

Truth or myth?

CHESTNUT

nightmares

One thing's for sure, they've got one heck of a bad reputation: Dawn Jelley investigates whether the chestnut mare is really as difficult as everyone believes...



COLOUR ME BAD: Is a bad behaved Chestnut mare down to colouration or coincidence...

CHESTNUT MARES often get bad press in the equine world. Some say they are more temperamental than horses of other colours – nappy, moody or hard to train or school. Many owners or riders say this behaviour goes with the colour – the 'fiery redhead' label.

Bonny Willis had difficulty finding a livery yard for her beloved 13-year-old chestnut mare when she relocated to Essex two years ago. "On a couple of occasions I made yard enquiries and when I explained what type of horse I owned and mentioned she was a chestnut mare it was surprising how many yards went from friendly to full in the space of a phone call!"

However, many owners have had only positive experiences with their chestnut mare companions. Sue Wason, chairman of the Warmblood Breeder's Studbook UK which registers European bloodlines, says the kindest mare she ever had was a chestnut. So what are the grounds for the chestnut mare's fearsome reputation – or is it an equine old wives tale?

IS THERE A PHYSICAL DIFFERENCE?

Owners who are struggling with a particular chestnut mare – with training tantrums or bad

stable manners – blame their colour. One rumour is that chestnuts are more feisty because they have a red coat, the same stereotype pinned to people with red hair.

Another theory bandied around livery yards is that chestnuts have thinner skin and, as a result, are more sensitive. Josh Slater, Professor of Equine Clinical Studies at the Royal Veterinary College says there is no scientific truth at all in either rationale. He lays both myths to rest: "It's

easy to associate redhead humans and animals but it is a false translation and there is no anatomical difference in terms of the skin," he says.

In the racing world, chestnut horses with four white feet have historically been seen as unlucky. There is even an old ditty that goes: "One white foot, buy him; two white feet, try him; three white feet, there's some doubt about him; four white feet, you can do without him."

IS THERE A BLOODLINE TO BLAME?

If their hue is the only physical difference from other horses, do chestnut mares' notoriety come from the studbooks? Was there a mare who gave the girls a bad name down the genetic line?

The breeding experts say the chestnut mare is in the clear in the studbooks. Sue Wason says: "Certain stallions breed difficult animals – they may be chestnut or black. From my point of view certain bloodlines may breed far more difficult animals – it is a coincidence if they are also chestnut."

At Weatherbys, where they maintain the Thoroughbred register, only a small proportion (around 15 per cent) of recorded Thoroughbreds are chestnut, as bay horses are more common.

Adrian McGlynn, company secretary of Weatherbys, believes that colour has nothing to do with temperament. He says: "I have a strong interest in nature versus nurture and therefore have difficulty in believing that colour is a determining factor in behaviour, or that a stallion's behaviour is passed to its offspring – he never meets them. I have a lot of trouble accepting that there are criminal, or bad genes. Mares can be more difficult than geldings, but assigning colour with breeding has no foundation in science."

It was the champion chestnut gelding The Minstrel, who won The Derby in 1977, that blew this theory out of the water once and for all.

But Josh Slater says there is an element of truth in that a white horse hoof horn may be very mildly weaker than a pigmented one: "A white horn is anatomically slightly 'less strong' than that of a coloured horse. It can mean the hooves are more prone to cracking and bruising – although this is not guaranteed," he says.

HAVE GELDINGS GOT IT LUCKY?

But the fact remains that many riders have had an experience of erratic chestnut mare behaviour. The reason may be simply a 'mare' thing. Sally Glossop an owner from Ware, Hertfordshire says: "I have a beautiful chestnut mare. When she's good, she is really, really good – but when she's bad she's horrid".

Veterinary Professor Josh Slater agrees that it's a gender issue rather than a colour issue: "There are some mares whose ovarian cycle and hormones unquestionably affect their behaviour. For some mares, difficult behaviour is associated with oestrus (coming into season). It can cause aggression or more excitable behaviour – some can be impossible to work with. Some just don't compete very well around the time of oestrus."



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■ The length of 'heat' in individual mares varies – it can be ten days or longer."

Olympian eventer Lucinda Fredericks owns one of the sport's most successful chestnut mares – 16-year-old Headley Britannia. Little Brit, as she is affectionately known (she is just 15.2hh), won Burghley in 2006 and Badminton in 2007 when she was also in season. She is the first mare to win both titles. "She just rose above it," says Lucinda, "she is more sensitive – she will dig me out of a hole. A mare can't help being in season."

Grumpiness and mood swings may not just be limited to the times a mare is in heat. Professor Slater explains that many changes take place before oestrus kicks in: "There are big changes in the ovaries before heat – you might see the behaviour change in the days up to that time, or even over a longer period. Behaviour signs can be early or there might be no signs at all, but either way your mare's ovary and hormone changes are very significant."

Josh has seen the occasional mare referral at the Royal Veterinary College where behaviour is so bad that they have made the decision to remove the ovaries. Hospital records show that, over the last four years, eight horses with severe behavioural problems have had their ovaries removed. Interestingly, none of these were chestnut mares – there were five bays, two greys and one skewbald. "These mares are a minority, but if myths were true you would expect chestnuts to be in the majority. We see a range of

colours and breeds of mare. Chestnut mares are no more prevalent."

Josh concludes: "A chestnut mare is no different to any other mare from a vet's perspective. Anyone who owns one should not feel that they have taken on a problem. A gelding is a lucky animal because it has a constant and normal hormone profile, whereas mares have enormous monthly variations in hormone level. They have active ovaries so their behaviour will change. It's no big deal – it's part of owning a mare."

Lucinda Fredericks, whose first pony was a chestnut mare, agrees: "You can only compare a

mare to a stallion – as geldings change their character when they have been castrated."

She agrees that a fulfilling relationship with a mare can come from having a deeper understanding of them. "A lot of it is how you treat them. Many mares feel pain in season and are grumpy, just as women are.

"Some people say they don't get on with mares and this is usually just because of a bad experience. Owners can make their mares dreadful – they can clash with mares."

Lucinda advises: "Just dig a little deeper and give them your all. Try a bit harder with them and give yourself an extra chance. You might need to ride them harder than a gelding; the harder you work them the more they give you. Brit can't stand being in the school. She is happier working on the road or on the grass – she loves variety.

"Little Brit likes to jump her own way – trying to settle her like a normal horse doesn't work. This isn't because of her colour, it's to do with her conformation and style of jumping," she adds.

Suffolk-based trainer and Grand Prix rider Jilly Day has had only positive experiences in the dressage circuit. She says: "My first dressage horse was a chestnut mare and she bred me a chestnut mare. I have only positive experiences with chestnut mares. In 35 years of teaching I have never yet found a difficult chestnut mare. In fact, I have known many bay geldings that have had the supposed temperament of chestnut mares."

Lucinda Fredericks thinks that being a mare even gives Headley Britannia her edge in competitions: "I don't think she'd be the great horse she is if she was a gelding. She helps you out. The more years I have her, the more I learn. She has a mental and physical toughness." ■

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