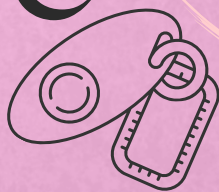


SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

How to clicker train your horse



AN INTRODUCTION TO STARTING CLICKER TRAINING
WITH YOUR HORSE

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Positive reinforcement training is a great way to improve your horses mental wellbeing and improve your working relationship.

But it can seem so daunting when you are first starting out...

Armed with this guide, even the most beginner horse owner will have the knowledge and skills to start training with positive reinforcement

Because it's actually really easy!





SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Busting myths

Will positive reinforcement make my horse muggy and dangerous around food?

No! In fact, positive reinforcement training actually improves food manners.

One of the first things you will be teaching your horse is how to have good food manners.

Obviously if you skip this step, you can expect to run into some problems further along the road.

Just like any training method, the horse will need a solid foundation to build on



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Busting myths

**Can I still use pressure & release
(-R) if I am also using positive
reinforcement?**

You sure can!

Nobody is expected to stop all forms of pressure & release when they start positive reinforcement. Even if you wanted to, it would be very challenging because -R can occur in many different situations without you even realising.

What learning positive reinforcement may do is actually make you better at using pressure & release!

When we delve into +R we gain a new perspective on how our horse learns. This then transfers over to other training methods that we may use.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Busting myths

**Can you use positive reinforcement
in ridden work?**

Yes!

Positive reinforcement has HUGE potential not just in ridden work but in areas such as jumping and dressage.

In fact there are already some incredible trainers that are already using positive reinforcement at a performance level

(Georgia Bruce, Shawna Karrasch)

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

There are a few foundations that every horse needs to learn when first starting
+R

The first is relaxation and manners around food.

But before we start, let's take some time to understand how the horses brain actually works





SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Horses are prey animals that have evolved
to travel long distances seeking out food,
water and safety

So it makes sense that their brains have
evolved with this in mind

What does this mean?

It means that horses have a very strong
drive to seek out food.

We can call this their
"seeking system" and
When we train our horse with food, we
engage that seeking system.

So if we don't understand how to control
this system, we may find find that we
accidentally make our horses frustrated
and end up with even worse behaviour
than before we started.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

To prevent this from happening, we
can follow these few simple rules

RULE 1. DON'T BE SHY WITH YOUR REWARDS

Dogs thrive when working for small
amounts of food but horses do not.

In fact, it's the chewing action for horses
that sends the signal to their brain that
they can stop seeking food.

So the more your horse chews, the less
“switched on” their seeking system is. This
means you need to maintain what is called

a

“high rate of reinforcement”

-

essentially keep your horse chewing



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

This is especially important at the start of +R as some horses will have a degree of food anxiety/excitement

Don't worry, this is quite normal and resolves on its own, once your horse realises that the food isn't going to run out.

RULE 2. CHOOSE A FOOD REWARD THAT ENCOURAGES CHEWING

It is the act of chewing that sends the signal to the horse's brain that it can stop seeking and relax for a moment.

Choosing a food reward that encourages chewing means your horse is going to start learning to relax quicker



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

The extra chewing time also allows you to get yourself ready and set up for the next ask, which is a god send when you are first learning.

RULE 3. TRAIN IN AN AREA THAT YOUR HORSE FEELS SAFE

Ever had a horse constantly trying to eat when you are leading it?

Snatching at grass when riding?

This can be a symptom of anxiety.

When a horse is feeling stressed, they will use their behaviour to try and make themselves feel better. One behaviour that they know always makes them feel better is eating



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

We do the same thing as humans. We call it comfort eating.

When a mammal eats, feel good neurochemicals like as dopamine and endorphins are released into the brain.

This is nature's way of making sure eating is something that we really want to do, so that we can survive and pass along our genes.

So a horse experiencing a level of anxiety for whatever reason, can become more pushy and snatchy around food as they attempt to use food to make themselves feel better.

So training in an area that your horse feels safe will set you and your horse up for success, especially when your horse is first learning to work with food.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

RULE 4. FEED YOUR HORSE BEFORE TRAINING

Another example of the differences between training with dogs and training with horses is that you always want to feed your horse before training.

This does a few things. Firstly, it helps the horse physically by reducing the risk of ulcers, and it also helps the horse mentally.

A hungry horse is much more likely to experience food excitement, anxiety, and frustration.

Instead, we can set our horse up for success by feeding some hay, lucerne, or a hard feed before training.

Just remember to factor this and the food rewards into your horse's daily caloric intake



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

RULE 5. BREAK THINGS DOWN INTO SMALL STEPS

You will need to break things down for your horse to understand.

The smaller you break things down, the clearer it is for your horse and the quicker your training will progress.

This applies to pressure & release as well but we can actually get away with “lumping” things a bit more in pressure & release and still get reasonable outcomes.

If you try and do this with positive reinforcement, you may find your horse may not learn as quickly

Writing a training plan is a great way to learn to systematically break down behaviours into smaller steps.

I offer a free downloadable training plan template from the same place you

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

RULE 6. WORK IN PROTECTIVE CONTACT

Protective contact keeps you and your horse safe during training. Especially when you are first starting out.

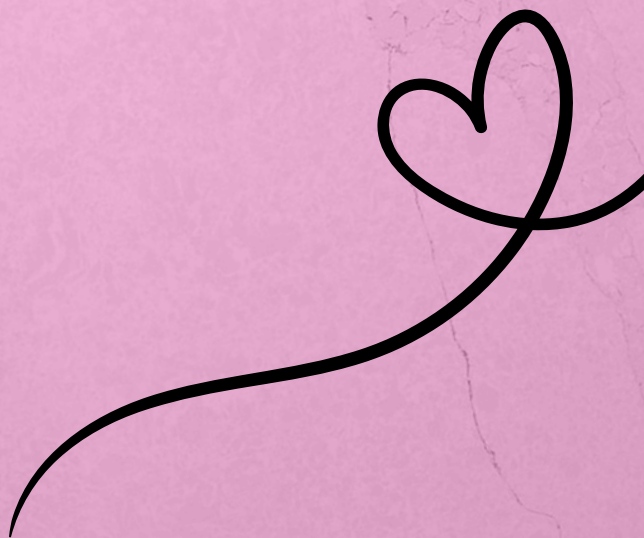
Protective contact just means working behind a fence or barrier of some kind. This can be a solid fence or a reverse round yard. So you will be on one side of the barrier and your horse is on another

If your horse is known to be fiery or gets quite excited or anxious around food, it is safest to start behind a more solid barrier.

If you would prefer to work behind a less solid boundary like a reverse round pen and your horse has shown no dangerous behaviours while working behind the solid fence, you can try moving to the reverse round pen. Just make sure to pay attention to how your horse is feeling and what they are communicating with their body language

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Choosing Food Rewards





SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

When we think about training with food, we think of high-value treats like carrots or sugar cubes. BUT these are not the rewards you want to be selecting for your horse.

You can end up feeding your horse quite a lot of food during a training session, so you want to select something that is low in sugar and high in fibre. Selecting a treat that encourages chewing is also recommended.

If you start with a food reward that is of too high value, you may find your horse gets too excited and struggles to concentrate on the task at hand.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



Food rewards that I recommend

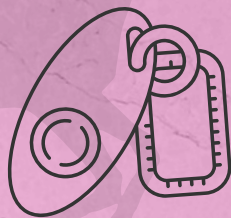
- hay
- hay pellets (dry or soaked)
- Low sugar vegetables like celery or cucumber
- Your horses daily hard feed (if not too arousing)

Remember that every horse is an individual so don't be afraid to play around with treats to see what works best for your horse.

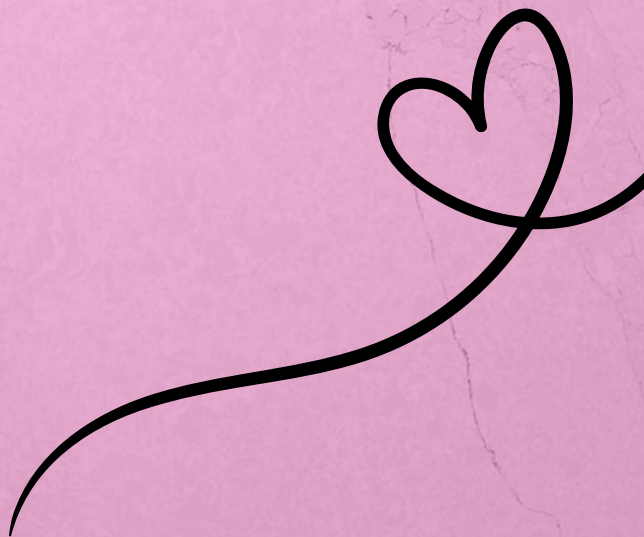
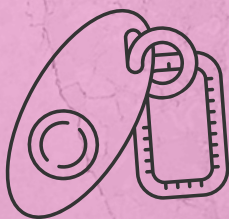
IMPORTANT

If you are using dry pellets, be mindful of choke. Always have fresh water freely available and allow your horse to empty their mouth before offering more food.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



CHOOSING AND PRIMING YOUR MARKER



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



Your marker is the word or sound you will use to communicate to your horse that they have done the correct thing and are about to be rewarded.

This can be a wordlike “yes,” a tongue click, or you can use a mechanical clicker. The best marker is something that is short, sharp, and consistent.

If you are using a word, just keep in mind that horses are incredibly perceptive to changes in our voice due to our emotional state.

So although it may be the same “word” to us, our horses may be perceiving a different version.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

This is why I actually prefer to use a mechanical clicker as my main marker when working with my horses.

Once you have selected your marker, you can prime it. This just means teaching your horse what the marker is and what it means.

The fancy scientific name for this is “classical conditioning”, i.e. Pavlov's dogs.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

SESSION 1. SET UP

Have your horse in protective contact.

Have an empty feed pan on hand.
Make sure your horse has eaten. Have your
food reward in your treat pouch/bucket

STEP 1.

Starting with your horse in protective contact, click or say your marker sound and then immediately feed your horse. You want to feed your horse within about 3 seconds of clicking/marking for them to easily make the association.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



If your horse is snatching food and you are worried about being bitten, you can place the food in the feed pan instead of feeding your horse with your hand.

As you and your horse progress, you will be able to transition to hand feeding.

You only really need to do this about 10 times with good timing for your horse to start making this association.

Once you have finished training, it's important to communicate with your horse that training is done and the rewards are stopping.

To communicate this, we use an "end signal." This can be whatever you choose.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



You can show your horse your empty hands and say "all done," you can remove your treat pouch, or you can lead your horse to a patch of grass and allow them to start eating. Whatever works for you.

No matter what your end of session cue is, always leave your horse with something to do. You can place a handful of food in their food pan and walk away. Give them a hay net or allow them access to grass to graze

Especially when you first start working with food, if you leave your horse without effectively communicating that the session is done and giving them an outlet for that seeking system that you have just upregulated, you may make your horse frustrated.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



You can show your horse your empty hands and say "all done," you can remove your treat pouch, or you can lead your horse to a patch of grass and allow them to start eating. Whatever works for you.

No matter what your end of session cue is, always leave your horse with something to do. You can place a handful of food in their food pan and walk away. Give them a hay net or allow them access to grass to graze

Especially when you first start working with food, if you leave your horse without effectively communicating that the session is done and giving them an outlet for that seeking system that you have just upregulated, you may make your horse frustrated.

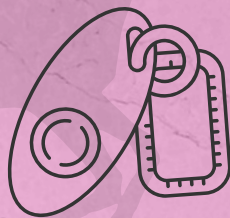


SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

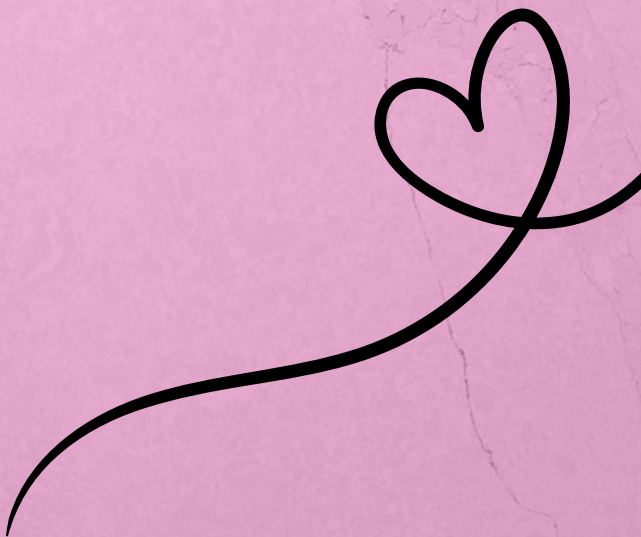
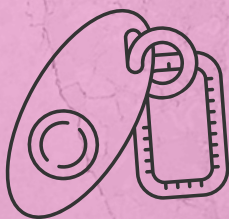
Frustration is detrimental to learning and in extreme cases may cause behaviours like pawing, cribbing, biting, ear pinning, and kicking.

Once your horse becomes familiar with this new form of training, frustration becomes less likely; however, it is still a good idea to leave your horse with forage during training breaks because it's good for their brain and gut

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



THE FOUNDATIONS





SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

FOUNDATION 1. HEAD DOWN FOR RELAXATION

This is the very first thing that I teach the horse when getting started with positive reinforcement training.

The head down behaviour gives the horse a calm and safe behaviour that they can default to when they aren't sure what they should be doing.

When we first start working with food, our horses can get very excited and just like dogs, they may start offering us behaviours when we haven't asked.

When this happens with dogs, it's pretty cute. But when this happens with horses, it can be scary and dangerous. However, the horse doesn't know this; they are just doing what they think we want!

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



So it is our responsibility to teach the horse that instead of offering a random (potentially dangerous) behaviour, they can just lower their head and earn a reward.

This is called “operant conditioning”. The horse is consciously choosing to lower their head to get the reward. Once your horse learns how to lower their head, we can move on to the second part of this process, which is developing relaxation.

We do this by pairing the head-down behaviour with the horse feeling relaxed. This is called classical **CONDITIONING**

In classical conditioning, an involuntary behaviour is paired with a stimulus. In this situation, the involuntary behaviour is the relaxation because that is an involuntary process.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



For the purpose of clarity, I'm going to define relaxation as a decrease in heart rate, respiratory rate and blood pressure and an increase in the following body language

signals: slow blinking and "heavy" /half closed eyes, yawning, slower chewing rate, an even balanced stance, slowed and even breathing, no wrinkles or tending above the eye and no muscle or facial muscle tensing.

Every horse will look slightly different when relaxing which is why it's important to become familiar with what your horse looks like when relaxed.

To do this, pay close attention to what your horse looks like when they are just hanging out in the paddock or stall or with their buddies. Watch their ears, eyes, the lines in their face.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Then compare this with what your horse looks like in different scenarios.

Over time you will start to notice things you never noticed before. Horses speak to us constantly; they just do it in a way that is different from what we are used to.

They tell stories through subtle body language changes. So pay attention to your horse and be curious.

Now back to the training aspect. Using the power of classical conditioning, the head down becomes a magic relaxation switch for your horse!

Of course, to classically condition relaxation, the horse has to be able to relax. Nobody (except maybe monks or incredibly experienced yogis) can relax on cue.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

So we need to set our horses up for success and teach this in an area where our horse already feels safe and relaxed. That is the key! The relaxation has to be classically conditioned with the head down FIRST; otherwise, it will not work.

So it's super, super important to only do this in a location where your horse is able to completely relax.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

SET UP.

Have your horse in protective contact.

Have an empty feed pan on hand.

Make sure your horse has eaten. Have your food reward in your treat pouch/ bucket.

STEP 1.

Start by feeding your horse at the level you want their head to be. Without clicking, feed your horse a few times in that position in quick succession (approximately every 3-5 seconds). What this is doing is showing the horse that this is a good place for their head to be. It's where the good stuff happens, and so they will be more likely to put their head in this position again to earn more food rewards
(REINFORCEMENT)



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

STEP 2.

When you feel like it's time to move onto the next step, make sure your marker signal is ready to go.

Now you want to offer the food in your hand (or pan if you are using the pan) and you want to MARK when your horse is moving their head downwards towards your hand.

This is where your timing is important.

A quick tip: you will find it easier to click when your horse's head is moving downward. If you are trying to click when your horse's head has already lowered and your timing is a bit off (which is normal when we first start out), you may actually be *MARKING*, when your horse has already started thinking about bringing their head back up again.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



So clicking for downward movement is easiest in these initial stages. As you refine your skills and your horse starts to understand what you are asking, you can start clicking when your horse's head has completely lowered

STEP 3.

This brings us to step 3. In step 3 you want to fade out the hand that is luring your horse's head down. If your horse is used to lowering their head to get the food, this should be quite easy.

Take a few moments before cueing your horse to lower their head (the cue has been you presenting your hand) to see if your horse offers any lowered head movement.

As soon as your horse offers any lowered head movement, click and feed them back at the same place you have been. Repeat this. Your horse should pick this up pretty quickly.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

STEP 4.

So now your horse should be offering a head down behaviour consistently, but you may find that your horse only keeps their head down for a few moments before lifting it again.

So how do we stop this? We can do this by clicking and feeding at a faster rate when their head is lowered. Every horse will be different, but the more relaxed your horse is, the more time they will spend chewing in a lowered head position.

So now, you want to click right as your horse is finishing taking the food from your hand and before they have a chance to raise their head again.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

STEP 4.

If your horse tends to leave their head down for a bit longer, you can time the click to right before they are going to lift their head again.

Over time, you want to try and draw out the click; this is how you shape “duration,” which is key for conditioning relaxation.

Repeat this process until your horse is able to stand relaxed next to you with their head lowered without searching you for food and looks visibly relaxed.

Once you reach this stage, you can experiment by taking your horse to another environment and practise the behaviour there. Repeat in lots of different environments. This is called “proofing.” the behaviour.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Only once your horse understands the behaviour and is able to offer the head down regardless of the environment, can you move on to asking for the head down in more stressful environments.

Start in an environment that is slightly stressful and build up from there. Don't suddenly throw your horse into the deep end and expose them to their biggest fear.

The key is to control the exposure so that your horse remains under threshold and slowly increases their window of tolerance. This way you are showing your horse, "Hey, this is a little stressful BUT you have the tools to cope."

This will allow your horse to feel empowered, which as a consequence will reduce fear and boost their confidence.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

FOUNDATION 2. TARGET TRAINING

Target training is an incredibly versatile behaviour and a must-have for getting the most out of positive reinforcement training. You can use target training to train so many other behaviours like lunging, recall, dressage moves, farrier work, etc.

The opportunities are only limited by your creativity!

Here we will learn how to do a simple stationary nose target, but you can use the same concept to teach your horse to target anything with any part of their body.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

SET UP.

Have your horse in protective contact.
Have an empty feed pan on hand. Make
sure your horse has eaten. Have your food
reward in your treat pouch/bucket.

You will need a target stick for your horse
to target. This can be as easy as a fly
swatter, a stick with a tennis ball on the
end, a pool noodle, or even a dressage
whip.

Just keep in mind that your horse will find
it easier to touch your target if it has a
clearly defined target spot like a tennis
ball.

Although I prefer to use a dressage whip
as my target for convenience, horses new
to target training can find this confusing
because they aren't sure which part of the
stick to touch (since it all looks the same).

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

So i RECOMMEND choosing a target stick like this to start.

You can also make a DIY target stick with a tennis ball on the end of a stick



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



STEP 1.

Hold your target stick right in front of your horse's nose, close enough that they will accidentally bump it.

When your horse bumps the target stick with their nose, click and then move the target stick out of the horse's line of sight.

Moving the target stick out of sight is important because you want the horse to learn that every time they see the target stick, they touch it.

So you can think of your target stick as having an ON and OFF position, where the OFF position clearly communicates to the horse that they aren't required to touch it.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Remember to hold the target stick close to your horse's nose to make this super easy for your horse to understand.

Repeat the process until your horse is eagerly seeking out the target stick to touch.

STEP 2.

Once your horse has understood the idea that touching the target gets them the reward, it's time to "up the criteria."

This means we are going to make it a little harder and ask a little bit more. You can do this by moving the target stick a little further away before asking your horse to touch it.

To start, you only want to move the stick a little further away and build up gradually.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



Don't worry if you accidentally move the stick too far away and your horse gets distracted or doesn't understand what you want.

You can just reset, move a little closer, and ask again.

This form of training is all about going at your horse's pace and rewarding them for trying their best. Listen to your horse and just have fun with it! This is a learning experience for both of you!

STEP 3.

Once your horse is approaching and touching the target confidently, it's time to teach them how to follow a target!

Despite looking similar, touching a stationary target and following a moving target are different behaviours for your horse, and so they need to be trained separately. I recommend teaching this step in a new session; this will make it easier for your horse to understand.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN



When we taught the stationary target, we clicked when the horse touched the target.

Now we want to click for movement. This will give your horse the key information they need to understand what we want them to do. Start by standing next to your horse with the target stick in the OFF position.

Bring the target stick to the ON position while at the same time stepping forward slowly so that your horse is encouraged to move towards the target stick with you. When your horse moves their feet, click and reward, and move the target stick back to OFF.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

Our goals are not for the horse to touch the target but to move with the target. Therefore, we need to click for movement and not when the horse has touched the target.

To make it easier for your horse to understand, don't let your horse touch the target when you are asking them to follow.

Also, make sure that when you want your horse to follow the target, you are also in motion. Especially at the start, this will be a key way that your horse differentiates between the moving and stationary target and understands what is expected of them.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

STEP 4.

Now that your horse has nailed the nose target, you can use the same method to teach them to target any object with any part of their body! For example, if you want to start teaching Spanish walk, you can teach your horse to target a dressage whip or the target stick with their front legs.

To teach a side pass, teach them to target their shoulder. It is that easy! You can even use targeting to improve trailer loading.

This is why I say target training is an essential foundation skill to have.



SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

SOME FINAL TIPS TO WRAP THINGS UP

It can be challenging to move from traditional/natural horsemanship methods to positive reinforcement-based training.

Training with positive reinforcement is more about working in partnership with your horse and honouring your horse's experience as a sensitive and sentient being.

One of the best things about positive reinforcement is that your horse gets to choose whether they want to participate.

This can be difficult to navigate sometimes as it is, in many ways, a completely different way of thinking to what traditional/natural horsemanship training teaches.

One of the biggest tips that I can offer is to practise compassion for both yourself and your horse.

SOULFIRE EQUESTRIAN

You are both embarking on this journey together, and that is such a beautiful thing to share.

It won't always be easy, but I promise it will ALWAYS be worth it.

