

# CLICK CLICK CLICK FOR CONTROL

by Alexandra Kurland

We reinforce our horses behaviour by showing them where their comfort zone lies. Do the wrong thing, and the pressure increases. Do the right thing and the pressure goes away. This is the 'language' we use to speak to horses.

But suppose there was another way to talk to the horse, one that gave him something he actively wants, instead of just taking away something he wants to avoid?

A stable may be situated any where in the world but when it comes to feeding time, the reaction of the horses is universal. When the first sounds of dinner come from the feed room, heads will be seen popping anxiously over the top of the stable door. Depending on their individual temperaments, some horses will be wickering gently while others may let out resounding neighs to ensure their handlers are aware they are waiting for their dinner. The big Thoroughbred in the end stall may be banging at his door. He's normally the last one to be fed, and he's telling you what he thinks about that. The Quarter Horse in the stall next to his is anxiously playing with his feed bin, and the pony is pawing non-stop.

Most horse owners will have realised that the behaviour of these three horses is their way of telling us how much they enjoy and want their food, yet traditionally food has not been used as a tool in the training of horses. In fact, we've avoided using food for most forms of equine education. *Continued*



“Well, of course,” you may be thinking. “Everyone knows what happens when you feed horses treats. They turn into pushy, rude monsters.”

That’s certainly been the typical response to food. It may be used in a few select places in training situations; to bring horses in from pasture, or to distract a frightened horse during a medical procedure but by and large, most horse owners have accepted the common wisdom that treats and horses don’t mix. Instead, training methods most commonly used manipulate elements of safety and comfort to create incentives for the horse to change its behaviour.

Think about how this works: traditional training sets up the horse so he’s moving away from discomfort towards a desired behaviour. The horse learns to move away from the pressure of a rein; of a rider’s weight; from swinging ropes; and from whips and spurs. This training relies on pressure and release of pressure. That’s how we reinforce our horses’ behaviour - we show them where their comfort zone lies. Do the wrong thing, and the pressure increases. Do the right thing and the pressure goes away. This is the ‘language’ we use to speak to horses.

#### **ANOTHER LANGUAGE**

But suppose there was another way to talk to the horse, one that gave him something he actively wants, instead of just taking away something he wants to avoid? Wouldn’t that create a whole new type of relationship, one that was based on trust and willing participation?

That’s what clicker training does.

Clicker training refers to a type of training that uses a ‘yes’ signal to tell the horse precisely when he has done something right.

Clicker training gets its name from a small plastic noise maker that makes a distinctive clicking sound. You don’t have to use a clicker to clicker train as any clear signal will do, but most people find they prefer the clarity of the clicker over other sounds.

The ‘yes’ of the clicker signal is followed by a treat. It’s a very simple system, the click marks the behaviour you want to reinforce. If you used food without the clicker, your timing would not be as precise because you couldn’t get the food to the horse at the exact moment you wanted to reinforce the correct response. The clicker says: “Yes! That’s it!” and links that behaviour or response to a reward. That also means it acts as a gatekeeper, creating rules around the food. If the horse is nudging your pockets, bumping into you, crowding your space, he never gets clicked therefore never gets a treat. If he wants his treat, he has to offer you behaviours you find desirable.

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#### **GETTING STARTED**

A simple way to get started is to put the horse in a stall with a stall guard across the door. Hold a target up in front of him - an empty water bottle, or the lid off a supplement container works well. The horse will probably be curious about the target and he’ll come over and sniff it. Click! Give him a treat.

Hold the target up again for him to touch. This time he may be more interested in your pockets than the target but if he gets too pushy, simply step back out of range. That’s the point of the stall guard, it keeps you safe while the horse learns how this new game

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## Click For Control Continued...

is played. Nudging your pockets gets him nothing, but bumping the target, click! earns him treats.

The horse is going to think this is a great game. Finally, he has this person trained. All he has to do is bump the target, and you reach into your pocket and feed him carrots! Life doesn't get much better than this, he thinks!

### EMOTIONAL CONTROL

At this point in the game, all the horse really knows about the clicker is that touching the target earns him treats. He doesn't yet understand however, that you aren't an open 'salad buffet' and he can't just help himself to the treats in your pocket whenever he wants. There are rules around the food, and the most basic rule of all says that unless he hears the click, there will be no goodies.

But right now, the horse doesn't know this. He just knows you have treats in your pocket, treats he wants. If you don't keep him busy touching his target, he'll be nudging you, demanding goodies. So, you're going to 'fill his dance card' by giving him things he can do to earn treats, and in the process you're going to teach him patience and emotional control.

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An easy lesson to teach with the clicker is to have the horse stand on a target. Use an old doormat or a piece of plywood and lead the horse up to it. If he's afraid of it, you can use the new targeting skills to get him onto the mat.

Hold the target up just an inch or two away from his nose, as he stretches out to touch the target, click and reinforce him. Offer him the target again. Slowly inch it towards the mat, Click and reinforce him for following it.

As he focuses on the target, he'll forget about being afraid of the mat. When he puts a foot on the mat, click and treat. It doesn't matter if he takes his foot away, the click marked the behaviour you wanted. He controlled his fear and put his foot on the mat, so click, he gets a treat. The beauty of clicker training is it breaks every exercise down into small steps, helps the timid horse to gain confidence, and teaches the pushy horse self-control.

### WITHHOLD THE CLICK

Once you can get the horse consistently putting both feet on the mat, withhold the click for just a second or two. If he steps off the mat, use your target and the lead to



*Hold the 'target' up so it's easy for the horse to touch it. As soon as this happens 'CLICK' then take the target out of reach.*



*Reach into your pocket for the food, but don't feed the horse if it strains against the stall guard or 'frisks' your pockets. Note how Anna's hand is closed even though the horse is right there demanding the food.*



*When the horse is no longer being 'pushy' about the food, Anna feeds him away from her body. She is establishing 'polite rules' even in this first lesson.*

reposition him on the mat. You may feel as though the horse has turned into a yo yo - you put him on the mat, he bounces off it. Don't worry, as you repeat this on/off, on/off, on/off, eventually he'll get tired of moving back and forth. He'll hesitate ever so slightly with both feet on the mat, click and treat! The high speed precision of the clicker will let you capture that hesitation. You'll gradually be able to stretch the time out.

If he wants his treat, the pushy, in-your-face horse will be learning he has to stand quietly on the mat with his nose out of your pocket!

The horse is learning emotional self-control. Essentially, you're taking advantage of the fact he gets excited around food to teach him better manners. In the process, you'll be transforming the food from a major distraction into a powerful training tool.

### USING THE CLICKER

So, what can you do now that the horse understands what the clicker means? The real question is, what do you want the horse to do? That's the fundamental question behind clicker training.

Clicker training is a **positive** teaching tool. You aren't correcting or punishing the horse for unwanted behaviour, instead, you are reinforcing him for the things **YOU WANT HIM TO DO**. This is known as replacement training.

In other words, if you don't want the horse crowding in on top of you when you lead him, what do you want him to do? The answer to that question tells you what you need to teach the horse. The more detailed you are, the better, and as you describe what you want, you are really creating a step-by-step lesson plan for the horse.

When you train with positives, each step leads to many others. For example, you didn't want the horse mugging you for treats. Instead of punishing him for nudging your pockets, you used the clicker to teach him to stand on a mat. Think of all the good things that lesson can lead to. This is the beginning of ground tying, trailer loading, and crossing trail obstacles, to name just a few. You may be thinking that you could get your horse to stand on a mat using just pressure and release of pressure, and that's also true, but there is a huge difference.

### BUILDING TRUST

Clicker training doesn't just teach good manners; it creates happy horses. When you use the clicker to teach these simple lessons, you are showing the horse how you operate. You are building trust, laying the foundation for future work, and allowing the horse's own intelligence to become an important part of the training process. The result is a bright-eyed, eager student. With the clicker, the only limit to what you can teach your horse is your own imagination! 🐾

*Next Issue Part 2 :*

*Preparing to Ride with the Clicker*

## About the Author - Alexandra Kurland

*Through her books, videos, and clinics Alexandra Kurland's pioneering work has been introducing the horse community to clicker training. The author of the book, 'Clicker Training For Your Horse' and 'The Click That Teaches' video lesson series, she earned her B.S. degree from Cornell University specialising in animal behaviour. She has been teaching and training horses since the mid 1980's and is photographed (right) training Icelandic Ponies.*

*For more information on clickers and clicker training, visit the web site at: [www.equilog.com.au](http://www.equilog.com.au) or [www.theclickercenter.com](http://www.theclickercenter.com).*

