



Rachel Williams BSc (Hons) Dip ICAT PG Dip CABP
Animal Behaviour Therapist
www.rachelwilliams-animalbehaviour.com

Clicker Training for Horses

I don't know of any of my horse owning friends that use clicker training so I would like to introduce this exciting training tool.

I have been training animals for as long as I can remember, some of my first memories are of teaching our sheepdog to sit, by using a biscuit to lure her into position. At the time, choke chains were very popular, as were strong verbal corrections, but I didn't see the need for any aversives when I could use a food treat instead. In 2001 I took my young dog, Sparkle, to clicker training lessons. The training method was so powerful, I saw significant differences in her motivation, focus and understanding of correct desirable behaviours. She went on to be a very successful agility dog.

In 2008 I bought a foal with the intention of backing and training him myself. The following year I began a post graduate diploma in Animal Behaviour at the University of Southampton. We learned about how animals learn and how training methods apply and I started thinking about the way we train and handle horses. I started to realise that clicker training can be a fantastic tool for horses, and have since trained my youngster this way.

What is clicker training

Clicker training uses positive reinforcement (normally food, but theoretically could be anything the animal enjoys) to reward correct behaviours. A distinctive 'click' sound is paired with food, so the click itself indicates reward will follow. In training, the clicker communicates that the animal is doing something right. Because the 'click' is so clear and distinctive it provides precision timing and can mark correct behaviour immediately, even the smallest behaviours or changes in response. Therefore, unlike any other training methods, the clicker allows very accurate training allowing the animal to learn and repeat correct behaviours quickly. Clicker training can be explained by scientific learning theory (which has been well researched and understood since around the 1900's). Clicker training has been used to train many different species of animal, but is most popular in the dog training world.

Clicker training and horses

Negative reinforcement (pressure and release; the removal of punishment contingent on correct behaviour) has been very effective in training horses for hundreds of years. However, with more scientific research and better understanding we are now finding that positive reinforcement is a more effective and kinder way to train horses. Whilst clicker training is an alternative to other methods, it does work well alongside traditional training. There are now many equine trainers that realise the benefits of clicker training. Whilst teaching horses this way is in its infancy, there are international riders that have clicker trained horses that have gone on to win medals; including John and Beezie Madden, USA Olympic Team Showjumpers.

Many people believe that horses should never be fed from the hand. However, clicker training can actually be used to overcome problems of biting and mugging for food. The unique aspect of clicker training is that attitude is rewarded as well as behaviour. It is vital that the horse is rewarded for a good attitude as well as correct behaviours. This type of training is a powerful way of encouraging good attitude in work and creates a calm relaxed horse.

I should emphasise that clicker training is an 'approach' not just a training method. The approach is to maintain a calm happy horse and build a mutual understanding. I do most of my training at liberty (loose) allowing the horse to lead the training and work at their own pace. Any difficulties during training give me feedback; caused by anxiety or lack of understanding. Concepts of dominance and respect are not relevant and the use of pressure / punishment is avoided. Before dealing with unacceptable behaviours, the motive or cause must be identified before teaching a new more appropriate behaviour. The approach influences my perception of horses as a whole, not just during training.

Clicker training is not a magic wand, and there are no instant results. As with all other training methods, clicker training is reliant on trainer ability and requires good timing.

Advantages of clicker training

There are some distinct advantages of using clicker training:

- Fun for the horse and owner.
- Builds a strong relationship between horse and owner.
- Horse becomes more willing.
- Less stress for the owner. *In situations where the horse may refuse or object, the horse is taught the correct behaviours so the owner avoids the stress of conflict.*
- Rewards calmness and good attitude.
- Accurately marks correct behaviour.
- Use of aversives is reduced or eliminated.
- Focus is on correct behaviour. *Whilst traditional training focuses on reducing wrong behaviour and telling the horse 'no', clicker training focuses on correct behaviour, helping horses understand what we want from them and telling them 'yes'.*
- Can change the emotion of fear and anxiety to pleasure and calmness.
- Active participation of the horse.
- Owner reads the horse and horse is allowed to communicate during training.
- Long retention of learning.
- Learning is stronger. *Because there are clear consequences to behaviour.*
- Mental exercise. *Can create games or tricks, ideal for horses on box rest.*
- Overall more confident, calm horse. *The cumulative effect of rewarding calmness, creating positive emotions in training, reduced aversives and a strong owner / horse relationship is a horse that is calm and confident, rather than flighty, spooky, withdrawn, sour, aggressive, sensitive, anxious etc.*



Training my youngster at liberty. The aim is teach him to be relaxed regardless of what is thrown at him. The training sessions are slow and methodical, building up from simple items such as a body brush to more scary rustly plastic bags or hose pipes. This can be particularly useful in reducing reactivity in spooky or sensitive horses.

Scientific research

There is some interesting scientific research of clicker training in real life situations. However, much of this is canine research, with very little equine applications. More recently, equine research has become a little more important and better funded due to the implications of positive reinforcement on equine welfare. Some of the findings to date:

- Clicker training was effective in training five horses to load into the trailer without the use of pressure or punishment. (Ferguson and Rosales-Ruiz, 2001).
- Horses trained using clicker training were more motivated to participate in the training sessions and exhibited more exploratory or 'trial and error' type behaviours in novel situations/environments. (Innes and McBride, 2008)
- No association of unwanted oral behaviours (biting, searching, nibbling etc) in clicker trained horses. (Hockenhull and Creighton, 2010)
- Reward based learning induced positive reactions to humans during and several months after training. Overall positive reinforcement enhanced learning and memorization of the task itself. (Sanky *et. al.* 2010).
- In a trailer loading task, horses trained using positive reinforcement (clicker training) provided the fastest training solution and expressed less stress response compared to horses trained using negative reinforcement (pressure and release). (Hendriksen, Elmgreen and Ladewig, 2011)
- Trailer loading and feet handling was successfully taught using clicker training. (Slater and Dymond, 2011)

I hope this article has enlightened you about clicker training for horses. If you would like further information then please feel free to contact me.

Rachel Williams BSc (Hons) Dip ICAT PGDip CABC
Equine Behaviour Therapist

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