

Positive Reinforcement Behavioural Training - Clicker Training

courtesy of Animal Info Publications

Author: Cheryl Glen

What are the aims of Clicker Training for horses?

Clicker Training is a form of Positive Reinforcement Behavioural Training. Also known in its full scientific name as 'Operant Conditioning'. The aim of Clicker Training is to train your horses with a clear communication link, without fear and without force. Capturing behaviours and shaping them is a fun way of training for both your horse and you.

A horse will offer a behaviour to you during training and by using a clicker toy, you can 'mark' the exact moment the animal is doing something that you want. The click becomes a 'bridge' between the horse working out what you are 'asking' it to do, and actually 'doing' what you are asking it to do.

If you use a Positive Reinforcer with your horse during training, he is more likely to 'repeat' a behaviour. So, after you have clicked for your horses' offered behaviour, you then 'reinforce' your horse with a treat. Horses love food, so for me a treat of food is the best reinforcer for a horse.

The information given to your horse of, a click followed by a treat, tells your horse that you really like the behaviour he has just offered to you, and asks the horse if it can please repeat that behaviour.

Summary

- I ask my horse for a behaviour
- my horse starts to offer me behaviours
- I then click at a chosen moment and my horse recognises he has done something I want
- I then treat my horse to give him something 'he' wants
- My horse will then almost immediately 'offer' me the same behaviour.

How easy and purely nice is that?

Clicker Training is for those people with horses who have been searching for an extremely clear and humane way to train their horses in all disciplines, without the use of force. It allows your horse to 'choose' to participate with you during training sessions and 'express' himself. Clicker Training really is great fun, resulting in seriously solid learnt behaviours, confident and willing horses... it is very addictive and the horses simply love it!

There are also opinions out there that clicker training is only for tricks. It will teach your horse to bite, give your horse bad manners, and you will always have to use the treats to 'bribe' your horse, otherwise the horse will not do anything. It will 'spoil' your horse, make it soft.



NONE of this is true, in fact, using Positive Reinforcement results in beautifully mannered, calm, willing, reliable, and 'safe' horses, in 'every' aspect of horse handling, training and riding.

The concept of Clicker Training is - give me something I want = behaviour, in return I will give you something you want = treat. The click bridges the gap between asking for a behaviour, and doing the behaviour.

Click = yes, Treat = thankyou

Can any horse be Clicker Trained or is it only suitable for horses that have already reached a certain level of training?

Clicker Training can begin with a horse the day it is born, right through until it is no longer with us. Clicker Training is a complete training method, which I feel stands alone as a training method.

Like all training methods, if you have some prior knowledge of a horse's behaviour in general, then Clicker Training will be easier to learn and use during interactions with your horse. In general however, this training method is the simplest and clearest horse training method I have used. Once you are accustomed to the 'concept' or 'how' Clicker Training works, then the sky really is the limit in what you can teach your horse. My training kit consists of two clicker toys and lots of treats in a bumbag.

Does Clicker Training help a rider or is it just an aid to managing a horse without a rider, eg standing for a farrier or vet, float training, halter classes etc?

Using a clicker when riding your horse will also benefit the rider. The clicker is a powerful tool. As you get more experienced you can replace a hand held clicker toy to using your 'tongue' to click, leaving your hands free for other things like holding reins to ride your horse.

When you and your horse are at a level of being able to ride with the clicker, you will be able to almost 'predict' what your horse will do while under saddle. Riding while clicker training is even more fun than working on the ground. It's a real eye opener as your horse will offer you so much more, and his training is 'excelled' by the reinforcers... kind of like Christmas for your horse!

The click and treat allows for instant training in a sense. Once your horse has learned cues from you of the behaviours you would like him to do, on the ground and under saddle, he will always be attentive and ready to please you. This keeps you 'both' in perfect harmony. A Clicker Trainer is always aware of his body position and what it is doing at all times, because his horse will always be watching his trainers 'body language', waiting and ready to respond.

Clicker Training results in well balanced and relaxed horses that have learned to use their bodies safely. This results in well balanced and relaxed riders. As you add desired behaviours, and teach your horse cues to go with the desired behaviours, you can then begin to phase out the constant click and treat. You can then use them occasionally to revise some lessons of behaviours with your horse.

If your horse is being entered into a show ring the clicker tool has to stay out of the ring. However, like any other training tool, the clicker is only used to help 'train' what you want the horse to do, NOT to be used constantly once the behaviours are taught. If you teach your horse thoroughly at 'home', then he should be ready to bring home the ribbons in the show ring!

A trainer's tools are only as useful as the trainer allows them to be, be confident, trust in your training method and know your horse can do it. All behaviours you would like your horse to do can be achieved by using Positive Reinforcement.

- Does your horse have issues loading onto a horse float or trailer?
- Is he scared of needles?
- Is having the farrier every six weeks a nightmare?

All of these behaviours can become a 'nice' interaction for you and your horse, if you 'reshape' your existing horse's behaviours by simply using a click and a treat. By doing this, all of these behaviours will become a 'fun' thing to do in your horse's mind, because these interactions will always result in something nice that he wants, 'a treat'.

How do you get started?

The very first lesson between you and your animal will be for you to explain to your animal, how the click and treat will work 'for' your animal and you. Targeting is an easy way to explain the rules of Clicker Training to your animal. It is also a good safe exercise you can do with your horse to 'practice' using the click and treat.

I would recommend this lady, Alexandra Kurland. She is the lady who introduced Clicker Training to horses. This is her site - click onto GUIDE then click onto 'targeting'. Alex has a step by step picture guide to help you understand how to do this.
<http://www.theclickercenter.com/2004/guide/index.php>

How quickly can I expect to get results?

Using Positive Reinforcement during training will show you instant results. You can almost see your horse thinking for itself and figuring out what it has to do. Because you are not forcing your horse to do a behaviour, its confidence will really soar and you will see its true personality shine. During training sessions your horse will have what I call 'light bulb' moments. These moments are truly amazing, as you watch your horse's eyes light up with 'I get it', and then it will demonstrate clearly to you, the behaviour you want it to do.

This is such a pleasure to watch as a trainer and the closeness which develops between you and your horse will certainly surprise you! Clicker Training is a shortcut during training. However, it is NOT about the speed at which your horse can learn. It is about how 'clear' you can communicate to each other by using Positive Reinforcement. It is what 'excels' the learning process.

Where do I go for help in learning to Clicker Train my horse?

There is now a lot more information available on Clicker Training. The internet is a good place to start. Watch as many Youtube movies as you can find on this method by simply typing in "clicker training" into the search. Pages of videos will show up for you to view. You can really learn a lot by simply watching videos and you will also get a lot of ideas from them to try with your horse.

Join up in forums on clicker training and ask questions, as many as you need to, in order to understand this beautiful training method more thoroughly. I also recommend this lady, Karen Pryor. She is the lady

who introduced Clicker Training to the world in the 1960's. She learned how to interact with Dolphins by using a whistle and fish rewards. This is her site and you will find many books and video's to choose from -

<http://www.clickertraining.com/store>

How far can Clicker Training be taken?

Clicker Training can take you and your horse all the way from a simple trail ride, to Classical Dressage, for a Vet visit and standing nicely for the Farrier. The sky really is the limit when using Positive Reinforcement Behavioural Training.

I am Cheryl Glen, my information is of a general insight to my own personal training while using Clicker Training with my horses, not a teaching. It will be at your own risk if you try any of my training ideas at home with your own horses. These are my internet sites that I would like to share with you, where you will find lots of information and ideas about Positive Reinforcement Behavioural Training -