



Part 3: Riding by Alexandra Kurland

Has it
CLICKED?

Riding is the ultimate test of whether a horse fully understands the concept of clicker training.

Clicker training is based on a very simple idea: instead of correcting your horse for things you don't want him to do, you're going to reward him for doing what you do want. It uses a 'yes answer' signal to tell the horse when he has done something right. This signal is paired with a reward, so the horse learns to offer more of the good behavior to earn reinforcement.

Parts one and two showed you how to use clicker training to develop good ground

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manners and emotional control and in this article, these principles are applied to riding.

Let's suppose your horse is a high-headed, nervous type. He spooks at everything, and if he feels trapped by the rider, he'll rear.

Safety should always be the first consideration and a horse like this isn't safe to ride. The solution to his riding problems begins on the ground. The first step is to ask yourself what you want him to do? Instead of going around with his head up looking for trouble, your aim may be for a

lowered head. He can't rear and put his nose to the dirt both at the same time. Clicker training solves training problems by reinforcing incompatible behaviours.

The next question is: have you taught the horse to lower his head? In the previous articles several different ways to achieve this were explained. One simple way was to rest your hand on his poll and when he dropped his head even a little, click!, you took your hand away and gave him a treat.

So, now you have a very simple way under saddle to ask the horse to drop his head. Simply reach forward and rest your hand on his neck. The instant he drops his head, click!, take your hand away. If this lesson has been well taught from the ground, you'll be amazed at how quickly the horse will catch on to it under saddle.

"Okay," you may be thinking, "I see the connection between the ground work and the things I want him to do under saddle. I can see how to use pressure and release of pressure to trigger the same response whether standing next to him or sitting on his back, but how am I going to give him a treat?"

This is something many people have a hard time visualising, but it's really very easy. The horse knows that the click means a treat is coming. When he hears it, he's going to stop to get his goody. When he does, lean down over the front of the saddle and hand it to him. Even with a bit in his mouth, he'll have no trouble eating the bite size piece of carrot, or tablespoon of grain you're giving him. If he needs a little help finding his goody, use your rein to bend his head around to the side.

Head lowering is just one out of many lessons you can transfer from the ground to riding. In last month's pre-ride checklist the horse was taught to give to pressure: to step forward and back, and to yield his hips over from the ground. When he gave a right answer, click!, he got a treat. You can easily transfer all of these lessons directly to riding.

To help the horse learn, and to keep a rider focused, put duct tape markers on the horse. There are six principal markers on each side: one on the jaw, poll, the chest, the withers, the point of the hip and on the hip itself.

Every one of those markers can move in six different directions: up and down, left and right, forward and back. However, to keep things simple assign a specific direction to each marker. For example, the marker on the front of the horse's chest is the 'back up' spot.

First, teach the horse from the ground what you want, then transfer this to riding. Both the lead and the rein send the same message to the horse. When you take the slack out, it means "I want something". When you release the slack, it means "thank you, you just gave it to me". When you want to highlight a particular response, to make the horse more eager to repeat the behaviour, you click and give him a treat.

For example, suppose you're riding a stiff horse, one that's hard to turn and even harder to stop. He vacillates between being nervous and full of energy, and feeling as though he's stuck in cement. There's no in-between that's fun to ride.

Safety always comes first, so before you get on, do some ground work. Use the clicker to teach him to yield to pressure. You want to be able to connect the lead to each of the duct tape markers. For a stiff, stuck-in-cement horse like this, you'll begin by getting him to bend his head to the side and to yield his hips over.

Don't pull his head around, instead take all the slack out of the lead and wait. The principle to follow is: a little bit of pressure over a long period of time will create a desire for change. Instead of escalating with more pressure, give the horse all the time he needs to mull over the situation. The instant he softens, even a little, click!, then release the

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lead. He'll be learning two important things: softening to pressure makes the pressure go away and, he gets a click and a treat.

As soon as he gets his treat, pick up the lead again. It's very much like bending a coat hanger. Each time you ask, you'll feel him soften a little bit more. The more time he spends with his head bent around to the side, the more he's going to want to straighten out. You're going to take advantage of this. As his head bends around, look back at his hip. The leverage effect from the rein as your body turns will encourage him to swing his hind end over. In effect, it's as though you've inserted a crow bar under a big rock. The turn of your body with his head bent around to the side will encourage him to shift his weight over. As he takes a step, click, release the rein and give him a treat.

Our stuck-in-cement horse has just taken a step. Pick up the lead and ask again. This time he may step over more quickly. Click and treat. Once he's consistently yielding his hips, ask for a couple of steps in a row before clicking and treating. The horse is in motion without being tense or afraid. Instead, you've connected his feet to the lead and taught him how to be light and responsive to your cues.

By getting him to swing his hips over, you've not only fixed the 'accelerator pedal', you've unlocked his 'brake', as well. In the same way you got him to go, you can get him to stop. If he starts to rush, or to spook, simply bring his head to the side and

Right: Markers on six principal points on the horse help to focus the rider. Assign a direction to each marker eg. the one on the chest can be used to indicate 'back up'. Each marker can move six different directions - up, down, left, right, forward and back.



Below right: Teaching a horse to yield to pressure using the clicker unlocks the 'brakes' as well as the 'accelerator'.

ask him to yield his hips over. This takes the 'steam roller' power out of his hind end so you can bring him safely to a stand still. Click and treat.

If he charges off when you get on, take slack out of the rein and bring his head to the side. You're telling him "I want something". When you focus on his hips, that tells him what you want. As his hips swing around, click!, release the rein and give him a treat. You've just completed the process by thanking him for a correct response.

Pressure and release of pressure alone could get this job done, but the clicker gives him an added incentive to work with you. It makes a huge difference having a horse that wants to please, rather than one that is simply doing a job because he must. The power of the clicker is the information and the motivation it provides. It tells the horse precisely what it is you want, and it gives him a positive reason to repeat the behavior.

The clicker can help you develop a safe horse, but it can also take you to your performance goals. For example, when your dressage horse gives you a little extra lift, you want to be able to mark that exact moment to let him know "yes, that's what I want!". With the clicker you can do exactly that.

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To build a top performance horse you need to be very clear and consistent. You need to cut your training down into small steps so the horse can be successful. Most of us ask for too much too soon and our training deteriorates. Clicker training helps create an organised lesson plan. Every time you click the clicker, you are creating a step in the training. It teaches the rider to look for reinforceable moments.

One of the great benefits of clicker training is it piggy backs beautifully onto other



training methods. Instead of thinking of it as a separate system that you use in isolation, think of it as a communication tool that makes everything else you do even better. As you and your horse gain experience with the clicker, you'll see how you can weave it into your normal everyday training. Anywhere you need a little help clarifying a lesson, or giving the horse a little extra motivation, you'll use the clicker. When the horse comes through for you with a great performance, you'll truly appreciate the "thank you" the clicker provides. 🐾

About the Author

Alexandra Kurland is the author of 'Clicker Training For Your Horse' and also produces a video lesson series, 'The Click That Teaches' as part of her work to introduce the horse community to clicker training.

For more information on clickers visit the web site at: www.theclickercenter.com or www.equilog.com.au