



NATURAL  
*Animal*  
CENTRE

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# Clicker training: Myth Busting

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# “Food will make my horse bite!”

Food is the most powerful tool to teach a horse \*not\* to bite!

People often believe that hand feeding horses will teach them ‘mugging behaviour’. There is a little truth in this, feeding a horse in the wrong way will reinforce them for being ‘in your space’ and foraging your pockets. When we first start R+, the first thing we address is helping our horses learn to remain ‘calm and polite’ around food.

For some horses, remaining ‘calm’ around food is harder than others, e.g. a cob who gets a very small or no hard feed is more likely become over-excited or frustrated (over-arousal is the behavioural science term for this) around food reinforcers than an OTTB who gets half a bucket of hard feed morning and evening because to the cob the food is something they don’t often experience, thus making it a higher value reinforcer.

But just because your horse starts off in the former category isn’t to say you can’t use food reinforcers! It just takes a little more training and a little more planning! (Check out the How to Set Up for Success Guidebook for more.)

# “Your horse will become dependent on food rewards”

Some people worry that once you start using food you can't stop, but have no fear: by creating 'behaviour chains' of previously taught (R+) behaviours it is possible to ride full dressage tests, a round of jumps or a trail ride without ever stopping to reinforce.

Food in this context is used as a reinforcer, not so much as a 'reward'. When we compare the use of clicker training in riding to traditional riding where the leg and rein is used as pressure and release in order to reinforce a behaviour (e.g. walking forward), a rider may need to continually 'push' their horse forward by repeating the same pressure and release mechanism. Whereas a clicker trained horse would have been trained to build duration and therefore wouldn't require the same level of repetition throughout the ride in order to achieve the same result.



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# “You can’t ride with a clicker”

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Okay, admittedly some normal box clickers are hard to hold whilst holding reins, but there are ring clickers designed especially for this, as well as clicker sticks that can be held in exactly the same way as a whip, with the clicker easy to reach on the handle.

Equally, one can use a verbal noise such as a short whistle to take the place of a clicker.

Learning how to handle reins, targets and clickers is an acquired skill but one that is far from impossible!

# “R+ is just for tricks”

R+ can be an effective training method for all and any disciplines and behaviours, no matter how advanced.

Clicker training has shown real strengths in dressage as it's possible to shape all typical dressage movements, and, due to the positive reinforcer, the movements often have a lot of exuberance to them!

R+ has also been shown to train bomb proof happy hackers, competent reining horses and can be used to help train cooperation in husbandry behaviours such as helping needle shy horses or training good behaviours for clipping, shoeing and easy loading.

In fact, qualified equine behaviour consultants will often use positive reinforcement training to help solve some of the most complex behavioural problems with great success.



# “My horse will get fat”

Most and many food reinforcers are low calorie and when offset against the movement that’s happening whilst you train, typically do not impact on your horse’s diet .

However if you’re truly worried there are a few things we can do:

- Use celery, as it burns more calories chewing it than it gives when digested.
- You can use your horse’s allotted hard feed allowance during training instead, that way you know you won’t be going over their diet.
- Typically as R+ trainers we advocate low sugar, low value treats - you can even use hay!



Hay cobs make an ideal choice for most horses.

Typically, carrots are too high value and cause over arousal.



If your horse likes it , celery can make a great choice for lami-prone or weight sensitive horses.

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# “My horse is doing it for the food not for me”

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Contrafreeloading refers to the study that animals will choose to ‘work’ for food even if the same food is provided freely and they have free choice to access it . (Jensen. 1963)

Horses are always behaving a certain way in training for a reason and that reason is always to do with what we are giving or doing to our horses.

Remember the learning theory quadrant graph in the “What is Positive Reinforcement?” guidebook?

A horse will keep doing a behaviour either because they’re under negative reinforcement or positive reinforcement and a horse will stop doing a behaviour if they get positively or negatively punished.

As much as we want our horses to ‘do it for us’, the way the brain works means there are always

*Contrafreeloading is a term coined by animal psychologist Glen Jensen and it refers to the finding that many animals prefer to earn food rather than simply eating identical, but freely accessible food found in a dish nearby.*

extrinsic or intrinsic motivators at play. Regardless of the training method used, the horse is either avoiding something or seeking to gain something.

So now we know that the horse is always motivated to behave a certain way by one of four quadrants, why not use one that motivates them to want to display desirable behaviours and get something they want in return?