



Horses Teach Me How To Find  
My Way

The Importance and Art of  
Leading

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# Overview of Presentation

- Before we look at training horses we need to understand how they learn
- Brief overview of equine cognition and why it is important
- Key elements of leading the Therapeutic Riding Horse
- Integrate video footage for each of the above



Equine Cognition ..... what is it and why does it matter?





## Why equine cognition matters....

Horses differ from humans in how they learn because of the difference between the human and the equine brain

Prefrontal Cortex – which enables planning complex cognitive behavior, personality expression, decision making, and moderating social behaviour

Well developed in humans but not horses



# Horses 3 learning processes



1. Cognition (processing information about the world)

# Horses learning processes

*Over- or  
underestimating  
horses'  
intelligence has  
negative welfare  
implications*

Cognition (process information about the world)



# Horses learning processes

Cognition (process information about the world)

2 . Ethology ( e.g. flight response)



# Horses learning processes



Cognition (mental ability)

Ethology ( e.g. flight response)

3 .Psychology (learned behaviour)



How horses learn i.e their psychology depends on

Habituation

- Desensitisation to stimuli

# Habituation - Desentisation to stimuli





# How horses learn i.e their psychology depends on

Habituation

- Desensitisation to stimuli

Operant  
Conditioning

- Rewards and punishments
- 4 subsets .....

•**Positive reinforcement:**

- A pleasant stimulus is added to the horses environment when a behavior occurs, resulting in an increased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.....e.g. clicker training



**Operant Conditioning** is your horse learning to behave in his environment. He learns that if he chooses to perform a particular behavior you have requested, a click (bridge signal) and a reward are coming.





•**Positive reinforcement:**

- A pleasant stimulus is added to the horses environment when a behavior occurs, resulting in an increased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.....e.g. clicker training

•***Negative reinforcement:***

- *An unpleasant stimulus is removed from the horses environment when a behavior occurs, resulting in an increased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.*





Negative reinforcement

Pressure ...horses moves  
to avoid pressure

•**Positive reinforcement:**

- A pleasant stimulus is added to the horses environment when a behavior occurs, resulting in an increased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.....e.g. clicker training

•**Negative reinforcement:**

- An unpleasant stimulus is removed from the environ horses ment when a behavior occurs, resulting in an increased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.

•***Positive punishment:***

- *An unpleasant stimulus is added to the horses environment when a behavior occurs, resulting in a decreased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.*



Positive punishment



•**Positive reinforcement:**

- A pleasant stimulus is added to the horses environment when a behavior occurs, resulting in an increased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.....e.g. clicker training

•**Negative reinforcement:**

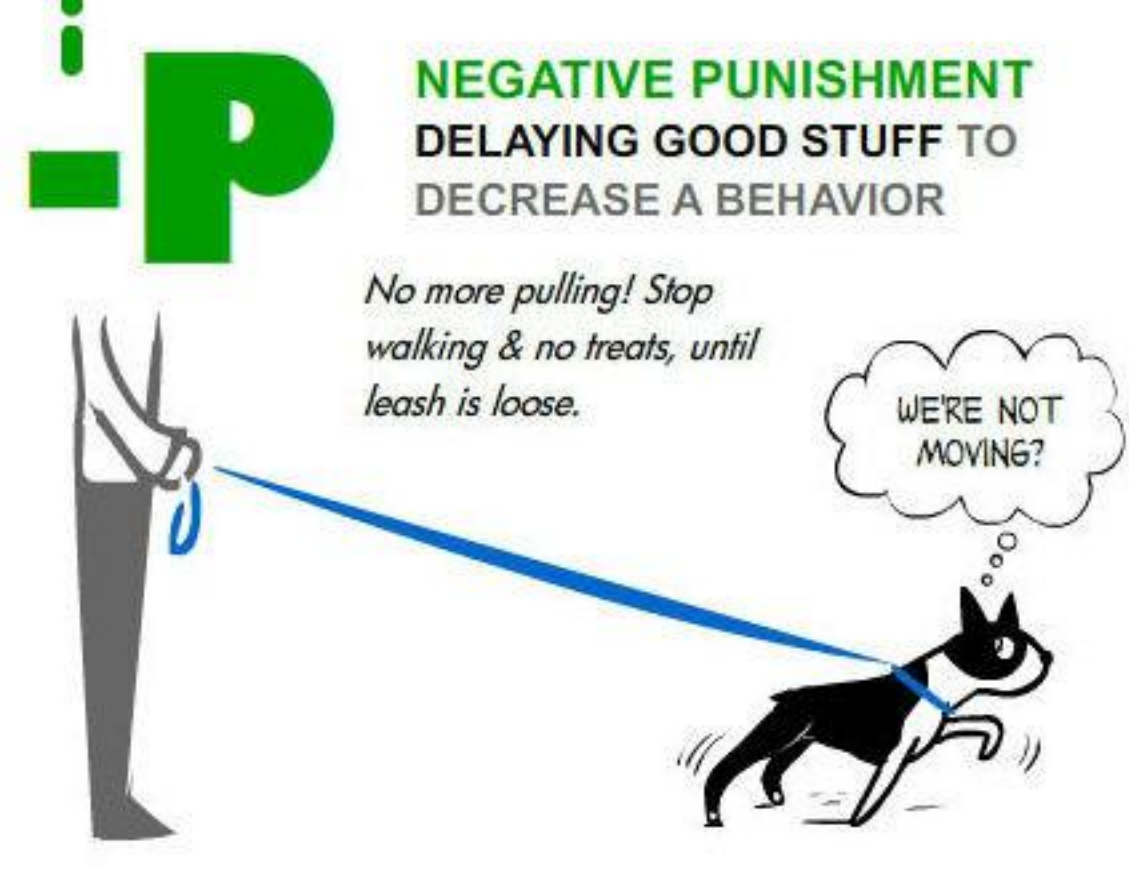
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•***Positive punishment:***

- *An unpleasant stimulus is added to the horses environment when a behavior occurs, resulting in a decreased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.*

•***Negative punishment:***

- *A pleasant stimulus is removed from the horses environment when a behavior occurs, resulting in a decreased chance of the animal repeating the behavior.*



Taking the car keys away from a teenager when they are “grounded” due to misbehavior is negative punishment.

# How horses learn i.e their psychology depends on

## Habituation

- Desensitisation to stimuli

## Operant Conditioning

- 4 subsets .....Trial and error
- Reward and punishment

## Classical conditioning

- Learning through association





**Classical Conditioning** is your horse learning a simple association between two events.

They hear the feed bucket, they know food is coming.

Bad experience of the farrier they anticipate a negative experience











# Most important factors for horses learning

- Release of pressure immediately when the horse responds (3 seconds)
- Using signals that the horse can differentiate
- Train and initiate responses one at a time
- Consistency and repetition
- Only one response per signal
- Eliminate fear during training
- Train persistence of responses
- Check for relaxation



# As Trainers we need to :

React quickly when applying a signal or rewarding behaviour (3 seconds)

Decide what you want to achieve in each session and work within your capabilities (planning)

Avoid being fearful and nervous because.....anxiety causes muscles to tense and reduces focus on the horse

# In summary.....

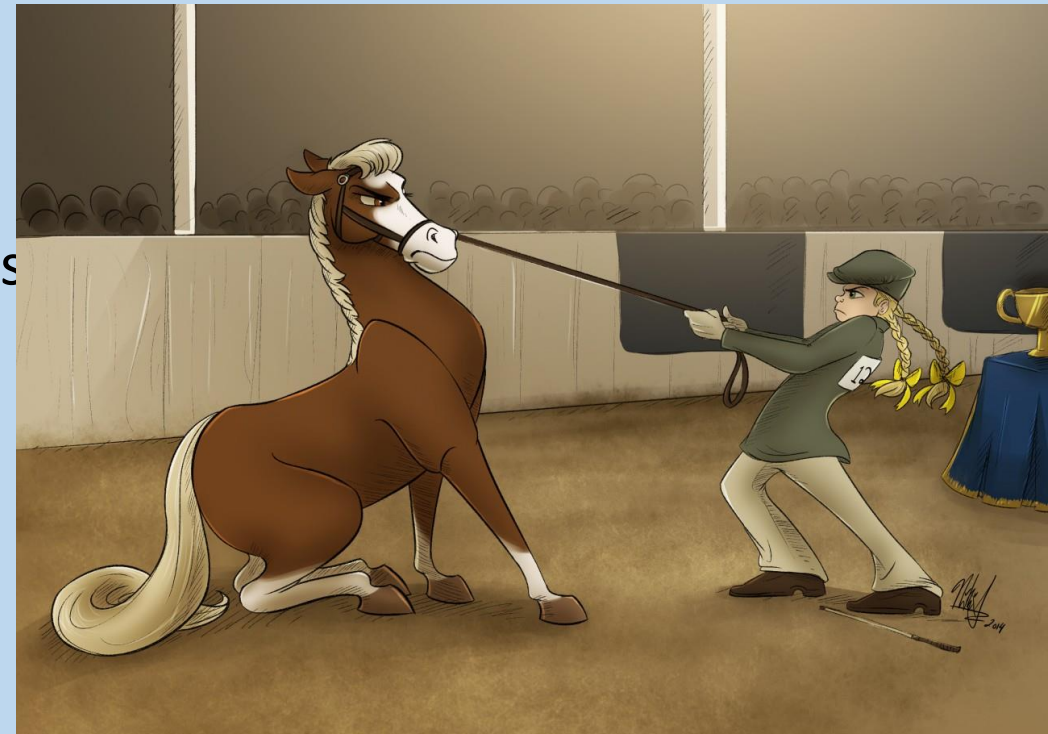
Understanding equine cognition is fundamental to training the therapeutic riding horse so that s/he leads in such a way to allow maximum value for the rider





# Typical problems associated with leading

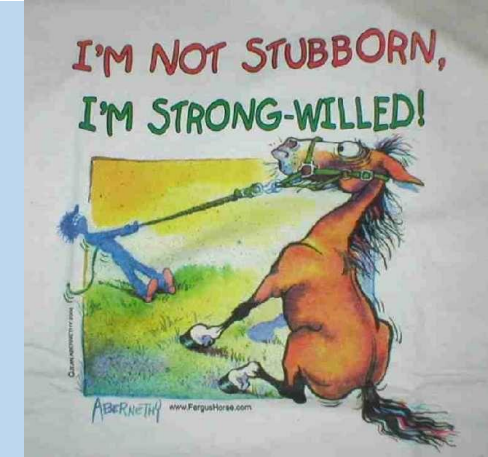
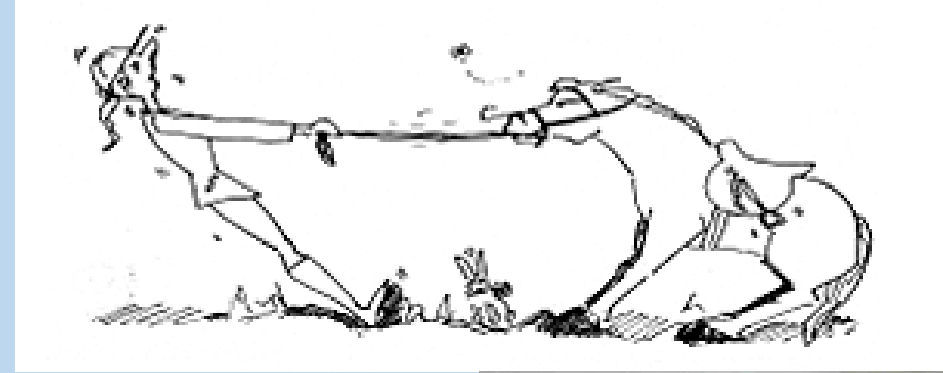
- Horse will not walk forward when asked
- Horse will not stop when asked ....can circle or keep going
- Horse can drift left or right
- Horse will not stay still
- Problems can be due to
  - Physical pain – (tack – riders weight – back problems)
  - Confusion
  - Uneducated leaders
  - Inadequate training for the horse
  - Not realising what the problem is



# Problem behaviours result in :

Describing the horse as

- Stubborn
- Cheeky
- Uncoperative
- Naughty
- Etc.,



The  
importance  
and art of  
leading





# The Importance of Leading

- Three Therapeutic Riding Coaches (1 full time, 2 part time)
- 120 Therapeutic Riding Riders / Clients
- Each Coach has a designated leader
- 6 Therapeutic Riding Leaders



# Essentials for leading

1. Position of the leader
2. Contact with the leadrope
3. Light aid
4. Maintaining straightness at all times
5. Increase or decrease speed
6. One cue at a time
7. Turning left and turning right in line with the footfalls of the horse



Position of  
the leader



Contact  
with the  
leadrope



Light aid —  
move at  
lightest  
pressure





Straightness – crooked  
horses throw the rider  
off center





# Maintaining Straightness





Increase or  
decrease  
peed to  
vary  
movement





Essentials for leading : one cue at a time  
horses can only respond to one cue at a time











# In summary.....essentials for leading

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