

The "300 Peck Pigeon" Post (copied from theclickercenter.com)
written for the clickryder list 1/18/01
Alexandra Kurland

Normally I don't comment on the clinics I give, but I am just back from the MOST OUTSTANDING weekend, I just had to write something to the list about it.

Dolores Arste hosted the clinic at her farm near Galway NY which is only about an hour from where I live. January clinics are always risky. You never know what the weather will bring. Last year I did a January clinic over in MA. I don't think the temperature ever climbed above 5 degrees, and that's Fahrenheit, which means it was bitter cold. We spent most of that clinic huddled together in the tack room. We had a great time, and actually worked horses, but we never ventured out of the barn.

This past weekend we fared much better with the weather, but it was still too cold to spend the entire day outside. I knew at the outset that I needed to structure the clinic so we weren't working horses the entire time. And that's what made it such a great clinic. The cold gave us an excuse to stay inside and talk. Imagine the clickryder list coming to life in your living room. That's what the clinic was like. We had the most amazing, enthusiastic discussions! Now we know what happens when you put eight horse-crazy clicker enthusiasts together in a room! You get an incredible weekend!

We had a mixed bag in terms of clicker experience. Most of the people had been clicker training for a long time, and were either clients or had been to my clinics before. But we also had a couple of beginners. They had seen my tapes, so we could skip past some of the basics without leaving anyone out. On the questionnaire I sent out before the clinic one of the common concerns people had was what to do with pushy, in-your-face horses. That's one of the recurring questions on this list as well, so I had decided in advance of the clinic to make emotional control the organizing theme for the weekend.

My focus in general is on helping people to get started with clicker training. Once you've got the basic idea and your horse is working well on the clicker, clicker training is a blast. But if your horse is getting frantic about the treats or mugging you with behavior, it can be anything but fun. One of the things that I so appreciate about this list is the willingness everyone has to help each new person who joins. That's really why I am writing this post. It's something we talked about at the end of the day on Sunday when we were all sitting in Dolores' living room reluctant to have the day end. It doesn't matter how many times here on the list we've answered questions about horses that grab their treats, or are afraid of the clicker, or get overly excited. Instead of the older members screaming GO READ THE ARCHIVES, they answer the questions.

There was a movie that came out this summer called "Pay It Forward". I didn't see it. I'd rather ride horses than watch movies, but I did love the premise of passing on good deeds. That's what this list is all about. As each person makes the successful transition into clicker training, they in their turn help the next wave of newcomers. That's something I love about this list, the willingness everyone has to help people make a smooth transition into clicker training.

There are issues that come up with clicker training. When I talked about this at the clinic, someone asked the obvious question: what are those issues? The main one is enthusiasm. What do we do with horses who truly love their work? People get distracted by the food issue, but the real issue is what do you do with a horse who is mugging you with behavior, who is offering you every trick he can think of to get you to click him? We aren't used to our horses being so intent on performing for us, or sticking to us like glue. What do we do with our enthusiastic over-achievers? How do we help people understand this stage where the mantra is "get behavior, get behavior, get behavior". How do we stabilize these behaviors without resorting to punishment, so the end result is a polite, settled, incredible horse?

This question was the organizing theme of the clinic. We had the perfect horses for it, and the perfect distraction: snow sliding off the arena roof. We were working on emotional control. What developed was a

wonderful format for going beyond basics. The weekend created a study circle for the development of clicker training. Very exciting!!

Let me give you a small taste of what was covered over the weekend. Sunday morning I talked about an exercise I did recently with Robin. Robin has been suffering from cabin fever the last couple of weeks. Our paddocks are closed for the winter, so the horses get very limited play time. Robin is a horse who requires a lot of mental stimulation, and when he doesn't get it, he invents his own games. To short circuit this I stepped in with a game of my own. I've been turning him into a "three hundred peck pigeon."

This refers to an experiment in variable reinforcement schedules I heard about a couple of years ago. A scientist was looking at how you build long duration variable schedules. She taught her pigeons to peck a bar, and by gradually extending the number of pecks they had to give her, she got her pigeons on a VR schedule of 300. That means that on average they had to peck the bar 300 times before they would get reinforced. That sounds like a tremendous amount of behavior, and it is, but it is in fact what we want from our horses. Think about dressage riders. They want their horses on the bit throughout an entire test. In other words they want a "three-hundred-peck pigeon". What this researcher discovered was the way to get there was to build the schedule slowly in very small increments. Most riders build their schedules too fast, and in too few steps. They jump from being delighted if their horse goes on the bit for a step or two, to expecting it as a matter of course. The result: resistance sets in.

In my training I generally emphasize quality of movement over duration. That's not to say I don't build duration, but my focus is more on HOW something is done rather than HOW LONG it is done. In this experiment I shifted my emphasis to duration. I picked a simple, very basic behavior to work with: walking next to me. That was my only expectation. I just wanted Robin to take a step forward when I did. When he took a step forward, click, I reinforced him. The way I played the game was I increased the number of steps he had to take by one after each click. I kept count, and I walked marching band style in a consistent, metronome beat. If Robin fell below a certain standard, the count automatically reset back to zero.

If you've seen my videos, you know Robin is a very sophisticated in-hand horse. Basic leading is baby stuff for him, except that right now he's so full of energy he can hardly contain himself. He wants to play, and he feels very frustrated by the lack of turn-out. Plus he hates being wrong. If he makes a mistake, he tends to get mad. He expresses both his frustration and his anger by grabbing at the lead. That was the impetus behind this experiment. I wanted to explore some non-traditional ways of eliminating this problem.

Since I can't change the turn-out schedules, my goal was to be able to have Robin come directly out of his stall and without any play time go to work in a settled, focused, relaxed manner. That's a lot to ask of a young horse, and especially a high-energy horse, but that's what I wanted.

Robin is usually the "shoemaker's kid who has no shoes". He gets very little focused training time, but over Christmas some of my clients were away, and I actually had time to work my own horses. That's when I turned my attention to duration. It's been an interesting experiment, and I'm continuing to reap the benefits from it.

At first it was an easy game for Robin. All he had to do was walk forward one step, and click! I reinforced him. The next time he had to walk forward two steps, then three, etc., baby stuff for him, except that Robin is a very sophisticated clicker-wise horse. He was looking for the standard of behavior I was reinforcing. So as we built duration, he started experimenting. What was I reinforcing? He went into his mainstay, his "pose". He arched his neck and carried himself in a beautiful dressage-horse equilibrium. I didn't click him right away, but kept to my count. Well, that was all right. He was used to some duration in the behavior. So we'd go maybe ten steps, and I'd click him.

The next time I'd go eleven steps. The next time twelve. clicking him on that 12th step, no matter what he was doing, so long as he wasn't grabbing at his lead. If he grabbed at his lead, the count automatically went back to 0, and I'd start again. Robin did pretty well in the early stages of the game, but as the count started

to lengthen out, he got frustrated. He was posing. He was doing great. I should have clicked him by now! Robin hates being wrong. He's very bright, and he's very eager. He gets mad if he gets the wrong answer. So as my count stretched out, Robin would get frustrated and grab at the lead. Zap! We might be one step away from a click, but the count would go back to 0.

As I explained this exercise to the people at the clinic one of the questions that came up was the whole issue of randomness. A variable reinforcement schedule should be just that, variable, and yet here I was describing a very patterned exercise, the count automatically increased by one after each click. My pattern was set from MY perspective, but from ROBIN'S I was being the most variable and unpredictable that I had ever been.

I'm a sucker for quality. Normally, if Robin shows an extra bit of brilliance, I click him. But in this game, at least at this stage, it absolutely did not matter how gorgeous he was. If we were not yet at my count, I did not click him.

I had begun the clinic by showing a tape of an experiment that was done with orangutans. The tape begins with a study conducted on children where preschoolers were given a timed test. They were told that most children of their age could complete the test in the allotted time. Then the researcher manipulated the time to ensure that the child either passed or failed. What they were looking at was the body language, the postural changes, the child exhibited when he failed.

A similar test was then presented to an orangatang. The orang was using a language board, matching symbols to pictures for a treat. She was very good at this, and almost always got the right answer. But then the researcher made the test deliberately so much harder that she couldn't help but fail. When she got the wrong answer, she exhibited a similar posture to that of the preschooler who failed his test. She clearly had an awareness that she had made a mistake, and it upset her.

I believe our horses show similar emotions. Our clicker-trained horses understand the game, and they are eager to please, eager to get the right answer. That's especially true of horses like Robin who are very bright, and very confident. Robin hates being wrong.

This is a very important dynamic to understand. Robin expresses his frustration by grabbing at his lead. That's the postural equivalent to the body language the pre-schooler and the orangatang showed. The ape flung her arm over her head. Robin structurally can't do that. Instead he uses his mouth to express frustration.

This is NOT a question of respect, and if I addressed it as such, I would create some major training issues. Imagine how you'd feel if someone reprimanded you every time you got a wrong answer. Think how willing you'd be the next time to try anything. You might shut down, or you might get angry and act out more violently the next time.

Robin and I have had respect issues. When he was younger and his position in his horse herd was shifting, he tried to reverse our relative positions, as well. I dealt with that as the dominance issue that it was. But that's not what this lead-rope-grabbing behavior represented. For our horse's sake, it's important to understand the difference.

Clicker training opens us up to seeing the differences and it offers us new strategies for teaching emotional control. Robin was trying to figure out what I wanted. When he tried his hardest to offer me things that previously would have earned reinforcement, he became frustrated. That's very understandable. He expressed his frustration by grabbing at the lead. I didn't reprimand him for that. I simply regrouped, got him settled again, and marched off as promptly as I could. I made a point of responding as little as possible to the unwanted behavior. If we got to our count, click, he got a treat. If he grabbed at the lead again, the count reset. So, to go to, for example, a count of twenty steps, we might actually walk fifty or sixty steps.

The next time we might go straight away to 21 steps and a click. But to get to 22, we might walk 80 steps or more, depending upon how many times he grabbed at the lead.

As the count lengthened we went through several interesting stages. First, he coupled his "pose" into the game. He'd hold it longer and longer, but when I didn't react in my usual manner to his gorgeous posturing, he tried other things. At first grabbing the lead was one of the things he tried, mainly because he was frustrated that something that always worked for him, wasn't working now.

One of the advantages of this game was I was counting. I could see when things happened. For example, around twenty-five he went through an extinction burst centered around the "pose". That's when he decided that the carriage I normally reinforced was not what I wanted. He gave up on looking outstandingly gorgeous and tried other things. At forty-one it was clear he had figured out the underlying criterion: that whatever he was doing, he had to keep doing it a little longer each time.

Robin experimented with several different alternatives: posing, walking with his head at chest height, dropping his head to the dirt. I kept to my count so that all of these were at times getting reinforced. But it was clear Robin was making choices. He started walking for longer and longer stretches with his nose in the dirt. I had not made what he did as we headed to our count one of the criteria. As long as he didn't grab the lead, he could walk any way he wanted. I clicked him when he made our count. But Robin was becoming more consistent in offering head lowering, so I decided to incorporate that in.

Again, at the clinic one of the questions was how did I know I could add in the head lowering at this point, and didn't that alter the structure of the process? By and large, you know you are ready to add the next layer to your criterion when you see it already occurring at least 70% of the time. That's what was happening with Robin. More and more, he was keeping his head down. If it popped up for any reason, within a couple of steps he had it back down again. Once I saw that happening I knew I could target it directly with the clicker.

I hadn't started out looking for head lowering. My criterion was much more general. Robin was simply to walk next to me. But now I made nose to the dirt also part of the game. If his nose was up when we made our count, I would keep walking until it dropped back down. So we might go 58 steps towards a goal of 59. If on the 59th step his nose popped up, I kept walking until it dropped back down on the 64th step, and then I'd go a step or two beyond that before clicking him.

Our game had become even more interesting. I was not asking him to keep his nose down the entire time, but I would not click him until the count had been met, and his nose was to the dirt. Again, if he grabbed at the lead, the count reset to 0. The first night we worked for a little over an hour. We ended at a count of 125 steps with Robin keeping his nose to the dirt the entire time. Pretty neat.

The next night I made my goal of 300. That's 300 consecutive steps where Robin kept his nose to the dirt. Very neat.

I found in my count that after about hundred and twenty I could start jumping up in larger increments. Instead of increasing one step at a time, I jumped up in increments of 10 to 15 steps. Robin had certain sticky points. 65 was one of them. At 65 the count kept having to be reset. It was as though Robin was saying: "I get it. I know what I'm supposed to do, but I don't want to do it that long." We got over that hurdle and had smooth sailing until we hit 100. That was another emotional barrier for him, as was 150, but after 150, I could build towards 300 very quickly. He had the behavior, and had accepted the idea of doing it for longer and longer periods. I think if I wanted a "1,000 peck-pigeon", I could get there with ease.

In general most of us don't stay with an exercise long enough to see what it can do for us. That's certainly true for an exercise like this. Without the goal of 300 I would have been satisfied if he'd just gone forty or fifty steps with his nose to the dirt, but somehow I knew getting all the way to 300 was important for Robin. I could not have been more right. I've said many times before you always get more good things than

you expected out of a lesson when you use positive reinforcement, and that's certainly been true of this exercise.

We met our goal and then some. Robin has been coming out of his stall and, without any turn-out or play time, going right into work. I don't have to lunge him, or let him run to get his energy out. Even after this past weekend when he had even less turn-out than usual, he could come right out and go to work. He's no longer biting at the lead rope. What I see now is he has an automatic default behavior, dropping his nose to the dirt. When he feels frustrated, he drops his head. That's a safety valve we didn't have before, at least not as strongly as he now has it.

I also have a much stronger, more consistent cue for head lowering. I wasn't working directly on stimulus control. In fact when he began offering head lowering, I was not asking for it. But out of the consistency of the behavior evolved a much clearer, more consistent cue. My previous cue had become linked to some other behaviors. Now I could get head lowering by itself without triggering the rest of the chain. Since head lowering leads to calmness, this is an important development. Robin gets lots of reinforcement for brilliance. He needs the balance the head-lowering creates.

The head-lowering has made something else much better - respect of space. Again, this isn't something we worked on directly, but he's become much more adept at shifting out of my space when I ask him to change sides, and that's resolved another whole layer of issues and questions he's had. He's become an even more amazing dance partner than he was before. Prior to this exercise I always had the feeling that he was a little clutzy with the changes. It was like dancing with somebody who steps on your toes. He wasn't quite managing to manuvre his big body out of my space, and that always made him a little resentful. Now it's just really pretty the way he can switch from one side of me to the other without either of us ever feeling crowded. Pretty neat.

When I started with this game, I would never have thought I'd be resolving these other issues. That's, of course, the fun of training. You never know all the good things you're going to get. But I did know stretching us both to 300 would be good for his emotional development. Robin is an athletic horse who learns things easily. Sometimes that means too easily. He's the bright kid in class who doesn't always want to do his homework. He knows the principle, why should he bother with the details? Working towards 300 helped with his emotional maturity and mental discipline.

So, how does this relate to the clinic? What I like to teach is process. That's fundamentally more important than presenting a nuts and bolt cookbook. When I find an exercise I like, I experiment with it with different horses. I ask them what they think of it. That's what I did when I first stumbled across clicker training. I liked what it did for Peregrine, and then I just kept experimenting, and look what's evolved!!

After I worked with Robin, I experimented with Peregrine who is ten years Robin's senior and has already worked through many of the emotional issues that Robin is still struggling with. Duration is not an issue with Peregrine. If I wanted to work 40 minutes between clicks I could. But I still played the game with him, and discovered that he loved it. With him I picked another simple criterion, keeping your ears forward while we walked together after our ride. He thought it was a highly entertaining game.

So now the question was what would it do for other horses, and at what stage in a horse's training could you head for 300? That's the question I threw out to the group. As I shared Robin's story, the wheels began to turn. Several people saw immediately that this would indeed be a useful exercise for their horses. One person with a barn-sour horse felt it would help with her horse's issues. She could see walking away from the barn, and then turning and walking directly back. She'd play the 300 peck game by increasing the number of steps she went by one after each successful cycle. She said this would keep her from over-facing her horse by asking him to leave too far, too fast. And that's exactly the point. This exercise helps the handler stay focused and consistent.

Dolores saw applications for her young horse, and that's when we decided it was time to go out to the barn. After all, you go to people for opinions and horses for answers.

One of Dolores' goals was to have her young horse, Cadberry, stand quietly for saddling. Cadberry is a very energetic 4 year old Morgan she bred, and whom she intends to use for endurance riding. Energy is good, but it needs to be channeled and connected to her. The connection part has always been the challenge with Cadberry. When she describes him, Dolores tells the story of the day he was born. She had to bring him in from the field to get him out of a rainstorm. Most foals will follow their mother, but not Cadberry. He was less than a day old, and already he was off exploring, doing his own thing. That's his basic personality. He's a very confident, independent horse. In many ways, he's very like Robin.

Dolores went on to say that Cadberry is very good under saddle. Her issues with him are all on the ground where he tends to be a very pushy, impatient horse. Standing still would be something she'd love to see stretched into a 300 peck-pigeon exercise. That was our goal.

The rules of shaping say: never start with your goal. Instead put as many steps between where your horse is now and where you want to be as you can think of. That was the lesson Cadberry illustrated for us.

In the arena we decided we were going to teach him to stand on a piece of plywood. In a sense we were using the plywood as a target. He was to place his left front foot on the plywood. We began by teaching him to step on many different objects, the lid off a supplement container, a fly mask, the plywood, etc. Once he had the idea down, "I step on these things on the ground," we focused just on the plywood, and began to build duration. At first standing still for just a second or two was hard for him. All of his "respect of space issues" came into play. He could keep his foot still, but he'd be snaking forward with his nose, telling Dolores to clear out of his space. As his nose pushed forward into Dolores' space, it took his feet with it.

At the heart of clicker training is learning to be a good observer and chunking behaviors down into smaller and smaller pieces. By noticing that the precursor to his moving his feet was his snaking his nose forward, Dolores became more adept at checking his shift in weight. She could ask him to reset his foot on the plywood even before he had begun to lift it. The result was he began to truly stay back out of her space. All the juvenile pushiness, and impatient body language, including some ugly faces disappeared.

He became solidly anchored on the plywood. Dolores could step back from him first to the end of the lead, and then she could drop the lead and step progressively further and further away. Even with snow sliding off the roof, he stayed on his plywood target. She could then pick and choose her moment to reinforce him. Ears forward became part of the criteria. It was neat to watch, but it was also very clear that he was not yet at a point where we could stretch him out to 300. Cadberry needed a high rate of reinforcement. Going prematurely to 300 would have confused and frustrated him. Before we could build that much duration into the base behavior, we needed to reinforce many different aspects of the behavior.

For example, Dolores could work on stepping away from him, stepping further away, stepping off in different directions, having both front feet on the plywood, having both front feet square on the plywood, ears forward, etc., etc. As she worked on each element individually, she was keeping Cadberry on the high rate of reinforcement he needed. At the same time, she was building duration in the base behavior. Cadberry's feet became glued to the plywood. He was getting clicked frequently, but since Dolores was going to him for the treats, his feet stayed planted. He was learning that he could stay still AND keep his ears forward to earn goodies. Snaking his nose at her, or making ugly, "get-out-of-my-space" faces just delayed the click.

Cadberry showed everybody how you stabilize behaviors and develop the emotional control that is such a necessary part of clicker training. It's all well and good to have a horse joyously flinging behaviors at you. In the initial stages of clicker training that's part of the attraction, but it can quickly get out of control. What we focused on in the clinic was how to stabilize behavior. How, for example, to get a horse to step back out

of your space and TO STAY back. Prior to this Cadberry was yo yo-ing back into Dolores' space demanding attention. Now he was learning a more appropriate, people-pleasing behavior. This is all part of the emotional control that evolves as horses learn how to learn via clicker training.

Because of the cold weather at the clinic we were able to explore this concept in much greater depth than we might have done otherwise. In our discussions we went well beyond what the horses at the clinic were able to show us. But the horses helped us to ask many questions about VR schedules and the building of duration. And it gave me a wonderful opportunity to share with everyone how I approach training questions and the whole process of exploring an idea to see what it can do for our horses. I expect at our next gathering we'll have much more data on "300 peck pigeons".

Alexandra Kurland
theclickercenter.com