

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS, Part 1

Fact Sheet Series No.5

This and the next fact sheet are answers to questions Alexandra Kurland has been asked in the past about Clicker Training. Check the links at the end to find out more about Clicker Training.

DO I NEED ANY SPECIAL EQUIPMENT TO USE CLICKER TRAINING?

No. That's one of the great things about clicker training. Clicker training dovetails beautifully with other training methods. You don't have to discard everything you are already know, and you don't have to buy a whole lot of special equipment to use it. All you need is a bag of carrots and a willingness to have some fun.

HOW DOES CLICKER TRAINING FIT INTO OTHER STYLES OF HORSE TRAINING? DO YOU ONLY USE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT WITH YOUR HORSE?

No. In the horse world you will never get away from using negative reinforcement, and furthermore, you do not want to. Negative reinforcement, i.e. pressure, is our communication system. Tightening a thigh muscle, pressing your calf against the horse's side, closing your hand on the reins, these are all signals that tell the horse what we

want, and they are all negative reinforcers. The question isn't so much whether we use negative reinforcers in our training, but HOW we teach them. That's where the clicker becomes such a wonderful addition to our toolbox. I can piggy back the principles of shaping and the use of a bridging signal onto other training systems, and in the process I'll make it easier for the horse to understand what I want. With the clicker I can teach my horse to respond to pressure without using either fear or pain to provoke responses.

DO YOU HAVE TO USE THE CLICKER TO BE A CLICKER TRAINER?

No. Any unique signal that the animal can recognize will work. I use the mechanical clicker when I am first introducing a horse to the clicker. I use this in preference to a verbal cue because of the uniqueness of the sound. The horses are quick to notice the clicker. Verbal signals often get lost in the background noise of our

own chatter. Once the horse understands the basic rules of the game, i.e. behaviour leads to click leads to reward, I switch over to a tongue click. This leaves my hands free for other things. I've never had any problem transferring the signal. The horses instantly make the connection.

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU HAVE MORE THAN ONE CLICKER TRAINED HORSE IN THE RING AT THE SAME TIME? DO THEY GET CONFUSED?

We routinely will have four or five clicker trained horses working together, and they all seem to sort out which click they are supposed to be responding to. What is particularly interesting is I can be working with a client and be clicking her horse from a distance, and none of the other horses will react. These are all horses I work with. They all know I'm a potential vending machine, but they also know that at that moment my click is not intended for them.

WHY CAN'T I JUST SAY "GOOD"? DO I HAVE TO USE A CLICKER?

I personally prefer a tongue click over verbals. The click is a high speed,

unique signal that lets me mark very precise criteria. Verbals can do the same thing, but I prefer to use "good" and "yes" as encouragers. Think of the children's game hot and cold. "Good" says you're getting warmer, but the click says, "YES! You just found the pot of gold". You can certainly use "good" in place of the clicker, but I think you'll find that you're going to prefer some other signal. The important thing is not to get hung up in what signal you use but to understand that clicker training is really about shaping behaviour in small steps with a clear "yes" answer signal that guides and motivates the horse through the learning process. Clicks are NOT clucks, and horses have no trouble telling the difference. A cluck is a request for movement. A click is my "yes answer" signal. Clucks are made from the corner of your mouth. Clicks are made on the roof of your mouth with your tongue. (It's surprising how many people struggle to produce a consistent tongue click.

My book, **CLICKER TRAINING FOR YOUR HORSE**, has detailed instructions on how to do this. While you're learning, the plastic clicker definitely helps.

The printed information contained in this fact sheet is kindly provided by Judy Ryder-Duffy and Alexander Kurland; author of "CLICKER TRAINING FOR YOUR HORSE" & GETTING STARTED: CLICKER TRAINING FOR HORSES. You can purchase Alex's books by printing off the order form at <http://www.crisny.org/users/kurlanda> & mailing it to; Alexandra Kurland. 110 Salisbury Rd Delmar, NY 12054 USA. The Australian Clicker Connection Website can be found at <http://www.equilog.com.au/clicker.htm> & Clickers can be purchased in Australia through Equilog. (ph) 49986095 . <http://www.equilog.com.au>.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS, Part 2

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WHAT KINDS OF THINGS CAN YOU TEACH WITH THE CLICKER?

Anything you want. From basic manners to advanced upper level performance, anytime you need a clear "yes" answer signal the clicker can help out your training. For starters go down a checklist of basic stable manners. Does your horse lead well? Will he walk right onto a trailer? Does he ground tie? Does he take his bridle easily? Will he stand quietly on cross ties? Is he good for grooming and saddling? Will he accept clippers, pick his feet up for cleaning, etc., etc.. If the answer to any of those questions is no, try a little clicker training.

DO YOU FEED THE HORSE A TREAT AFTER EVERY CLICK? IN A NORMAL DAY, IF YOU ARE CLICKING FOR GOOD BEHAVIOR, WOULDN'T YOU NEED A WHEELBARROW FULL OF FOOD?

I follow every click with a reward. That's the bargain I've established with my horse. Here's an example

that may help you to understand this. I live in snow country. Suppose I ask

one of the neighbourhood kids to shovel out my driveway after a snowstorm. In exchange I tell him, I'll give him twenty dollars. I don't have a very long driveway, so he'll probably think this is a really good deal. Now suppose when he gets all done, I look at the driveway, and I say, "That's a really great job, you did. The driveway looks super." He'll feel good, but he'll still want his money. Praise is nice, but it's not what motivated him to do my drive. Now I say, "Oh, I'm a little short this week. I'm not going to pay you this time, but maybe next time I'll give you twenty dollars." The next time it snows, you can bet I'll be doing my own driveway. That kid is going to have twenty good reasons not to do what I want. So, if I set up a bargain with my horse that says I'm going to pay him for work well done, that's what I need to do. That doesn't mean that I'm going to be clicking and treating every time my horse does something good. The clicker is a TEACHING tool. For example, I can

use the clicker to teach a horse to pick up its feet for cleaning. I may start by clicking the horse when it lets me run my hand down below its knee, but I'm going to use a variable reinforcement schedule to ask for more and more.

The variable reinforcement schedule means that the horse never knows exactly when he's going to hear the click. He'll keep working, offering me more good responses, in an effort to get the "vending machine" to work. This is the same principle that runs the Las Vegas slot machines.

Before long my foot shy horse is going to be doing a lot more than simply letting me run my hand down his leg. He'll be picking his own foot up and holding it quietly in the air while I pick out the dirt. Pretty soon, I won't click him until I've cleaned two, then three, then all four feet. And after a while I'll be able to fade the click out completely as he masters that skill, but I'll be using the clicker in other areas to teach new things. It's like saying to that kid, yes I'll give you twenty dollars. You can count on that, but I also want the front walk shovelled, AND the snow pulled off the roof. If he quits part way, he won't get anything, but the more he gets done, the closer he gets to his

reward. That keeps him going even though I'm asking for more work. If I were to add both new tasks all at once, he might grumble and go away. But, if I gradually ask for a little bit more each time, after a while it will all seem like just part of the job. If every now and then I surprise him some fresh baked brownies, he might even offer to knock the icicles off the rain gutters. (Doesn't this sound familiar? Not only is it a lot like horse training, but isn't this what happens to most of us at work. Look back at your original job description. After a while it starts to sound as though it's referring to somebody else. You do SO much more than that, but it's still the same pay check.) With the horses a pocket full of grain or even a single carrot can buy you a lot of training.

Treats are given in small amounts. A teaspoon of grain, one bite of carrot, is enough to keep your horse working for more. I vary my reinforcers. Not only does that make the training more fun and interesting for my horse, it provides him with an additional source of information. I can save his favourite treats for extra efforts. They help me to mark those special "Kodak moments." When my own horse does something I particularly like, click! the peppermints come out. He knows he's just done something super that was well worth the extra effort.

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