

By ZOË SMITH

THE BIG INTERVIEW Gillian Higgins

IH Magazine editor ZOË SMITH talks to *Horses Inside Out* founder Gillian Higgins about her anatomical paintings, meeting the Queen, and why we should all be our horse's physical trainer

Horses Inside Out has taken Gillian all around the world

“It's not about art for art's sake. For me, it's always been a super method for demonstrating where parts are.”

Watching one of Gillian Higgins' painted horses leg yield across the arena or leap over an oxer is a mesmerising sight. At first glance, the horses – their bones, muscles, and tendons painted in bold colours across their bodies – look like they could enter a Halloween fancy dress competition. Add a rider in a skeleton suit and you've got a shoo-in for the top prize! But look a little closer and you'll see that the beautifully-executed paintings are in fact anatomically accurate drawings, offering a fascinating demonstration of how the horse's musculoskeletal system works.

"It is so much more than just putting paint on horses." Gillian assures me and she is keen to emphasise the educational benefits. "It's not about art for art's sake. For me, it's always been a super method for demonstrating where parts are.

Sometimes you don't need the entire skeleton painted on. If you put a spot of paint on part of the pelvis, say the tuber coxae, when you see the horse move and you see that bit of paint move in a certain direction, it really highlights what's going on. It's such a fantastic tool for training your eye."

She's right. Seeing the horses move offers a visual aid that means you don't need a degree in equine science or even to memorise the names of the bones and muscles. You don't need to know that concentric shortening of the spinal extensor chain results in retraction of the hind limbs and extension of the lumbosacral junction (yes, I did my homework!). Instead, the evidence is right there in front of you in black and white (or a rainbow of watercolours). You can see how the tendons flex and recoil to help the horse spring over the jump, how the neck and back muscles elongate as the horse stretches its neck forward, and the relationship between the abductor and adductor muscles during lateral movements.

As a qualified anatomist, biomechanist and therapist, as well as a BHS coach, Gillian soon realised that the best way to help horses was to help the riders and owners understand why problems were arising. "[Clients would often ask me] 'why is my horse sore there' or 'why am I seeing these patterns of movements or behaviours?'. It became quickly apparent that people really wanted to learn and that there was a lot that they *could* learn." She began running small workshops for her clients to help demonstrate massage techniques, polework, and Pilates-type exercises that they could work on with their horses.

"Sometimes people can get put off by anatomy and biomechanics, with the long Latin names," Gillian admits. "But it's the application of the information that is most important. It's about how you apply that information to the way you ride, train and manage your horses. If you can understand the principles of how the horse works and why certain exercises or training techniques have certain effects in the horse's body, then you can really make a difference."

As for the painting, that part wasn't exactly planned. "My mum at the time was a primary school teacher and had some paints lying around, so I would just indicate with a bit of paint where a part was. Absolutely nothing like the painting I do today! Just blobs of paint to say, 'here's where the shoulder is', 'here's where the ribs are'."

Like all great ideas though, it soon took on a life of its own, and as the blobs of paint evolved into detailed anatomical drawings, Gillian soon found her artistic skills were as in-demand as her anatomical expertise. Today, her business 'Horses Inside Out', is hugely successful and she's published three books and held demonstrations and seminars all around the world, all with the aim of making equine anatomy fun and accessible to everyone.

"Every demonstration that I did, someone would say 'can you come and do one for us' and it's just snowballed! The more workshops I did, the more I realised how much I loved sharing the information. I love seeing people having that 'Eureka!' moment in their eyes. Being able to give them that piece of information, that help, or tip or technique, that really makes the difference to them and their horse. Because ultimately, through the teaching, I'm helping the horses. And that's what it's always been about for me."

Chatting with Gillian, her enthusiasm not only for anatomy, but

.....
“It's such a fantastic tool for training your eye.”



"We should think of ourselves as a personal trainer to our horse."

for sharing that passion with others, is palpable, and you get the sense that she can't quite believe her luck. "I do think I am so lucky," she admits. "I mean, I love horses, I have an absolute fascination with anatomy and biology, I've always been a bit arty and creative, and I also love riding. So to be able to combine all of my passions and make a living doing it!"

Becoming a published author is another thing she only dreamt of doing. "It's funny because when I was a little child, I would always say 'one day I'm going to publish a book' but I never *really* thought that I would do it!" she laughs. In fact, when the commissioning editor from David & Charles Publishers first suggested she write a book, she turned him down. "I had done a feature article for Your Horse

magazine and the photographer that worked on the shoot, also worked for the publishers. So he told the commissioning editor, who rang me. To start with, I said no! I thought 'I can't write a book, I can't possibly do that!'."

Thankfully, she changed her mind and by 2009, her first book 'How Your Horse Moves' hit the shelves, soon followed by 'Horse Anatomy for Performance', and most recently, Posture and Performance, published by Quiller Publishing /Kenilworth Press. "It was a fabulous learning opportunity and also quite a steep learning curve!" Gillian tells me. Putting a book together, especially one with so many visual images, is no easy task.

"They don't give you much time to get it in! Every one I write, I think it's such a good idea, but then during the process, I always say 'I'm never going to write another one, it's such hard work' but then you quickly forget that part and get another idea!"

Another milestone achievement came in 2008, when Horses Inside Out won Knowledge West's Best Business Award. It's a moment that she's never forgotten. "There are some times in your life that you just feel so happy and so elated and so proud! You want to try and bottle that feeling up and keep hold of it. That was one of those really special moments." Just last year, she was invited to Hyde Park Barracks to share her knowledge with the Household Cavalry and got a chance to show one of her painted horses to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. "That was also a very special moment," Gillian recounts. "She seemed very interested and pointed out how surprising it is that the neck vertebrae are where they are." >>

Gillian Higgins THE BIG INTERVIEW

>> Of course, behind every success story is a strong support network. "My parents have been very supportive with my business and I couldn't have done it without them." Gillian tells me. "My Mum, Shirley, does all the administration side and booking demonstrations, and my Dad, David, is involved in the technical side and comes to the demos as an assistant. If I didn't have their support, I would never be able to do it all."

Growing up in a small village in Nottingham, Gillian became passionate about horses early on, although she admits that her first encounter wasn't her finest moment. "I was about four and I loved ponies, so my Mum took me for a riding lesson at the local riding school. But then when the pony moved, I got scared and started to cry!" After this, riding lessons were off the cards for a while and it wasn't until around ten years old that she began riding regularly, finally getting her own horse at 16 years old. After a work experience position at an eventing yard that summer, she was convinced that her future would be horse-related.

Flash forward a few years and she had graduated with a First Class Honours Degree in Equine Science & Business Management from the Royal Agricultural University, as well as qualifying as a BHS Senior Coach. A string of other qualifications soon followed, including diplomas in sports and remedial massage, equine massage, and McTimoney-Corley Manipulation.

Gillian's wealth of experience doesn't only come from her professional qualifications – she's also an accomplished rider in her own right, competing up to Advanced level in British Eventing and clocking up significant wins with her horse Freddie Fox, including a win at Gatcombe in 2007 and riding for Great Britain at the Student Riding Nations Cups (SRNCS) in Austria 2004. She also owns Artistic Flair, a youngster who she started herself and has also begun eventing.

It's this hands-on experience and practical understanding of training, that makes Gillian uniquely qualified to offer advice to

riders and trainers of all levels. "It's important to remember that horses didn't evolve to be ridden," Gillian tells me, when I ask how we can apply this anatomical knowledge in the saddle. "In any single discipline, we ask them to do things that are not natural for them. It doesn't mean that they can't do it. But often people will say, for example in dressage, that the movements are natural. Yes, the horse can do piaffe in the field, but they would only do it for one or two steps, and they are certainly not doing it with a weight on their back.

.....
“...ultimately, through the teaching, I'm helping the horses.”



Clockwise from top: Gillian's anatomical paintings offer a fascinating insight into how the horse's musculoskeletal system works; Gillian with Dad, David, and Mum, Shirley: "I couldn't have done it without them!"; Meeting the Queen at Hyde Park Barracks in 2017

"As soon as you add the rider and the weight on their back, you are compromising their posture and balance, and their ability to move. The additional weight will increase the stress and strain on tendons, joints, ligaments, muscles, bones...the whole system. And that's only looking at it from the physical side. Of course, the physical side also affects the mental side, which is a whole other story!

"So, we need to start thinking, what can we do to help them? What can we do to prepare the horse's body, to prepare his muscles and his skeleton, and his whole system to be able to perform what we'd like him to do with the optimum comfort and to be able to keep doing it for a long period of time without inducing injuries? I think we should think of ourselves as a personal trainer to our horse. We can do postural exercises, and exercises to strengthen his musculoskeletal system including core muscles, so that he will be better prepared for the rider."

It's not only core stability that is important, Gillian explains. "Horses have evolved to run away from a predator. So, if you look at their anatomy, there aren't as many muscles, tendons and ligaments that are involved in lateral

movement and they aren't as well developed as those that are involved in propelling the horse forwards. And then we get on them and one of the first things we do with a young horse is we ask him to perform a circle. Or we ask them to run around in circles on the lunge. So I think we need to focus on improving lateral stability with a lot of horses as well."

As someone who places such an emphasis on correct and progressive training, I wonder what her opinion is on all the many training aids and gadgets that are on the market. "To be perfectly honest with you, I prefer not to use training aids" Gillian begins, "but on the other hand, what

BEHIND THE SCENES: the Painting Process

Gillian uses water-based, hypoallergenic paints which are harmless and can be easily washed off. It can take her hours to paint a horse, depending on the complexity of the design.

"For a typical demonstration, I paint two sides of two horses and it takes about five hours" she tells me. "I like to do two at once, because I can put the first layer of paint on and leave it to dry while I start the next one, before painting the second layer."

Ensuring the comfort of her equine models is also important. "The painting process should always be relaxed," Gillian insists. "It should be enjoyable for the horse and it's almost therapeutic. When you're painting a horse you get this kind of calm feeling. The horses seem to enjoy it and very often I'll have them loose in the stable, so they can relax and eat their haynet. As long as they don't rub or roll, that's the important thing!"

She admits to one demonstration where the demo horse dutifully paraded around the arena, then promptly stopped and rolled right in front of the audience. Thankfully everyone saw

the funny side. "It didn't matter so much, because the audience had already seen [the paintings]. Over the years, I've become quite flexible, because you've just got to work with what you've got in the moment. If a horse rolls, it doesn't really matter; if a horse doesn't do a movement in that moment, it doesn't really matter. There are other things that we can talk about or do!"

In the early days, it was Gillian's own horse, Freddie, who served as her main model, but when painting other people's horses, she has a specific list of requirements to ensure that the process is enjoyable and safe for everyone involved. "Most people know if their horse will enjoy the attention or not. If they are ticklish, or they don't like being touched or groomed, or if they bite or kick, anything like that, we just wouldn't paint them. At demonstrations, I will always touch them all over first and make sure they're happy with it. And if they show the slightest sign of not wanting it, I wouldn't even attempt it.

would you consider a training aid? I'll tell you my favourite training aid – poles. So that's not a training aid as in something that you would put on the horse, but the reason that I really like polework exercises is because the horse approaches the poles and puts his body in the position that he needs to in order to negotiate those poles. If you get the right exercise, you can make some really good postural improvements and really get him moving through his body, using his muscles and mobilising specific joints in a way which is more natural because he is doing it himself. I always think if a horse is doing something himself, you get a better effect. They need to have their own balance and their own self carriage." In fact, Gillian's use of polework exercises is the subject of her next book, Poles for Posture, which is set for release next year.

Gillian is open-minded when it comes to discovering new techniques and therapies. As well as her qualifications in anatomy and biomechanics, she's undertaken training in the Masterson Method, Myofascial Release Techniques, saddle fitting, kinesio-taping, and electrotherapy, to name just a few. "Trying to keep abreast of new developments is a constant challenge, there's so much going on, all over the world," she admits. "But I love learning and I love going to conferences and picking up new information. I'm constantly going on different courses. That's part of working with horses, you just never ever stop learning. Every demonstration I do and every horse I see, I learn something."

Speaking of trying new things, Gillian will soon join the ranks of the Intelligent Horsemanship alumni as well. This November, she's booked on a Horse Psychology course with Kelly Marks and she's excited to add another element to her already vast knowledge of horses. "I have been to quite a few of Monty's demonstrations and I've read Kelly's books, so I'm really looking forward to the course with Kelly." Gillian tells me, and she hopes that the knowledge she gains will add another dimension to the therapeutic work that she does. "I do a lot of talks about posture and performance, but I'm talking about it from the physical side, the anatomy, the biomechanics. What happens within the horse's body when he's in this position and how does it change and how can we encourage the best posture. But one of the other major factors in that is psychology. I typically look at how physiology affects the psychology, but I'm keen to learn more about

the psychology side and then linking it back to [how that affects the physiology]. I can't wait!" Will we be seeing a Horses Inside Out-themed Join-Up® at some point in the future? Watch this space!

TRY THIS... BACK YOUR HORSE UP

HOW? Gillian recommends backing your horse up in-hand, as you can achieve a better movement. The ideal posture to look for is: "Head down and long marching steps backwards, not dawdling or shuffling backwards, it has to be about the same speed as walking forwards. Aim for 10 steps, two or three times a day." Be sure to give your horse time to develop his strength and co-ordination – it's best to ask for a few steps if your horse finds it difficult, then build up slowly to the full amount.

WHY? "Backing up is a favourite exercise of mine and I think all horses should be doing this on a regular basis." Gillian says. "It mobilises the joints through the back, it helps to strengthen the muscles involved in carrying weight behind, and the postural muscles that are important in supporting good posture when carrying the weight of the rider."

WHEN? "I back my horses up every day, or at least five times a week. I do it on the way to or from the field, that way it can be easily fitted into the daily routine."

GILLIAN'S TOP TIP: "The important thing is to do the exercises regularly. I think sometimes people think once they've taught their horse to go backwards that's it, but it's a bit like doing sit-ups. Once you can do a sit-up, you don't think 'I can do that, I don't need to do anymore'. If you want to have the benefits, you have to keep repeating them!"

NOTE:

If your horse has arthritis or any other physical issues, you should check with your vet or therapist first

• **LEARN MORE:** Gillian's first full-day seminar in the UK will be held on 29th September in Northampton and details of other upcoming demonstrations can be found at horsesinsideout.com. Gillian's books can be purchased from her website or at intelligenthorsemanship.co.uk

The paintings can take up to five hours to complete, using hypoallergenic water-based paints

