

Clicker Training Builds Relationships

by Julie Varley

I didn't set out to learn about clicker training, but in doing so my relationship with my horse has been completely transformed. A friend was hosting a Clicker Training Clinic with Alexandra Kurland at her farm and invited me to stay for the weekend and participate in the clinic. I had recently purchased my first horse and found myself in the all too common position of being a novice horse owner with a horse that had serious training issues.

I was leary of clicker training because I didn't know anything about it and wondered if it was a good idea to use treats while working with horses. Most of us have been warned at one time or another about the pushiness that can result from feeding treats to horses during training. But my horse was difficult to work with, through no fault of her own, and I needed help. My Morgan, Allie, had strictly been a brood mare until age fourteen when her owners no longer wanted to breed her and sent her to a lesson stable to be used as a prospective school horse. She had gone from the only life she knew as head of the brood mare band into two years of saddleseat training, and some showing, before I bought her.

Allie was an expert at knowing how to use her body to move things out of her way. She would drag you off or try to barge over you if you were in her way. She had never been taught to lead, or stand still for grooming, tacking, or mounting. When she was nervous, which was quite often, she became even more pushy and difficult to handle. There were times when I thought my arm might fall off from trying to hold her on a lead if she was excited or if there was somewhere she wanted to go that I didn't. She was green broke to ride but really wasn't very happy about being ridden. She was stiff, unbalanced, and anxious much of the time.

I tried to communicate with her by praising the things that I wanted her to keep doing and to correct the things I wanted her to stop doing, but I didn't have the tools to be as clear and consistent as I needed to be in order to be effective. I was a new horse owner who did not enjoy "getting after her" and certainly wasn't any good at it, so I didn't see using fear or intimidation as possible training options. When I am learning something new I don't appreciate a teacher whose method is to get after me. I want someone to calmly and patiently teach me in a way that I can understand. So what did I have to lose by finding out about clicker training?

I met the clinician Alexandra Kurland and learned that her experience with horses began long before she discovered how clicker training could benefit her horses. She has a degree in animal behavior from Cornell University and a lifetime of experience with horses including her high school dressage background. At the clinic Alexandra explained that clicker training was originally used with marine mammal training in the 1960's and is actually B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning at work in real life training situations. Dog trainers have been using it to teach obedience and agility training for years. Zoos are using it to work with animals as an alternative to squeeze chutes and tranquilizer guns.

Alexandra began experimenting with clicker training in 1993 as a way to break up the boredom of stall rest for her thoroughbred Peregrine, who was laid up with foot abscesses and unable to walk. She had read Karen Pryor's Don't Shoot the Dog and watched her dog training videos to get ideas of things that she could do to engage her horse's mind while his feet healed. What started as an experiment to break up boredom resulted in phenomenal progress with her horse and new and exciting methods to add to her horse training tool box.

Alex explained that clicker training is a way of communicating what the animal has just done right rather than correcting or

punishing what the animal has done wrong. The sound of the click tells the animal that whatever behavior it was doing at the exact moment of the click has earned it a reward. Reinforcement can come in various forms, depending on what the animal finds rewarding. Animals; including horses, remember what they were doing at the time of the click and want to produce more of the behavior that is being positively reinforced. Alex showed a video of her horse Robin working at liberty trotting around her on a circle in the most beautiful self-carriage I had ever seen. I had seen people try to get horses to look like this by using side reins and other such equipment, but her horse wasn't attached to anything and wasn't even wearing a halter and he was maintaining a beautifully soft, round top line with balance and engagement- completely on his own! I sat up and paid even more attention.

We watched videos of several species of animals that were clicker trained, including an elephant who had been so dangerously aggressive that he nearly killed his trainer on several occasions. The elephant had been clicker trained to hold his foot through an opening in a wall that separated him from his handlers so he could receive foot care that ultimately saved his life. I watched and started to think of horses as one of many species of animals that learn from operant conditioning. In fact, clicker training can be used to teach any species of animal any behavior that it is physically capable of doing. I put myself in the position of the horses and thought about how I would prefer to be trained- through the use of things like correction, restraint, or punishment or through positive reinforcement? I didn't have to think about that for very long.

After learning how to introduce clicker training to the horses at the clinic I left feeling excited about going home to see how this would work with Allie. She caught on quickly and enthusiastically

participated in the lessons. We were both having so much fun that I doubt she realized that she had just been enrolled in Manners 101.

Alexandra recommends that horses are taught three foundation behaviors as they become "clicker wise" - targeting, backing, and head lowering. Targeting introduces horses to the clicker by teaching them that touching a target leads to a click, and click leads to reward. The reward is something that the horse enjoys working for whether it is a pat or scratch, a teaspoon size amount of grain, or a small piece of carrot or apple. It made perfect sense to me when Alex explained that she uses the grain that she would be feeding to her horses in one larger serving if she was not using it for clicker training. Instead of eating a larger serving too fast as many horses do, they can earn it little by little. So they are not only learning and enjoying the lessons, but they are eating more slowly over a longer period of time and that is healthier for them. Targeting has many practical applications such as having a horse stay on a target to teach it to ground tie, to follow a target past scary objects, and even onto trailers.

Backing helps horses develop a respect for your space and teaches them that coming directly to you for treats never works- the treats must be earned by producing desirable behavior. Horses become pushy and rude about food treats only if we let them. Sure they get excited about food in the beginning but we teach them to be polite by being consistent- just as we need to do in all aspects of their training. Clicker trainers learn how to take one of the most powerful motivators in a horse's life and put it to good use by establishing clear guidelines for behavior.

Head lowering builds trust between horse and handler and also puts an end to rearing, bolting, and spooking. Head lowering has been a key element in helping me learn how to work with Allie. Her history of being jazzed up to go into the saddleseat show ring has provided many opportunities to teach her an opposing behavior

to a high-headed nervous stance. I can cue her to lower her nose to the ground by touching her poll or by taking the slack out of the lead line to put pressure on the poll and releasing the pressure as well as clicking and reinforcing her for lowering her head. When her nose is on the ground she can't be rearing or bolting at the very same time. By using varying reinforcement I am able to require her to keep her head down for longer and longer periods of time before she is reinforced. Because she can't be scanning the horizon line for danger while her nose is down she is turning that responsibility over to me, which has greatly improved the trust between us.

Clicker training has given me a way to use a "yes" answer signal to communicate to Allie what exactly it is that I would like her to do. It is as though I've been able to have a conversation with her as I've been working with her to develop the foundational training that she so desperately needed to be a safe horse to work with and ride. I've used clicker training to help her become more comfortable and cooperative with grooming, bathing, tacking, foot care, mounting, lunging, and riding. Teaching her basic leading skills led into working on lateral flexions in hand which have continued to build on the trust factor while helping Allie learn how to improve her balance and become a soft, light, responsive riding horse.

A year has passed since I attended that first clinic and Allie and I have developed a wonderful, trusting relationship. She is patient, calm, well mannered, and a joy to be around. As Alexandra said when she saw her, "she has learned how to learn." Clicker training de-mystifies the training process by helping us learn how to break things down into small steps so our horses can learn at their own pace and enjoy the training. It has helped me to see how smart and willing my horse is to work with me because I am learning how to do a good enough job of communicating to her exactly what it is that I would like her to do. A horse that used to prefer being left alone now comes galloping to the pasture gate

eager to begin working with me. Clicker training is most definitely worth investigating.

For more information on clicker training: visit www.theclickercenter.com for Clicker Training for Your Horse and "The Click that Teaches Video Series" by Alexandra Kurland