

How Horse Training Works

By Sean Patrick

FROM
Horse&Rider

Trainer Sean Patrick talks about his honest-to-goodness training method that anyone can apply to any horse in preparation for any purpose and how that training method works.



As a trainer, your aim is to condition a horse so he stops acting instinctually while under your guidance, and instead only acts in response to your requests. Here, for example, my horse remains steady under my control and trots calmly by a potentially fear-inducing tractor, instead of shying, whirling, or bolting.

Photo by Charles Hilton

Modern horsemanship has been shaped by the age of information sharing. How we handle and ride our horses today is due in large part to the videos, Web sites, podcasts, clinics, and personal instruction available to us 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in our cars, homes, and barns.

In a sense, and as the saying goes, we can't see the forest for the trees. We're so overwhelmed with the jargon and the gear and the newest trends, we can no longer focus on the big picture: an honest-to-goodness training method that anyone can apply to any horse in preparation for any purpose. I cover this method in my new book, *The Modern Countdown to Broke: REAL Do-It-Yourself Training in 33 Comprehensive Steps*.

Understanding how your horse learns is the cornerstone to my program. This knowledge enables you to train in a consistent, common-sense manner. There are no guessing games about whether the horse has found the correct answer or not.

Here's another key piece of knowledge. The horse's body has five specific points that you need to control in order to one day have him prepared to execute any movement, and perform in any discipline. All five points can move in six directions: forward, backward, right, left, up, and down.

The five points are: nose, right shoulder, left shoulder, right hip, left hip.

That's it. In my Countdown to Broke training program, there are no other places on the horse's body that you need to be concerned about. Your goal in using the program is to begin to isolate these control points and condition each one to respond to your cues, as needed. But, first things first.

Horse-Psych 101

Depending on environmental conditions, a herd of horses will graze one-third of the time, travel another third, and rest for the remainder. By understanding some of the social patterns that govern a natural herd as well as its tendencies, you can domesticate your horse (train him, in other words) with greater success.



By controlling all five of the body's control points, marked here with arrows (nose, right and left shoulders, right and left hips), any maneuver is possible. My Countdown to Broke training program isolates each of these points and shows you how to condition a great response to your cue(s) for each.

Photo By Charles Hilton

During their normal day, horses in a natural herd would be on the lookout for predators, and when spotted, either respond with fight or flight. Since the horse is naturally a prey animal, he'll most likely choose to flee a frightening situation and only fight if he feels he absolutely has to.

If you wish to be a part of a horse's life, you'll need to establish respect, but also build and maintain trust. This can be a delicate balancing act in the beginning, as your horse figures out what his role is in his new relationship with you.

Since there is a hierarchical pecking order in a natural herd, you must be the leader in your domestic herd (even when your herd only contains one horse and you). When you don't command respect, you'll be moved around, threatened, bitten, or kicked. It's normal for horses to test their place in the herd ranking, but with consistent leadership, you can maintain your integral role as boss.

Conditioned Response

Horses conduct themselves on two very different levels: innate behavior and conditioned behavior. Innate

behavior—or instinct—comes from natural brain processes that horses inherit from their predecessors. Conditioned behavior is a result of learning from the environment around them. Horses learn how to respond to different situations, based on their previous experiences.

As a trainer, your aim is to condition a horse to behave in a way that's appealing to you. This translates into a horse ceasing to act instinctually while under your guidance, and instead only acting in response to your requests—for example, when your horse doesn't whirl and bolt when confronted by a strange, fearful object, and instead remains steady under your control, keeping you safe.

The following are ways in which conditioning can be used for training purposes.



I use a treat to teach this mare to bend her neck while keeping her feet stationary, in order to stretch her neck muscles. This is an example of positive reinforcement, as I'm adding a pleasing stimulus to reinforce desired behavior.

Photo By Charles Hilton

Operant conditioning is a teaching process that uses reinforcement in order to condition a response—to create such desirable behaviors as the one described above. Both positive and negative reinforcement strengthen behavior, making a desired response more likely to happen in the future.

Positive reinforcement is the addition of and use of a pleasing stimulus. A horse that's brought in from the pasture for

his daily grain ration is far more likely to be caught easily than one that receives nothing. And, you can easily teach a horse such tricks as bowing down on one knee with the enticement of sugar cubes. With positive reinforcement, the horse learns that certain behaviors guarantee a reward.

Positive reinforcement (although powerful when used with people), isn't a practical primary teaching tool with horses.

You're obstructed by the horse's inability to communicate through reason and language. You can, however, use a type of positive reinforcement, such as kind rubs, in combination with the next approach—negative reinforcement—to further strengthen a response from your horse.

Negative reinforcement strengthens behavior with the removal of an aversive stimulus (something that the horse wants to avoid). Because this stimulus is physical, it allows you to communicate to the horse how you'd like him to respond—for example, bumping your legs to encourage your horse to move forward more quickly, and once he does, discontinuing the use of your legs.

I realize the term “negative reinforcement” sounds, well, negative. It's not! It's simply a term from the field of psychology that refers to the removal of the stimulus. So, in fact, it's a positive experience for the horse, and consequently, a wonderful teaching method.

Shaping is another way in which horses can be taught. Shaping brings about a nonexistent or complex behavior

through an operant process. It's achieved in small steps known as successive approximations, which progressively develop behaviors that you desire with the help of the reinforcements just discussed.

For example, in order to perform a beautiful sidepass, you need to control the horse's hips, shoulders, and nose position. You also want the horse to remain elevated, collected, calm, and willing. You can't teach all this in one step. This advanced maneuver requires you to teach your horse many smaller responses that eventually build up to the sidepass.



To ask the mare I'm training to go forward from the ground, I raise the dressage whip and lightly tap her hindquarters. By my beginning the request softly, the horse is in control of when she decides to move. In time, she'll want to move as soon as she recognizes the cue coming.

Photo By Charles Hilton

Conditioning a Response

In order to condition a response, such as the movement of one of the five control points at the appropriate cue, you'll use a teaching process consisting of four equally important components: spot, direction, motivator, and release.

This method requires you to focus on the horse's small tries and successes, and to reward his efforts. By isolating a spot on the horse, you're able to see these small changes more easily and can accurately assess how the control point is responding. For example, in order to recognize a precise change in a shoulder, the lesson may suggest you focus on a front foot as the spot, where it's easier to see the horse's progress.

In any lesson, your first step is to determine each of these four components so that the plan is clear to both you and your horse from the beginning. So, you'll begin by choosing a spot on the horse to move. This can be the

point of the chest, a particular foot, or really any other part you can easily focus on. Knowing what you want to make move keeps it simple.

Second, you need to have a direction in your mind in which you want the spot to move. Your horse may take the spot in many directions, but the direction you've chosen is the important one.



As she moves forward, I immediately stop tapping and lower the whip. I turn all pressure off—body, vocals, and whip—and the mare sees an opportunity to quit working.

Photo By Charles Hilton

Third, in order to move the particular spot in the chosen direction, you must have a motivator to encourage the horse to respond to your request. Leg pressure is one example of a motivator.

And, the fourth component is the release. When the horse moves the spot in the direction of your choice, you've just defined a response, and the release (or stopping the use) of the motivator tells him that his response is the correct one. By getting it right, the horse sees that the motivator is no longer applied. The ideal moment to discontinue application of the motivator is called the release point.

This, in a nutshell, is the teaching method primarily used throughout my Countdown to Broke. To train your own horse using my system, you'll memorize these four components and apply them to every lesson plan.

You, as a Trainer

Let me provide a sample situation. Let's say your plan is to teach your horse to go forward, on cue, from the ground. This is how to break it down:

1. Spot: Choose a spot on the horse to watch for forward movement. A small, distinct area like the point of the chest helps you determine success more easily.
2. Direction: You want your spot to move forward. Have a clear direction in mind.
3. Motivator: Plan to use a dressage whip as the motivator. By tapping the horse on the hindquarters with it, you'll have a way to encourage the correct response—move the spot forward. Begin the tapping softly and escalate as necessary, if needed.
4. Release: At the moment the spot moves in the proper direction, offer a release with negative reinforcement: Stop tapping the whip and stand quietly with the horse. Then, offer positive reinforcement, such as a head rub and kind words. Together, the two types of reinforcement strengthen the chance of this desired response reoccurring in the future.

You've just begun to teach your horse a conditioned response: The horse moves the spot forward when the whip is applied to his hind end. If he doesn't move forward with initial tapping, escalate the firmness of the taps until he responds. Your horse will soon become uncomfortable with being tapped and quickly learn, through repetition, that he's better off responding promptly to the motivator in order to find the release.

To transfer the horse's short-term memory into long-term memory, you need to repeat this process many times. The response must also be practiced on a regular basis to keep the horse's long-term memory fresh.



She stops and faces me, and I allow a short break and offer positive reinforcement.

Photo By Charles Hilton

More About Motivators

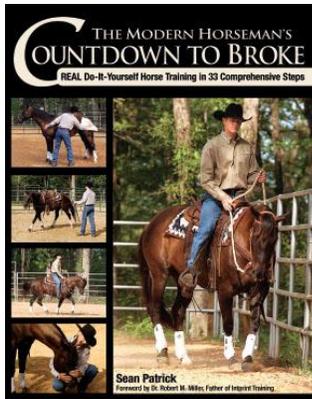
The motivator is an essential piece of the teaching process. As just explained, in order to move the spot in the direction you want, you must motivate the horse to respond. Since you can't verbally reason with your horse, you use a physical motivator. Common motivators include bit pressure, leg pressure, halter pressure, a dressage whip, and hard work (you can't make a horse stand still, but you can make him move).

Understanding what your motivator is, and how to use it effectively, is crucial. Without proper use of escalating pressure, your horse will learn the wrong behaviors instead of the right ones.

Your aim is to evoke a correct response—one that you've previously taught or a new one—and in order to do that, you want to use the motivator with just enough pressure. If you don't use enough, your horse will be released while giving an incorrect response—something to avoid.

However, if you use too much pressure, the horse may show signs of avoidance behavior and lose trust in you. The right amount of pressure is just what it takes for your horse to respond correctly, and no more. Consistent use of reinforcements following the motivator's release will reassure your horse that you're fair and trustworthy.

Since you don't always know how much pressure it will take to get the desired response, always begin softly, increasing the application of the motivator until the horse finds the right answer. If your teaching step is small and you use your motivator effectively, your horse will continue to learn.



Sean Patrick, author of the book from which this article is adapted, began his study of horses and horsemanship while working as a high-country guide in British Columbia. His formal education includes a degree from Canada's Trent University, certification from Oklahoma Horseshoeing School, and horse-training study with John Lyons. Sean now runs a training and horsemanship-coaching business in New Smyrna Beach, Florida (seanpatricktraining.com). For the successive lessons in his Countdown to Broke program, refer to the book, available at HorseBooksEtc.com.