

## What is Positive Reinforcement Training

### also known as Equine Clicker Training or Reward Reinforcement?

'Clicker training' or 'reward reinforcement' is also called 'positive reinforcement' because we **add something** (a treat) to the situation.

'Release reinforcement' is also called 'negative reinforcement' because we put signal pressure on the horse to do something. When we 'release' the pressure we **remove something** from the situation.

**The terms 'positive' and 'negative', in the field of animal behaviour, are used in a mathematical sense, not in the sense of being 'good' and 'bad'.**

Clicker training can work with 'reward reinforcement' only. You can observe and wait for the horse to do something, and click him for it. For example, you can click and treat each time he itches himself. Once he's made the connection, you can put a signal (either a gesture or a word or both) on that action, and then you can ask him to do it whenever you like.

This is called 'free shaping'. Once he responds correctly to your signal most of the time, you have created a 'conditioned response'. If your horse comes to you every day at feeding time, you have created a 'conditioned response'. If he sees you with a halter or bridle and moves away so you can't catch him, you have a 'conditioned response'.

However, to progress a bit faster, we mostly pair up 'release' and 'reward' reinforcement when we use clicker training. We apply some sort of pressure to the horse to cause it to do something we want. When it does, we both release the pressure **and** click/treat. The 'click' is the 'bridge' between what the horse has done and the treat he will get for it. It allows us to 'mark' the exact piece of behaviour we would like the horse to do, or at least a first approximation of the behaviour we would eventually like him to carry out.

The click/treat system causes the horse to be strongly focused on finding out what earns the click and treat. He'll start to offer behaviours to 'earn' the treat. It gives him a way to communicate with us. It also allows him a stronger ownership of the new learning. Soon after starting to learn things with click/treat, the horse will begin to 'throw' behaviours at us, hoping to get the vending machine working.

At this point, it is important to put the new pieces of learning 'on signal'. A signal can be verbal or a gesture. Often it's nice to use both together. Signals usually arise naturally out of the nature of the task we are teaching. For picking things up, I tell Boots to, "Pick!" and point to the object. At the end of a session, she likes to come around with me to pick up all the cones and rags we were using as arena markers.

Once the horse knows the task and the signal, it is important to only click/treat when you have asked for it. Otherwise it might be hard to use cones as arena markers while riding or doing ground work exercises!

Using the click&treat only when we've asked for the behaviour, will slowly extinguish the horse's desire to 'throw the new move at you' as soon as he sees you (much like a child dying to show you his new painting). When I taught Boots to 'spin', it was quite startling when she wanted to show it to me and visitors all the time, while standing right beside us!