



Jeanette Brakewell learnt how to overcome Over To You's conformation issues

EVERY now and then an unlikely champion comes along to remind us that a truly great horse is so much more than the sum of his parts.

Despite his goose rump, cow hocks or some other frowned-upon defect, this unconventional hero puts his best foot forward to triumph over his perfectly formed peers. Could it be that correct training and management — and a big heart — can make up for a horse's physical flaws?

If certain top riders had been less willing to overlook a few faults in conformation, we might have been denied some of our most memorable winners.

Take King William, who gave eventer Mary King her first Badminton win and partnered her at two Olympic Games.

"I was very worried about buying him as a five-year-old because he had such poor limb conformation," recalls Mary. "Both hocks had curbs and he was pigeon-toed and slightly tied-in below the knee, but he was one of the soundest horses I've ever completed. He was so light and athletic over the ground."

Olympic eventing team medallist Tankers Town was pigeon-toed, according to Sharon Hunt, while Shane Reeves reveals that the front feet of his prolific showjumping winner World Cruise turned in to an alarming degree.

"It would usually be enough to put me off, but it was never a problem for him," says Shane. "Some say toes are better turned in than out, as it's slightly easier on the tendons."

Showjumper Tim Stockdale had reservations about Parcial, who later won a Horse of the Year Show grand prix and took Tim

to the World Equestrian Games.

"Percy had a distorted back end with one hindleg longer than the other," says Tim. "He had a very unattractive trot that rocked about a bit and was slightly uneven, but you didn't notice anything at canter. It was why I was able to purchase him, as it meant he wasn't mega-bucks."

"I wouldn't rule out buying a horse with vet issues if we could manage the problem and he could do the job," says Tim. "There are lots of wonderfully conformed horses with perfect X-rays that haven't got the talent. You weigh it up and you're aware that you're gambling a bit."

'He was shaped like a teapot'

COMPROMISES must occasionally be made, especially if funds are limited. Your new horse might not be picture perfect, but how can training help overcome his conformation defects?

Jeanette Brakewell employed specific tactics with her "teapot-shaped" eventing megastar Over To You.

"He had a high head carriage and quite a dipped back, with a very elasticated neck that would quickly come up and back at you," explains Jeanette. "For the dressage I had to work him a lot lower to stretch him over the topline. I warmed him up as best I could so he was obedient and listening, but didn't try to produce an outline until he was in the arena."

Sometimes conformation is not wrong, just unsuitable. When Steph Croxford paid £2,500 for Mr President, she never dreamed that he would become a grand prix dressage horse.

"He was a typical part-Gelderlander, built for driving," says Steph. "His biomechanics for his

THE CONFORMATION CONDUNDRUM

SHOULD you invest in a horse with a conformation quirk? Consider these points before you buy:

> Put feet first

"If he doesn't have quality feet, don't even bother starting," says eventer Sharon Hunt. "And look at how he moves — does he jump and land lightly? Eventing is so tough on horses these days, with the turns, the twists and the terrain."

> Have vision

"Into The Blue was a foot higher behind than in front as a three-year-old," says show and dressage rider Louise Bell of her working hunter champion. "As long as a young horse has correct limbs and good feet, with everything else sort of in the right place, he will get better. You need an experienced eye, however, so ask an expert if you're unsure."

> Factor in age

A horse already proving himself in competition, despite a fault, might be a safer bet.

"If he's 10 or 11 and has never had a problem, he probably never will," says Tim Stockdale.

> Be choosy

"You have to be stringent about not running a horse with a conformation issue on unsuitable ground," says eventer Lucinda Fredericks, issuing a reminder that ongoing management of a defect requires self-discipline as well as money and expertise. "You can't be greedy."

> Think positively

Don't write off something less than ideal. "I can't afford the perfect raw material," says Steph Croxford, who jokes that she "splashed out" £4,000 on her latest grand prix prospect Mr Hyde. "That's why I work with — and cherish — what I've got."

breed and type were correct — he was very strong in the back, but quite flat. He naturally wanted to carry his head in the carriage frame. For dressage, however, there should be true roundness.

"The judges continually commented that 'Mr P' was tight in the back and short in the neck," she adds. "But he was short in the neck. I couldn't add an extension!"

"When he gained more weight and condition his driving frame became less obvious. And while he never did particularly well at lower levels, he found the more difficult moves easy. He could piaffe and passage all day."

Dressage Olympian Richard Davison, who trained the pair, points out that no horse is perfect. It's a case of weighing up positives and negatives, he argues, and asking yourself whether any conformational challenges can be managed.

"When it comes to lack of straightness of limbs, I take into account if these are fore or hind," he says. "Top-level dressage places a

“For dressage he needs the look of a horse that was born to fly and loves it — not a square peg being forced into a round hole”

Andrew Day Biomechanical specialist