The science of simple training

Make everyday behavioural problems a thing of the past, and understand how your horse thinks, using science-based training. Lisa Ashton explains how

OUR EXPERT

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A well-mannered horse is a pleasure to be around, and by teaching yours a few basic skills you can make him safer to handle, while developing your partnership for the better. Equitation science, a rapidly growing body of evidenced-based knowledge, provides a refreshing approach to training and enables you to interact with your horse in a way that's predictable, controllable and effective. Plus, it can easily be applied to situations you'll find yourself in with your horse every day. To use it you'll first need to gain a firm understanding of how your horse learns, as explained here.
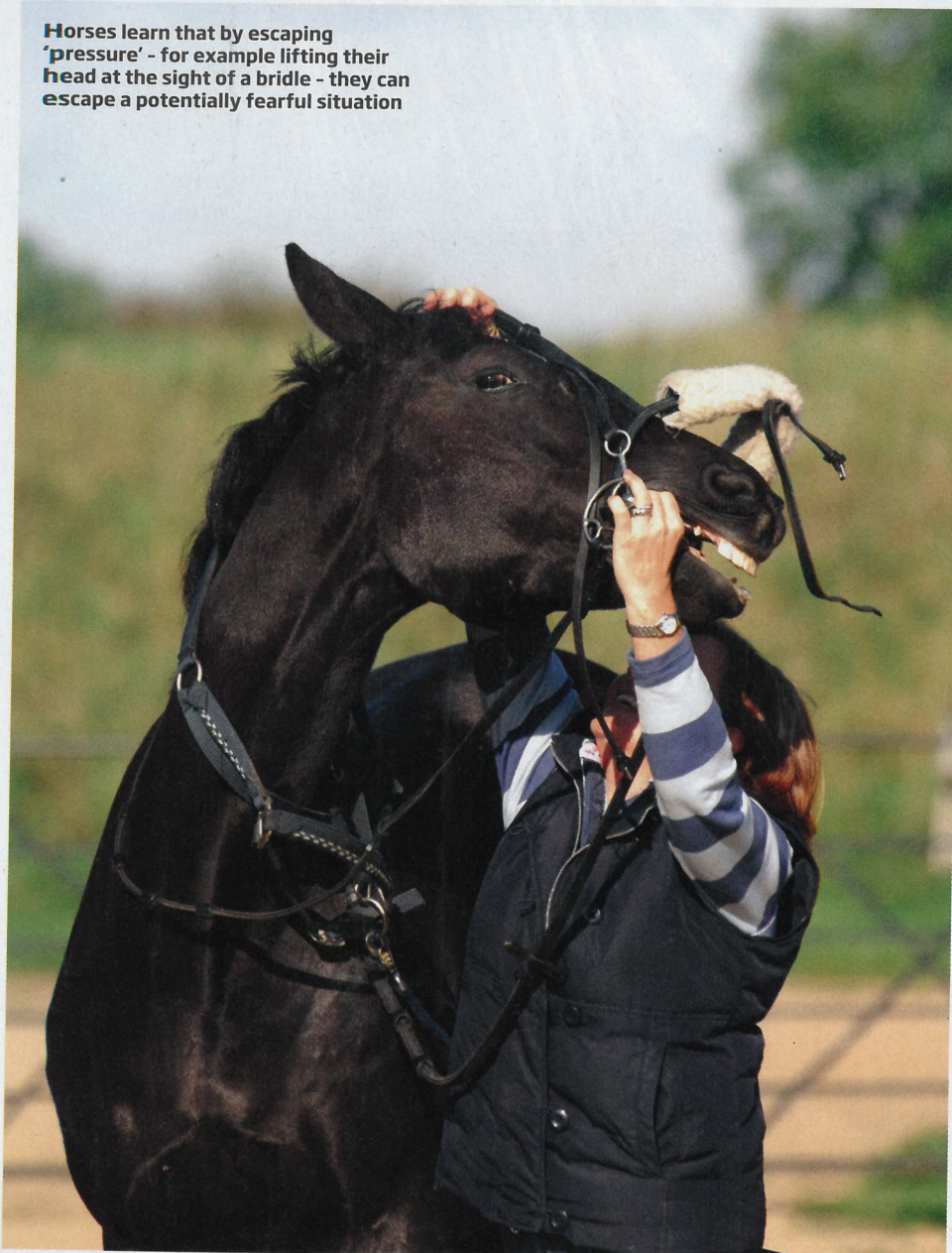
Understand what makes your horse tick

Your horse isn't designed to do what you want him to do, physically or psychologically, because he's never been pre-programmed with the aids or rules we live by. The truth is, every time you interact with your horse you create new learning opportunities.

Horses are motivated by comfort and therefore seek to remove themselves from pressure in all situations. Keep this in mind and you can quickly see why 'pressure-release' or 'negative reinforcement' is an effective training tool.

Naturally, your horse can learn rapidly how to release himself from pressure. For example, raising his head at the sight of the bridle removes the bridle, while walking in the opposite direction when he sees you walking to the field carrying a headcollar prevents him from being caught. Rearing removes rein and leg pressure, while running backwards at the bottom of the trailer ramp helps him to avoid travelling or, more specifically, means he won't have to stand in a small, possibly dark and elevated space. These are just a few examples of how horses behave, not to be 'naughty', but to remove people, the situation or both – all motivated by their desire for safety and comfort.

Horses are also excellent at making associations which, more often than not, earns them a label of 'too clever'. But this is simply a mode of learning adopted by horses and one that's fundamental at every level of equitation – it's known as associative learning or classical conditioning. Using this mode of learning your horse will anticipate that you're about to use stronger pressure if you always use a predictor or 'safety signal' first, such as a light leg aid.

Horses learn that by escaping 'pressure' – for example lifting their head at the sight of a bridle – they can escape a potentially fearful situation

Be effective in your use of rewards

One of the most effective rewards in your horse training 'toolkit' is a scratch at the base of his withers. This area is directly below your nose under-saddle and easily accessible in-hand. You'll regularly see horses grooming each other in this region, and research has shown this can lower your horse's heart rate by 10bpm.

You can also use a food treat as a reward, although it's recommended to use associative learning to increase your horse's motivation by giving him a unique sound at the exact moment of the desirable behaviour (ie the click of your tongue, saying 'good boy', or using a clicker), and following this with a food reward.

By adopting this method you'll find that in a short space of time your horse will associate the sound with the arrival of a tasty treat. Remember, you don't get to decide what's rewarding, only your horse can do that.

A scratch on the withers is an effective 'thank you'

Mutual grooming lowers a horse's heart rate

Simple steps to mounting success

As I mentioned earlier, a scientific approach to training can be effective in all situations, and now that you have a better understanding of what motivates your horse to learn – and the best ways to reward him – it's time to give equitation science a go.

For stress-free mounting you can train your horse to not only stand still (park) by the mounting block, but also to step his hindquarters towards it if he's not close enough, or has learned to swing his quarters away. Before you can teach 'park', try the 'stop' and 'go' techniques described below:

STOP (See right)
Facing your horse so you can see what he does with his feet, apply light pressure on the reins or lead rope to ask him to take a step back. The backwards step is taken using the same muscles used to stop or slow down, so 'stop' is trained initially with a step back. As soon as he steps back, even if it's just a small step, reward him by releasing the pressure on the reins or rope.

GO (See below)
'Go' entails training your horse to lead forwards from pressure. Facing your horse, apply a light pressure on the reins or rope. This will apply pressure to his poll and jaw. As soon as your horse steps forward, release the pressure.

First, ask your horse to step back in response to light pressure on the reins, then reward him by releasing the pressure

Teaching your horse the signal for 'go' starts by applying a light pressure on the rope to ask him to step forward

Teach your horse to 'park'

Next, you're ready to teach your horse to 'park' and ask him to step his hindquarters towards you from a voice signal.

1 Start by standing your horse parallel to a fence, and position yourself as for the previous 'stop' and 'go' exercises. Gently reach over your horse's back with a schooling whip (see below) and lightly tap his hindquarters. As you do so use the vocal cue "here" until he steps just one step towards you. As soon as he takes a step forward, stop tapping.

2 Repeat step one until your horse starts to anticipate the tapping when he sees the whip cross his back. This may take many repetitions. Stop any random stepping forwards with your reins, and stop any stepping backwards by tapping your horse's tail. In time, by repeating this process, your horse will learn to step towards you in response to the word "here". This is known as associative learning.

If your horse stands patiently as you mount up, reward him

Stand your horse parallel to a fence and reach over his back with a schooling whip, controlling any forwards movements with the reins

Progress to the mounting block

Once your horse steps easily towards you from a voice signal, you can repeat this process at a mounting block, without the support of a fence or wall.

1 Once your horse is 'parked', mount up, putting both reins into your left hand half way up his neck, with a visual loop between your hands and his mouth so you don't pull on his mouth. If he goes to step forward before or during mounting, bring your hand back towards his tail to ask your horse to stop and step back.

2 If your horse stays still as you mount, mark his correct behaviour with a unique sound, such as "good boy", a click of the tongue or a low whistle, ahead of giving him a treat.

3 Repeat this process until your horse anticipates that the mounting block means step towards you and then get a treat.

Does this look familiar?

Mounting blocks are great for us, but actually present a problem when it comes to training our horses to mount correctly.

This is because as soon as your horse walks or moves away from the block you're forced to abandon mounting and start again. In this process your horse learns through associative learning that the mounting block can 'remove you' or delay the mounting process, even if only temporarily.

Any movement from your horse at the mounting block like this, be it forwards, backwards or sideways, tells you both associative learning and pressure-release training is in play.

Think of it like this: your horse learns that when he sees the mounting block you plan to get on board and by moving away from the block he removes the pressure – you!

This is where the 'stop', 'go' and 'park' training comes into its own.

By 'removing' the mounting block your horse can easily remove you!