



Jock Hutchison, (far left, in a stetson) introduces the five PROs including Karen Hill, second from right, to their horses.

Back from the front

Charity Horseback UK works with injured servicemen and women recovering from mental and physical trauma. Sara Walker spent the day finding out more.

In 2008, Jock Hutchison, a former captain with the RM commandoes, left the private security firm he'd built up from scratch and moved with wife Emma and his three daughters to Aboyne on the edge of the Scottish Highlands to start a horse breeding farm.

Photographs: Tania Kindersley, Horseback UK

A self-confessed horse addict all his life, Jock spent several youthful years in the USA learning Western horsemanship, and planned to breed a Quarter Horse/Thoroughbred cross to combine agility with speed and stamina.

After a long search he found a very dilapidated smallholding on the edge of the Cairngorm National Park and was in the process of re-building it by hand when a



A double amputee from the British Limbless Ex-Servicemen's Association works with Jock's Quarter Horse Nimitz.





Jock rides ex-sprinter Peopletan Brook with a Western saddle and rope halter.

former colleague got in touch. The colleague was concerned about the plight of 16 young soldiers who'd done a brutal tour of duty in Afghanistan, and who'd seen nine members of their unit killed and many badly injured. Thinking that the farm would be an ideal place for them to recover, Jock spent the next two years working out a suitable programme, with input from many organisations, charities and individuals including the injured soldiers.

The idea was such a success that Jock began to run the courses officially for servicemen and women suffering physical injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and now Horseback UK has six permanent staff, 30 horses, dozens of volunteers and 420 course graduates.

When I arrive at the centre on a bright, sunny morning, five PROs (Personal Recovery Officers) are being put through their paces, trying out a shortened version of the course so they can recommend it to the men and women they support. The PROs are responsible for transitioning the dozen or so injured servicemen in their care back into the next stage of their life, either civilian life or a return to active service. The group have been allocated a horse each, and are assembled in a small sand paddock to practice their handling skills, under the watchful eye of the Horseback UK staff.

PRO Karen Hill takes a break to explain, "My role is to support my charges in any way I can, whether that's answering questions about council tax or helping them to look for new careers.

"I'm on day two of the course, and I'm definitely seeing the benefits. It's a one-on-one relationship, just you and the animal. It definitely makes you less selfish and inward-looking."

The course involves a lot of groundwork, to help the novice handlers feel comfortable around the horses, and as the five PROs lead their horses past me on the way to the arena, I'm surprised at how relaxed and confident they look at such an early stage of their training, as many are handling horses for the first time.

"We use a Western style of riding, as it's easier for the clientele, and we adapt what we do to what they can do," says Jock.

The main instructor is Jock's wife Emma, assisted by yard manager Anna Andersson.



Photographs: Tania Kindersley, Horseback UK

"All the attendees have to fill in a pre-registration form, detailing their previous experience and answering a couple of questions," explains Anna. "This means we can use our experience to match the horse to the trainee."

All the course attendees receive a briefing pack beforehand, which helps Emma and Anna in the matching process. Day one consists of a talk about the psychology of the horse, then the group meet their equine partners and learn grooming and handling.

Much of the briefing is carried out in military language, with hats and boots being referred to as Personal Safety Equipment (PSE). Although Jock's Western roots mean he prefers to wear a stetson to ride his own horses, every attendee is meticulously fitted with a hat, suitable boots and a body protector as required.

"It's very important for the guys to feel they're coming into a familiar

environment," explains Jock, who's tall and wiry with seemingly inexhaustible energy reserves. "Most of them have never been around a horse before, and most are coming out of a long period of recovery from physical injury or PTSD. It's important that they feel the courses are run by the boys for the boys.

"We think of ourselves as a transit lounge, a stopping off point on the way to recovery. Horses want certainty, leadership, respect, and working with them helps the guys to be part of something again, make decisions and integrate with another community."

In Horseback UK's relaxed, friendly, non-judgemental atmosphere, the soldiers can move away from being 'an amputee' or 'a PTSD case', and move towards being an individual again.

One person who's seen the benefits of the charity at firsthand is Corporal Jay Hare.

Tall and athletic-looking, with clear blue eyes (one of which I later discover is false), Jay lost a leg in an explosion in Afghanistan and has been involved with Horseback UK almost from the beginning.

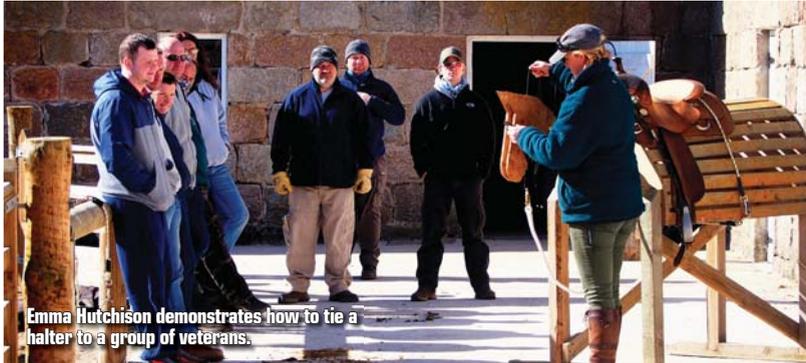
"It's been a really interesting journey," he explains. "Four years ago I came up here and met Jock, and helped him rebuild the farm, it was great to be working in a team again."

A serving Royal Marine, Jay has been drafted to Horseback UK for the last two years and now has his own horse, a palomino mare named Jodie. On completion of his time with the military he'll take on the role of the charity's Head of Corporate.

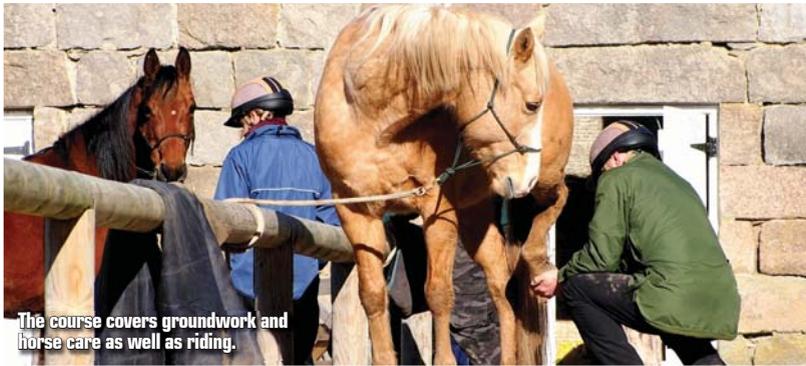
"All our courses are carefully tailored to the individual group," he explains. "The people who come here might have all sorts of different issues, such as the fear



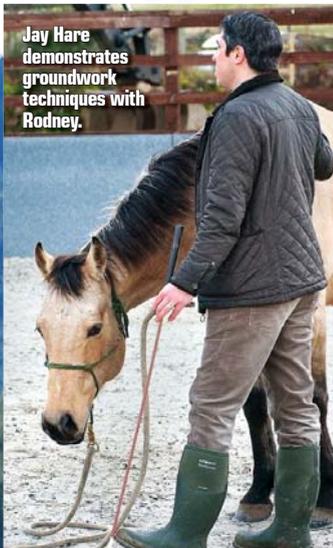
Ex-polo pony Nino follows one of the veterans through a grid of poles.



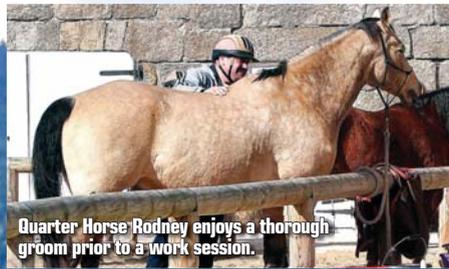
Emma Hutchison demonstrates how to tie a halter to a group of veterans.



The course covers groundwork and horse care as well as riding.



Jay Hare demonstrates groundwork techniques with Rodney.



Quarter Horse Rodney enjoys a thorough groom prior to a work session.



Jock thanks young local supporter and family friend Struan Robertson for a donation.

of travelling in a fast-moving vehicle, and the last thing we want to do is put pressure on someone or send them back to hospital when they've just come out."

"What we're working towards here is mobility with dignity," adds Jock. "On horseback, amputees can work on a level playing field with everyone else, and we'll always find a way. We're not in the business of therapy - we describe what we do as an adventure training package with psychological benefits - but there's no doubt it has a profound effect on all our attendees. We also offer bushcraft, shooting, fishing and a range of other activities to help these soldiers really reconnect with nature. Many of the men and women I see here have been taught to keep a tight rein on their emotions, but horses see what we are, not what we have to pretend to be."

Horses want certainty, leadership, respect, and working with them helps the guys to be part of something again, make decisions and integrate with another community

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Course graduates are also encouraged to volunteer at the centre, and help with the ongoing building work.

"It helps them feel they have a stake in what's happening, they're contributing to the recovery of their comrades and it also means we've always got lots of people around to help the next wave of attendees. It means that people who were victims become teachers."

Jock's work has recently attracted wider attention, and he's been presented with an ex-racehorse named Peopleton Brook. The handsome dark bay Thoroughbred was a champion sprinter, winning many races before retiring with a tendon injury. His owner George Thompson gave the horse to Jock via the charity Rehoming of



Jock demonstrates Horseback UK's work to M.P. Oliver Letwin (second from left), who visited when the Cabinet met in Aberdeen.



Anna Andersson leads a pupil from Banchory Academy on Harry the pony as part of a new youth development scheme run by Horseback UK.



At the end of the course, the happy smiles from the group say it all.





Racehorses and Jock is now retraining him, using groundwork and Western-style methodology.

Coincidentally, George has another link to Horseback UK. His brother Jim served in Malaya with the British Army and was very seriously hurt, resulting in life-changing injuries that left him with severely reduced mobility. Part of his recuperation was spent at Headley Court, the centre where many of Jock's course attendees are treated.

"In a way, there's a lot of parallels between this horse and the servicemen we see on the course," explains Jock. "Brooky was trained for a job, and he was very good at it. When that job ended suddenly, he had no

other purpose and no-one knew what to do with him. When he first arrived here, he was really strung up, didn't know what was going on, didn't trust anyone."

Now, I watch Jock riding his horse round the arena at a soft lope in a Western saddle and rope halter, and watching Brook's calm attention it's hard to believe this was once a Thoroughbred sprinter.

"We're hoping Brooky will be an ambassador, both for the work we're doing here and for ex-racehorses, and George couldn't be happier about it. We're talking to the Jockey Club about using other

ex-racehorses to help rehabilitate injured ex-jockeys as well as in the other work we do. This is such a fantastic horse, it's only right he should be given a second chance at a career," he says, clapping Brook affectionately on the neck.

As I leave the centre, it's office manager Coleen Edwards who has the final say. "Coming here isn't like coming to work, it's like hanging out with your family," she laughs.

And as I start the journey back past the distant mountains and thick pine forests, I can't help but agree.



Horseback UK is sponsored by **Help for Heroes**, who provide around 50% of the £400,000 needed annually to run the centre, with the remaining amount being raised independently. For more information or to make a donation, please visit horsebackuk.org.

