

An examination of the challenges in working to incorporate positive reinforcement techniques into traditional horse training

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Abstract

Extension professionals and others who share agricultural knowledge often face the challenges of combating established methods and assumptions; this challenge is especially obvious when discussing horse training techniques. In this review of literature, the struggle to incorporate positive reinforcement techniques into contemporary horse training is discussed. After examining the techniques and exploring what makes new information difficult to incorporate into horse culture, we concluded that using handler safety as a reason to implement positive reinforcement techniques could be successful. However, widespread introduction of positive reinforcement techniques will still meet significant resistance.

Introduction

Horsemanship is a loosely defined term, and depending on the discipline you are referring to, confers either a working dialogue between human and horse, human control over horse, or some other combination or rewording of the relationship between handler and animal. A combination of traditional horse culture and their long history of domestication have created a severely fragmented base of people, who follow whatever specific school of thought they have been brought up with, to the exclusion of all others (Birke, 2007). Additionally, a recorded lack of basic education on behavior theory beginning with Skinner principals undermines the arguments of all sides (Warren-Smith, 2008), creating a lack of credibility that promotes fewer discussions across these method-culture barriers (Birke, 2008). This review of the available literature looks to explore the common ground between these fragmented cultures, both within principals that they can agree upon, as well as pitfalls in their lack of knowledge about behavior and each others' techniques. The goal of this review is to examine why it has been so difficult to incorporate new methods of training (specifically in the increased focus on positive reinforcement as a conditioning tool), and look for points of view and marketing strategies that can be used by all sides to promote an open and inclusive dialogue on horsemanship and horse handling. Both experimental groups showing the success and benefits of differing techniques, and reviews of training perspectives have been examined.

Discussion

The literature available does an excellent job exploring both the academic and practical applications of incorporating positive reinforcement to traditional training techniques. While there has been no obvious critical or significant change in the effectiveness of the training (Warren-Smith, 2007) other than personal opinion, there have been small noticeable differences that would encourage handlers to explore adding positive reinforcement to their training arsenal. The largest observed benefits of the incorporation of PR to a normal training regimen or standing alone has been in reduction of habituation periods or promotion of exploratory behaviors (Sankey, 2010) (Innes, 2008). In comparisons of PR to no reinforcement at all, the animals

clearly respond and learn better (Sankey, 2010), and positive effects outside of simply learning the task are observed when comparing positive reinforcement to negative reinforcement (McLean, 2008). These secondary benefits are significant from a marketing perspective as they not only are useful in practical interactions with working horses, but they are also immediately apparent to non-horse professionals. This perspective increases the credibility of the trainer, regardless of their results, as the horse appears better behaved or more manageable (McLean, 2008).

One of the most consistently obvious and very practical benefits of the incorporation of PR into a training program is handler safety. In stressful situations the addition of a positive stimulus either in the past (Innes, 2008) or during the stressful event (Heleski, 2008) clearly promotes calmer, less dangerous horses. In any situation working with animals safety is always a priority, whether training, administering veterinary care, or using animals for sport/pleasure activities. Safety leads to easier, less fatiguing handling (Heleski, 2008), fewer chances for injury, and allows less experienced handlers to interact with horses in all settings. Clearly, if you wanted to bridge a gap in factions, pointing out the benefits of increased human safety can reach financial perspectives, human effort perspectives, and individual animal welfare.

There are reasons to not incorporate PR into a training program and they do have merit. Negative reinforcement has been shown to be (from available research) extremely effective in training a prey animal such as a horse, and has the dual effect of preventing unwanted responses while promoting desired responses with the same stimulus (Warren-Smith, 2007). Additionally, PR in the form of food rewards are not always feasible, as they cannot be implemented easily by a rider and many times cannot be given immediately to promote rapid learning (secondary reinforcers, such as clickers, can help solve this problem) (Warren-Smith, 2007). Typically PR requires longer training times to condition a response, and if incorporated incorrectly, can confuse horses and stress animals (Birke, 2007). However, these problems span all forms of training if handlers are willing to recognize them, oftentimes however, each faction of training technique is much too quick to recognize problems with other techniques, while simply ignoring or relabeling them in their own practice (Birke, 2008).

The single biggest roadblock to an open discussion is the exclusivity that each faction of horsemanship places itself. It has been shown that regardless of technique, most others are immediately rejected if they can be associated with an opposing faction (Birke, 2007). Consistently, techniques that solicit similar responses are relabeled or cast aside by each cultural group, stating clearly opinionated “facts” that swing back and forth from a scientific perspective to personal opinion based on context. All sides eventually lose credibility if you allow them to argue long enough, as each makes no effort to understand the others, or look for similar goals (Birke, 2008).

Outside of the perception that each “other” faction is being exclusive while their own methods are inclusive, all schools of thought are very flawed in their basic understanding of ethology. Consistently, validations for both positive reinforcement, naturalistic teaching, and traditional methods, are made from an ethological perspective, where less than half of the speakers can correctly define basic terms such as negative reinforcement (Warren-Smith, 2007) (Birke, 2008). This lack of knowledge skews perspectives further, as one group will argue against the use of

negative reinforcement, when in fact they define it as punishment, and believe that their techniques that are negative reinforcers are actually positive reinforcers (Warren-Smith, 2007). These gaps provide incorrect perspectives from arguing sides, as riding coaches may openly condemn the use of negative reinforcement, while approving the use of bits and other gear that condition behavior using the principals they are miseducated about.

Conclusion

While Positive Reinforcement as a training technique by itself and in conjunction with traditional methods is gaining popularity, there is still a very vocal resistance to its implementation. Unfortunately as long as all sides of the issue remain ignorant of other perspectives, and make invalid arguments, the use of PR will still face an uphill battle in its widespread integration. New marketing strategies should focus on educating the public as well as professional horse handlers on basic conditioning methods and their definitions/applications. They should also look for benefits of PR that are obvious and agreeable, such as handler safety. If an open dialogue that explores the benefits of all techniques and their similarities rather than the condemnation of an opposing faction can begin, then positive reinforcement should receive a place in contemporary horsemanship. However, as long as exclusivity and an us versus them mentality on all sides of the issue continues, no great progress will be made.

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