the business we were proposing.

Dedication is a large part of making one's own luck — perhaps more so in equestrianism than other fields. My advice is to get a good balance of qualifications and practical experience. Be prepared to make sacrifices over pay and working hours

to gain high-quality, practical experience.

When I started working with horses, I was operating out of

cowsheds and teaching and riding in muddy fields, I had to box my horses to get the use of a school — but I never lost my desire to improve.

To be a successful teacher, you need to be self-motivated and continually strive to improve. You never reach a point when you know it all — ideas are always developing.

If you're able, make sure you get insurance against injury and, if you can, contribute to a pension, as in sport there are always risks.

Getting to where I am now at 30 has involved years of dedication, but it's worth it. My passion is competition riding and now, with some youngsters I'm training on, I'm hoping I have all the ingredients in place to take that forward.

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