

# Clicker Training for Horses

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**EQUUS**



**Using a clicker to train your horse to play fetch, kick a ball and do other tricks is fun---and it can help you build a stronger partnership on the ground and under saddle.**

My horse Aurum was a real handful when I first brought him home. He was a 2-year-old who had grown up in a field without much human contact, and I knew I was going to have to start with lessons in basic ground manners. I soon found, though, that he was a real problem child.

I enlisted professional help, and we discovered that many of his issues stemmed from back pain---but that's a story we already told, in "Good as Gold" (True Tale, EQUUS 352). Yet even after we finally got his back cleared by a veterinarian and a chiropractor, and he was started under saddle, I knew I was going to have to work extra hard to gain his confidence and respect.

Teaching him tricks proved to be the perfect way of achieving that goal. I already had some experience with trick training. After a friend showed me the basics of a method called clicker training, I taught our white pony Timbit to do all kinds of things, from fetching a tissue when I sneezed to retrieving packages from a mailbox. Timbit took to all my requests almost gleefully, and we did many demonstrations at festivals, seniors' homes and for the Humane Society. But Timbit was growing old, and I had bought Aurum to aid him.

Aurum, too, took to performing like a duck to water, but in the end my beautiful palomino taught me that trick training can be about much more than pleasing crowds---it's also about teaching a horse confidence

and trust, reducing his fears, helping him to relax and building a bond. Today Aurum is a confident ham who loves performing for crowds who come to our place, especially children, and I firmly believe it was the trick training that helped him become the horse he is.

Whether you'd like to train your horse to put on shows, or you'd just like to explore a new way to have a little fun with him on your own, teaching tricks can help you strengthen your relationship. And it's easier than you think to get started. Here's what you need to know.

### **Steps to positive learning**

Volumes have been written about how to train animals, but I found success primarily through techniques based on positive reinforcement. The concept is fairly simple: The horse gets something he likes---often a food treat---as a consequence of performing the desired activity, and he is therefore more likely to repeat the behavior when asked again. And the faster the positive reinforcement follows the action, the sooner the animal will understand the connection.

To effectively practice positive reinforcement methods, you'll need to develop cue control. Once you've begun rewarding a certain behavior, you will find that your horse will often do it without your cue, hoping to receive a treat anyway. But to maintain control of the situation, avoid rewarding a behavior unless you've asked for it. In other words, reward him only for correct responses to your specific cues. Establishing cue control is also an excellent means of teaching your horse emotional control, and this will be of great benefit when you are out riding him.

The other part of cue control is how you respond to incorrect behavior---you simply ignore it, or at most, you might deliver a gentle but firm "No" or "Uh-uh." You must be careful to never accidentally reward bad behavior. Once the horse learns that the only way to earn his reward is to wait for your cue and then perform the behavior you want, you are well on your way to good training.

### **How to use a clicker**

Clicker training is one method of delivering positive reinforcement quickly and efficiently. A clicker is a hand-held device with a button or a metal tongue that makes a distinct "click" when you press it. You can buy them at most pet stores or order one online.

A clicker is helpful because it is not always possible to reward a horse instantly when he offers a desired behavior. But just as Pavlov conditioned dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell with classical conditioning, a trainer can make an animal associate a particular sound with an upcoming reward. In other words, the click becomes a "promise" that the reward will come later.

You do not need to use an actual physical clicker to train a horse; you can also use a verbal cluck or a word of praise. But, to me, the clicker is like magic when it comes to trick training. It is both attention-getting and precise, and the sound can be delivered instantly, to let your horse know that the behavior he has just performed is exactly right. This helps him to make the connection and understand what you want faster.

To get started with the clicker, simply get a handful of your horse's favorite treats (if you're worried about feeding him too much at once, break larger pieces down into smaller bits). Click the clicker and then offer a treat. Repeat this several more times: click, treat; click, treat. It won't be long until your horse associates the click with the treat. Trainers call this either charging up the clicker or creating a conditioned reinforcer. (Do not click and treat if the horse gets pushy or aggressive---that would be rewarding bad behavior. Instead, wait until he backs off and stands quietly again.)

Many clicker trainers wear a treat pouch on their waists while they work. There are still some people who worry that feeding a horse by hand will cause him to bite, but in reality a horse who is properly clicker trained is less likely to mug you for treats because you will never, ever reward pushy behavior.

### **Trick basics**

Once your horse understands what the clicker means, and you've learned how to deliver rewards appropriately, you can start with a few basic "building blocks" of trick behavior. These simple actions are easy to teach, and they can become the first steps into more complex tricks. Here's how to get started:

- **Targeting** teaches a horse to touch his nose to an object. The target can be anything you choose, such as a small orange cone, a plastic lid or the rounded end of a hunter bat (my choice).

Hold the object in front of your horse. Natural curiosity will make him sniff it. If he touches it, immediately click and treat. If he doesn't touch it, help him succeed by positioning it so that his natural head movement will cause his nose to bump into it. The instant this happens, click and treat. As you repeat this process over and over, you will notice the exact moment when your horse figures out the connection between the touch and the reward.

Clicker training is a flexible method, so there is plenty of room for you to develop your own style. You can have the horse respond to your gestures alone, or you can build a verbal command into your training by saying, for example, "touch" as your horse reaches for the target. Eventually, you ought to be able to say "touch" to let him know what you want him to do. (Most clicker trainers shape a behavior and then put a word to it, but I always start with the word and then find a way to explain that word to my horse. Using this method I have taught Aurum such complex behaviors as the canine scent discrimination exercise, in which an animal is sent out to find and retrieve a scented dumbbell from a group of identical dumbbells.)

Once your horse consistently touches the target on command, you can start getting him to follow it around. I use my hand as the target when guiding Aurum over ramps, through hoops and around weave cones. Build slowly, and if the behavior deteriorates at any time, go back to a previous step in the shaping process.

Targeting is not just a trick but also a valuable tool that can be used in situations such as trailer loading, obstacle training and lateral work.

- **Head positions**, such as tucking the chin, raising the poll or turning the nose away from you, can come in handy in many situations. Head lowering, for example, is one of the most important moves you will teach your horse, because a low-headed horse is a calm horse. If you want to use it as part of his tricks for public performance, you can always use a command like "shame on you." (I use the "look away" if Aurum gets at all pushy.)

Head lowering can be taught in two ways, and because it is such an important behavior, I train it both ways.

Using this method, with a lead rope, will help with riding work. First take the slack out of your lead without pulling down. Then apply just enough pressure on the rope so that your horse can feel the halter pressing against his poll. If you feel even the slightest dropping of your horse's head, release the rope. When you feel a definite drop, click him and reward. Continue this exercise until your horse is dropping his nose all the way to the ground. Gradually extend the length of time he has to hold it there to get his reward. If your horse lifts his head, just go with him and wait for him to eventually come back down.

The other way to get your horse to lower his head is to put the weight of your hand on his poll. Let it rest there quietly, and eventually he will shift away from the steady pressure of your hand. As soon as he

moves down even slightly, click, take your hand away and treat. If he goes up, go with him but keep steady pressure on his poll and wait him out. When he lowers his head even slightly, take your hand away. Start over, and when he eventually drops his head again, click and give him a treat.

Nowhere is patient persistence more important than in teaching your horse to lower his head.

- **Kick the ball** can become the basis for a variety of similar tricks, including kick the can, kick the bucket and knock on wood. To start teaching your horse to play soccer, put a large beach ball or similar toy in front of him and click him when he touches it. If he moves to paw at the ball, you're in luck! While he might initially scare himself, your click will encourage him to keep playing.

If he doesn't paw the ball, you can help him by rolling it off his hoof and clicking. Just be ready at the beginning to keep out of the way if he spooks. Eventually he should be so sure of himself he will be able to bounce the ball off his own stomach without bat-ting an eye.

- **Fetch.** Once you've taught some very basic behaviors, you can start putting them together into more complex actions. What you do is "chunk down" a trick, which means breaking down a complex action into increments, so the horse learns separate behaviors that are combined in the end.

Teaching your horse to retrieve an object, such as an oversized dumbbell, is a perfect example of this process. A proper retrieve consists of several behaviors taught in this order:

1. Touch the object.
2. Take the object.
3. Hold the object for increasing lengths of time.
4. Give the object to the handler.
5. Bring the object to the handler.
6. Go out to the object to retrieve it.

You can use whatever words you like for these behaviors, but I use "touch," "take it," "hold," "give," "bring it to ME" and "go out." Once I've firmly established all these behaviors, I put the whole retrieving sequence together and call the command "go and fetch." Don't expect to get a perfect retrieve in one session, as you will only frustrate both yourself and your horse.

"Take it" shouldn't be too difficult if your horse will take a bit. Once your horse understands the words "take it" in connection with a bit or an oversized dumbbell, transferring the command to other objects is relatively easy.

Gradually increase the length of time for your "hold" command. When you ask for "give," make sure you click at the precise time you receive the object from your horse. Once you're ready to establish some distance, it's easiest at first to move away from the horse and have him "bring" you the object. I teach the "go out" as a separate command in which the horse goes to a mark or mat, and by the time I'm finally ready to tell the horse to "go and fetch," he's more than ready to comply.

Once your horse has "learned to learn," and you've learned to teach, the sky's the limit! You can teach your horse almost anything as long as you can break the action down into component behaviors. Here are the breakdowns for some of Aurum's tricks:

**Paint a picture:** take brush, touch brush to paper, wave brush

**Put garbage in can:** take garbage, go to can, drop garbage in can

**Sweep the barn:** take broom, touch broom to floor, wave broom

**It's raining:** fetch umbrella (involves all the steps of the retrieve), wait (stand at attention while the opened umbrella is held over his head)

**Parcel out of mailbox:** go to mailbox, open mailbox, fetch parcel

**Turn skipping rope:** take end of rope, wave rope.

Horses trained using positive reinforcement learn quickly and become enthusiastic partners in the process. Once you've got the basics down, you might find the only thing holding you back is your own imagination. If you approach each session with enthusiasm, a positive outlook and a sensible plan, good things are bound to happen.

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