

# Catch me if you can

Equine behaviourist **Adam Goodfellow** aims to persuade Annitta Engel's Thoroughbred mare Emily that she doesn't have to fear being caught



THE TRAINER

**ADAM GOODFELLOW** trained with renowned equine behaviourist Kelly Marks and is one of her recommended associates. He holds the Monty Roberts Preliminary Certificate of Horsemanship and has been working with horses for over 10 years. Adam is also joint author of *Whispering Back* (Ebury Press). For more information, visit: [www.intelligenthorsemanship.co.uk](http://www.intelligenthorsemanship.co.uk) or [www.whisperingback.co.uk](http://www.whisperingback.co.uk).



THE OWNER

**ANNITTA ENGEL** of Cirencester, Gloucestershire, has owned 10-year-old Thoroughbred Emily since the mare was six. She says Emily has got worse to catch over the years and will continually move away from her. Annitta adds that often the only way to catch Emily is to use three people to herd her into a corner. Emily, who is a talented jumper used for team chasing, hadn't been caught for three weeks prior to her session with Adam.



## 1 THE PROBLEM

### WALKING AWAY Refusing to be caught

Difficult-to-catch Emily is usually kept in a herd of eight horses on an eight-acre patch, but to help make Adam's job easier she has been put in a smaller paddock with her favourite equine companion, Anna.

First of all, Adam asks Annitta to attempt to catch her Thoroughbred mare normally in the paddock, but Emily moves away whenever she comes close. She also cleverly uses her companion, Anna – who is more than willing to be caught – by putting the other mare in between herself and Annitta (above).

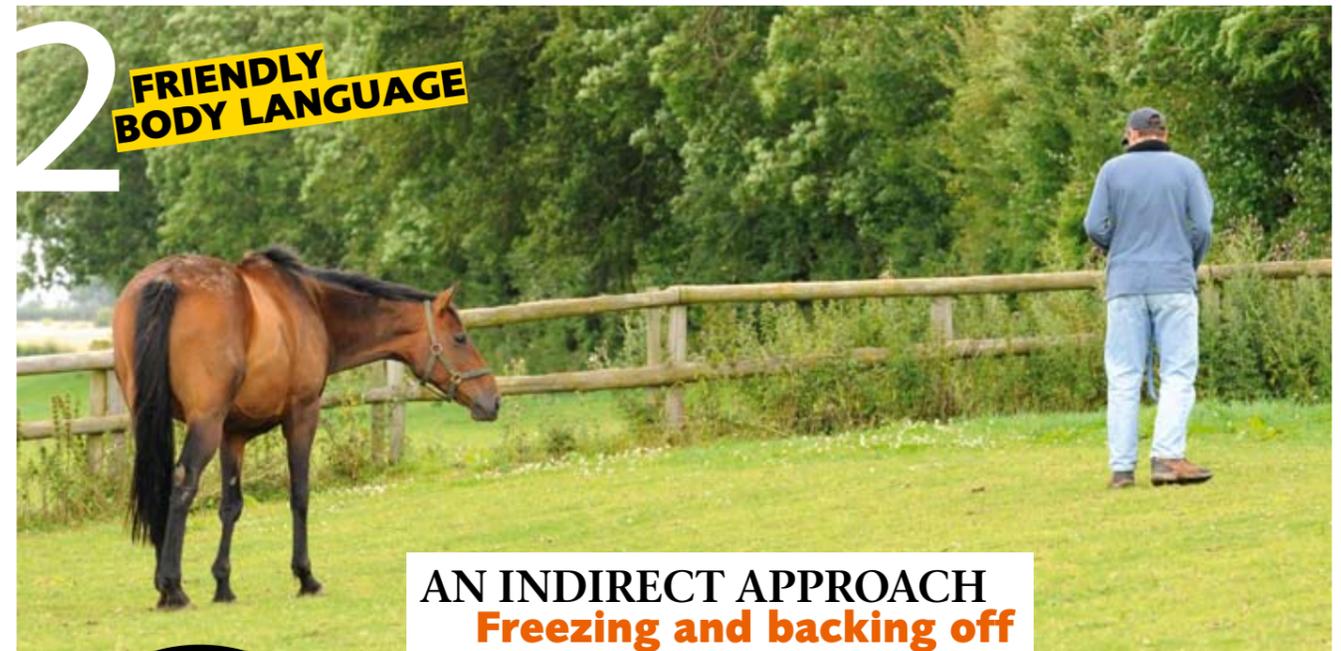
Adam calls Annitta back and runs through what he thinks she is doing wrong.

**Adam says:** "There's a communication breakdown here and because of the way you've been approaching Emily she doesn't realise that you're trying to be friendly."

"The way you move is like a language to horses and she will be reading things into the speed at which you move, the angle at which you hold your hands and the direction you're moving in."

"You are actually approaching her in a way that's aggressive to a horse and I think Emily has developed a phobia about being caught."

**Annitta says:** "What Adam says makes sense but isn't something I had thought of before. I hadn't considered I could be acting like a predator when I go to catch Emily."



## 2 FRIENDLY BODY LANGUAGE

### AN INDIRECT APPROACH Freezing and backing off

Adam shows Annitta the body language she should be displaying when she wants to catch Emily. He walks in a 'collapsing arc' around the mare, getting a little closer to Emily with each step. He moves towards her in a sideways motion, rather than approaching her directly, and puts his hand out in a friendly gesture as he gets near her.

**Adam says:** "If Emily looks up at me I'm going to stop immediately and soften my body language – I will turn away and look at the ground (above). If she starts to move, I'll freeze and back off. If I

continue to approach at that moment it's going to confirm that I want to catch her. When she grazes it's my ticket to carry on moving towards her."

"It's interesting to note that she's paying me some attention and keeping an eye on me. But now she is moving away, so I'm going to move in the other direction and will start to sweep back towards her when she comes to a halt."

**Annitta says:** "Emily did seem to pay Adam more attention than she does to me, although I think she's a little confused as to why he's circling around her. She's now displaying her normal technique of walking off whenever anyone gets close."

## ISOLATION AREA Adding negative consequences

Emily is still using Anna to block Adam, so he catches the companion and puts her with the rest of the herd in the neighbouring field. He explains that now Emily is on her own he plans to introduce some negative consequences when she walks away.

**Adam says:** "Following the principles of join-up, I'm going to drive her away if she's not going to play ball. But if she stops and looks towards me, I'm going to become passive."

"I also want to develop a 'sweet spot', which is an area of the field where Emily feels safe and calm. The top right corner is a good place because it's easier for me to catch her there. I'm going to put pressure on her, but when she gets to that corner I'm going to back off."

"She moved away from me, so I drove her as a negative consequence and now she is racing up and down the fence, showing her frustration at being separated from the others with rears and bucks (right). We are actually seeing the signs of a classic join-up situation."

**Annitta says:** "Emily is the alpha female of the herd and she's cross that she has been separated from her friends."



## 3 GOING IT ALONE

**POSITIVE PROGRESS**  
**Emily shows willing**

After five minutes of high jinks from all of the horses, Adam is keen for Emily to calm down. She soon obliges and stands in the right hand corner of the field – the area Adam hoped would become her 'sweet spot' – opposite Anna in the other paddock.

Adam starts to move towards her again in sweeping curves but this time he keeps his hands in his pockets. He moves towards her in a sideways motion and then away, getting a little closer each time. If Emily looks at him, he stops.

**Adam says:** "The result of me having my hands in my pockets is that I am getting much closer to Emily and she's paying me attention again."

"I'm nudging closer every time, then moving away – now we can chalk up a major success, as she has turned towards me and touched my arm with her nose (right)."

"I will keep moving away and then going back, and now I will gently extend my hand to touch her shoulder. Each time she is getting a little better and allowing me to do more."

**Annitta says:** "It is amazing that Emily is turning to Adam – she is standing as good as gold as he walks up to her and away. He's scratching her shoulder and neck now, and he could easily catch her if he wanted to."

**4**  
**MAKING CONTACT**



**TRYING DIFFERENT APPROACHES**  
**Desensitising process**

To continue to desensitise Emily, Adam asks different people to go up to the horse, including the yard manager and Annitta's husband, Tony, but now approaching in a more usual fashion. Soon she is being caught by a number of different people – including Horse's photographer, Jem – all approaching her from different sides. The mare also follows Annitta around the field (left)

**Adam says:** "I would like Annitta to work with Emily over the next few weeks so the horse is able to cope with anyone approaching her in any manner. She should be able to walk up to her carrying a lunge whip or a flappy jacket and even run up to her without the horse being bothered."

"Annitta needs to remember that catching Emily is the only goal. It shouldn't be to go for a ride or to get her in for the farrier. Whenever she comes out to catch her she needs to have plenty of time and remain patient throughout the process."

"It's possible that Emily will be fine to catch next time but she may be difficult again. But at least Annitta has the knowledge and skills in place to be able to deal with that scenario."

**Annitta says:** "It has been so interesting to watch Adam working with Emily and I'm delighted at what has been achieved. The body language he has taught me will be really useful in the future."



**THE BENEFIT OF PATIENCE**  
**Taking things slowly**

Adam is now spending longer periods at Emily's side, giving her a good scratch. He always starts at the shoulder, moving up the neck towards the head and then returning to the shoulder as a 'safe spot'. To develop the exercise he scratches along the mare's neck to touch the headcollar (left), which Annitta has to leave on permanently. After a few more repetitions he has taken hold of the mare's headcollar, and then clips on the rope (below).

**Adam says:** "Emily is enjoying the attention I'm giving her – I think it's probably a long time since anyone has walked up to her in a field and given her a scratch without wanting to catch her."

"I'm now walking away and then back to her and clipping the rope on and off. However, we have to remember that we've only worked with her on one side and towards one eye. We need to make sure she is happy with us approaching from both sides, and therefore using both sides of her brain."

"Our next goal is for Annitta to catch her – we'll practice her approach between us before she goes up to Emily."

**Annitta says:** "Fifteen minutes ago Emily was careering round the field and now she is letting us catch her. At one point she turned her head round and nuzzled me and it really was a lovely moment."



**5**  
**CLIPPING ON THE LEADROPE**



**NEXT STEPS**

Adam suggests Annitta carries out these actions in the coming weeks:

- Work with the mare in other areas of the field so you can catch her wherever you want to, from either side.
- Turn her out without her headcollar, which is safer, and work on catching her when she isn't wearing it.
- Ask different people to catch her – but talk them through the body language first.
- Try catching her when she is turned out with other horses, but be conscious of their adrenaline levels. If you use the sending away technique – it can cause them all to chase around.

**Adam's top tips for preventing the problem:**

- 1** Don't move too quickly or grab your horse's head when you catch him.
- 2** Don't just bring your horse in to work him, which can be a particular problem for those living out. Sometimes just give him a feed or groom him and turn him out again.
- 3** Avoid a strong bond developing between two horses, resulting in neither of them wanting to leave the other. If you do keep two horses together, make sure they spend time apart.

**Safety notes**

Horse recommends you wear a hat when working with a horse on the ground

If you are experiencing a behavioural problem with your horse, have his back, teeth and tack checked as the issue may be caused by discomfort.