



Field Notes

from Redwings



April 2020

Better Behaviour

It's in your hands!

Horses learn from every interaction with us. So when a behaviour is not what we want to see, we need to train clearly and train well, even when we're under pressure. It can be very frustrating when a horse refuses to load, be injected, or to stand for the farrier, but we need to work through the issue in a way that achieves what we need without giving the horse reason to be even more worried next time.

Redwings Field Notes shares the charity's approach to overcoming avoidance behaviours ethically and effectively when needed. Then think about a long-term training plan to help you and your horse face more situations with confidence.



Careful handling has transformed the lives of hundreds of rescued ponies

Contents:

Behaviour dilemmas:

We answer some common horse handling questions

Putting it into practice:

Try our 'handy' training toolkit to help you help your horse in those high stress moments

Training tips:

Don't wait for an issue, be proactive about preventing problems arising

Case Study:

Meet Pyeman and find out how we helped him overcome his fear of a particular situation

Common behaviour questions

We answer your handling queries



"My horse loads at home so what's the problem?"

Unlike humans, horses do not readily apply lessons learnt in one situation to another because they don't generalise as easily as we do. Environment is a key part of the learning process, so a horse that is perfectly happy for you to load him in your trailer at home can still be genuinely anxious about loading in a different place, onto another vehicle, or with a different handler.

To help our horses generalise we need to try and use variety in places and situations as we create a training plan for our horse.



"Is my horse just being dim/naughty/lazy?"

Lose the labels! Blaming unwanted behaviour on your horse is not only unfair, it may be used to justify excessive pressure and even punishment to try and resolve the issue. In fact, using increased pressure or punishment is far more likely to increase the horse's fear and stress in a situation and exacerbate behavioural issues in the long term.

Instead of asking what is wrong with the horse, we need to ask what is wrong with the situation, and address the root cause. Consider the following common underlying issues:

- U Pain – always rule out physical discomfort as a cause of behavioural problems
- U Confusion – lack of clarity or consistency can mean the horse is simply unsure what to do
- U Over stimulation – distractions such as noise, movement, smells, other horses can interfere with the horse's ability to concentrate
- U Anxiety – a new environment, separation from friends, being asked to do something for the first time, can all be causes of real anxiety for a horse
- U Fear – memories of bad experiences in the past are never forgotten and something associated with the memory may trigger a fearful reaction at any time.



"Won't using food encourage bad habits?"

Redwings finds that including reward-based techniques (positive reinforcement) in our training toolkit can be very beneficial as we work to prevent or resolve unwanted behaviours. Most horses are motivated by food, and learning how to offer appropriate food in a specific, timely way during training should help your horse progress without triggering other, unwanted behaviours around food.

Horses have different food preferences so it's good to try various options. Aim for something that motivates your horse but doesn't over-excite them!



"Do I just need to show my horse who's boss?"

Basing interactions with horses on ideas of 'hierarchy' and 'dominance' have been consistently discredited by scientific research.

Dominance is not a training technique but a relationship. Do we want our horses to be wary or fearful of what may happen if they don't do exactly what we want when we want, or do we want to be interacting in a way that helps horses feel safe, relaxed and able to enjoy new experiences and learn new skills?

Promoting relaxation in our horses as we work with them is not only ethical, it's effective. Stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline bypass learning pathways in the brain, instead activating a fear response that will lead to a long-term fear association. These associations are often at the root of problem behaviours and more stress will reinforce the desire to avoid similar situations in future.



Equine behaviour is an active and growing area of research

Make sure you and your horse benefit as new knowledge unfolds. Organisations like the International Society for Equitation Science (ISES) and the Equine Behaviour and Training Association (EBTA) are a mine of information and ideas.

Your turn! Better behaviour is in your hands

So many factors affect our horses' behaviour. We can all face an unforeseen problem, despite the time and effort we put into training. From health problems to restricted turnout, a recent stressful event or a bad experience from years ago, not all the elements in play at any given moment will be within our control.

Whatever the situation, don't let stress get the better of you: **respond don't react.**

Take your time and use our 'handy' checklist to help your horse **LEARN** that there is nothing to worry about.



Rule out pain

Undiagnosed pain is a common cause of unwanted behaviour so always consider this before you do anything else.

LOCATION Are you handling your horse in a safe, quiet and, if possible, familiar place? If not, can you create or find a more suitable area to work in? If you're struggling to load your horse at a show, for example, consider moving horse and vehicle to a quieter part of the venue.

EMOTION How relaxed is your horse? Relaxation is key to learning. Can you spot subtle signs of stress and address them before they escalate? *Turn to page four for more information on this vital skill.*

ASSESS Have you looked at the situation from the horse's perspective? Don't blame them, help them. If the situation is potentially dangerous, take a step back and rethink how finding some extra time, space or support can reduce the pressure on you and your horse.

REWARD Are you letting your horse know when he gets something right? We only ask for one action at a time and use a wither scratch or well-timed treat to clearly mark the correct response.

NEVER PUNISH Anything that raises stress levels or creates fear in your horse will make things harder for you, both at the time and in the future. Fear doesn't help the horse learn what to do, only what to avoid, and frightened horses are likely to increase use of unwanted behaviour.



Redwings says...

Don't punish yourself either. We're all likely to face a behavioural issue at some point and it's an opportunity for us to learn too!

Behaviour basics

Make time for training

We can reduce the risk of unwanted behaviours by taking time to train horses at home so they are more comfortable and confident in new or challenging situations.

Listen with your eyes

Relaxation is key to effective learning. Monitoring horses' emotions as we handle them means we can address anxiety early, rather than waiting for stress to escalate into unwanted behaviour.

Watch for:

- U Muscle tension
- U Tail swishing
- U High head carriage
- U Tight nostrils/chin
- U Fidgeting/lack of attention
- U Increased/loose droppings
- U Elevated breathing
- U Vocalisation

The BIGGER picture

There is growing evidence of a link between how horses are managed and how they behave. Meeting a horse's fundamental needs across their everyday life will help reduce frustration, stress and anxiety.

Use the **THREE Fs** to help you assess how fulfilled your horse is likely to be;

- F FOOD** – horses are trickle feeders; there are many ways we can increase the time and interest a horse takes in their food, without increasing their calorie intake
- F FRIENDS** – herd animals feel vulnerable when separated from companions, as well as lacking the enjoyment of interaction. How much equine company does your horse have?
- F FREEDOM** – as prey animals, horses feel more comfortable in an open space, or at least where they have a wide visual horizon.

Remember there are 24 hours in a day and horses spend more of them awake than we do!



Pyeman avoiding treatment



Clicker training worked wonders

Meet Pyeman!

Breed: Cob Cross
Height: 12.2hh
Born: 2010

Pyeman was rescued as a stray pony wandering the streets of a Norfolk town. He arrived at Redwings with no fondness for humans, as is so often the case with recent rescues.

Progress in helping Pyeman trust the people who cared for him at the sanctuary was going well, but took a step back following treatment for a nasty wound to his knee.

Initial veterinary treatment to the full-thickness, painful looking injury was carried out successfully under sedation. However, follow up treatment required daily application of cream to the sensitive area. Pyeman began to use more extreme behaviour in an effort to prevent people touching his sore knee, resulting in barging and rearing.

The team decided to use positive reinforcement in the form of clicker training to help reward Pyeman every time he performed the desired behaviour. Breaking the treatment process down into small steps was also key to a successful outcome:

- Standing still
- Being touched on the shoulder
- Being touched at the top of the leg
- Having a hand run down towards the knee
- Being touched around the knee
- Being touched on the knee
- Being touched on the wound
- Having cream put on the wound

The team used a well-timed reward to ensure Pyeman was relaxed and consistent at each stage before moving on to the next step. They also worked for no more than five minutes at a time before having a break.

It took just two sessions for Pyeman to stand still and relaxed to have his knee treated. Using the clicker training for all subsequent treatments meant the knee was soon healed with no further episodes of unwanted behaviour.

Find out more about clicker training by searching online for BEVA's 'Don't break your vet' campaign.



For other horse care blogs, films and free downloads, explore www.redwings.org.uk

Sign up for e-alerts to newly published horse care information and ideas at www.redwings.org.uk/enews



Contact us: **01508 481008**

www.redwings.org.uk

f RedwingsHorseSanctuary

@RedwingsHS

Redwings Horse Sanctuary, Hapton, Norwich NR15 1SP Registered Charity No. 1068911, Scottish Charity No. SCO45070