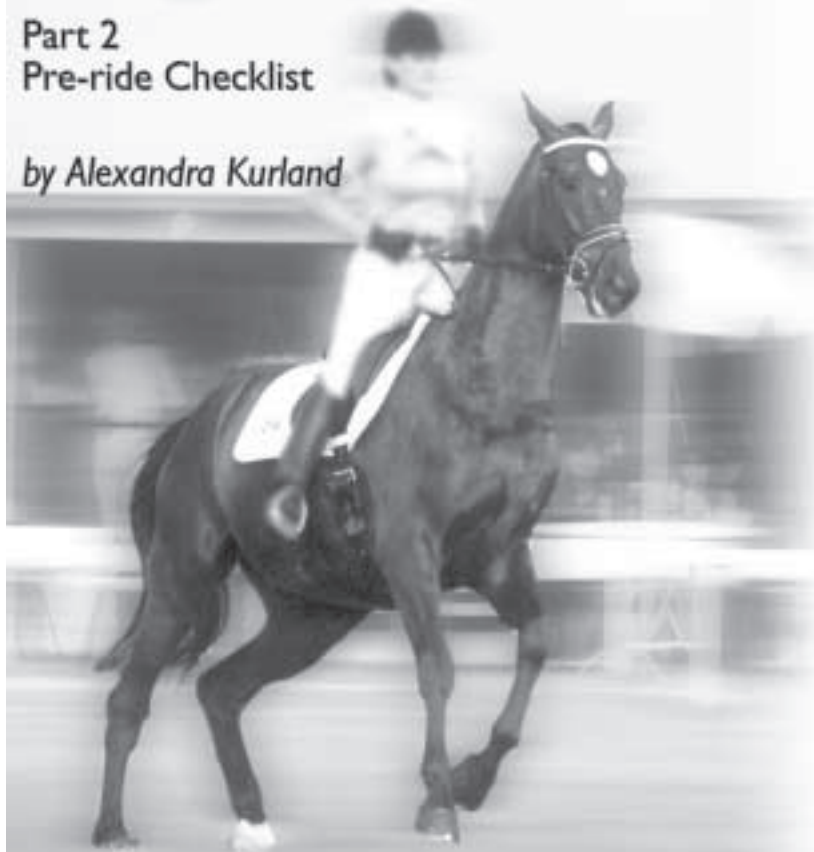


LICKER CLICKER CLICKER CLICKER **CLICKER CONTROL**

Part 2 Pre-ride Checklist

by Alexandra Kurland



Horses are full of surprises. Factors such as a windy day, an unfamiliar setting or a pasture mate going out of sight can easily upset even a normally calm horse. So what do you do when your horse 'falls apart'? And how do you know when it's safe to get on?

Before every flight, airline pilots have a checklist they review, and the plane doesn't take off until they are satisfied with each one of those safety checks. It's just common sense that we should have a safety checklist for our horses, and to ask ourselves a few simple questions to determine whether a horse is ready to be ridden.

This checklist can be used at any stage in a horse's training. You can use it to tell you if the youngster is ready for his first ride, on a windy day when your horse is higher than a kite, or when you take him away from home. The reality is you'll be using this checklist every time you bring the horse in from the paddock, groom him, saddle him up and head out for a ride. If the horse gives you a "no, I can't do that" answer to any of the questions on the list, you'll know he isn't ready to be ridden and needs some work on the ground before you get on.

Training Principles

This checklist is governed by two important principles, the first being safety always comes first. If you don't feel comfortable with an exercise there is ALWAYS a simpler, safer step you can begin with. Your goal is to find a starting point that is safe for both you and the horse. If a lesson becomes too difficult for either one of you, stop that lesson. The horse's resistance is just his way of telling you he isn't ready for that step. Make it simpler to make it safer.

If you don't feel safe getting on, don't - and trust the voice inside you telling you steps are missing in your training. This pre-ride safety checklist is designed to fill in those holes. It will give you an indication of your horse's emotional, mental, and physical readiness to be ridden.

The second principle is that you can't ask for something and expect to get it on a consistent basis unless YOU have gone through a process of teaching it to your horse. Horses know how to canter, stop and turn, they don't need you to teach them these things, however, the big question is, will they do them when you ask? That's what training is about.

Even if a horse is well-trained, you still need to teach him what you want, otherwise you won't be able to help him on those days when his training 'unravels'. If you don't know the steps that went into his training, you won't know how to fix things when they fall apart. You need to understand the teaching process that built the behaviour in the first place.

Clicker training is a teaching process that uses a "Yes answer" signal with a clear communication tool to tell the horse precisely when he has done something right. (*see Click For Control in Vol 24 No 1*). Instead of forcing your horse into obedience, you're going to teach him what you want. The result will be a happy horse that is eager to work for you.

CLICKERWISE CHECKLIST

An understanding of basic 'targeting' is the prerequisite for the rest of the exercises. In the June/July issue article we showed you how to introduce your horse to the clicker by teaching him to touch a target. When he bumped the target, you 'clicked', and gave him a treat. You built a simple understanding: certain behaviours were rewarded with a treat.

When food comes into the picture, many horses forget their manners and become pushy, and distracted. This is the same emotional meltdown you see at other times when your horse can't cope with what you are asking. You're going to use the food to help him learn greater emotional control and, in the process, you'll be gaining a powerful motivator you can use throughout his training.

Put a halter and lead on your horse and stand in next to him. If he mugs your pockets, keep yourself safe, but do

Continued...



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Click for Control Cont..

Right: A high head carriage links to a nervous state, while a lowered head equates to calmness.



Above: Lowering the head can be achieved in many ways - response to poll pressure can be reinforced with a 'click' and treat.



Right: Targeting skills can help your horse overcome a fear of strange (or not so strange) objects.

your best to ignore him. Try not to reprimand him for nudging at you and be as non-reactive as possible. The instant he looks away from your pocket, even if it's just for an instant, click, give him a treat. Be certain to feed him out away from your body where you would like him to have his head.

As soon as he gets his treat, he'll be back nudging at your pockets. Continue to ignore him, but wait for that instant he looks away. Click, he gets a treat.

As you repeat, he'll start looking away faster and faster. Now withhold the click just for an instant, so he has to look away and leave his head still and the click captures the hesitation. You'll gradually be able to stretch the time out he has to wait and if he wants his treat, he'll really have to control himself to get it. One of the great benefits of clicker training is that you're teaching the horse self control.

OVERCOMING FEAR

Now that the horse understands the clicker, the targeting skill you have taught him can help in overcoming fear of strange objects. Take him out for a walk and, if he eyeballs anything, offer him your closed fist as a target. Ask him to target on your hand, click and treat. Now have him follow your hand towards the scary object, click and treat. Put your hand on the object and ask him to touch it, click and treat. Slip your hand away and have him touch the object directly, click and treat. When horses earn treats touching things that worry them, suddenly the 'goblins' disappear. The more you practice this, the more the horse's confidence will build.

When horses are nervous, they raise their head to scan the horizon line for predators. It's only when they feel safe that they will drop their heads back down to graze. These two opposite body postures become linked to different emotional states. A high head links to a nervous state, while a low head creates calmness. If you can drop the horse's head to the ground, he'll begin to calm down.

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One of the principles of clicker training states that there is no one right way to teach any behaviour. Not only are there many different ways to train, the more different ways we teach our horse how to do the same exercise, the more solid that behaviour will become. Head lowering is a great place to put this principle into practice using the clicker.

For example, now that the horse is clicker-wise, you could have him follow a target to the ground. Click and treat. Or you could use poll pressure by placing your hand on his poll. If he resists you, your hand stays on his poll, but the instant he drops his head, even a little, click, take your hand away and give him a treat.

A third way to teach head lowering would be with a lead. Take the slack out of the lead. If he pulls up, keep a steady feel. The instant his head drops, click, release the lead, and give him a treat.

In these last two lessons you're using pressure and release of pressure to trigger the response you want, but you're pairing it with the motivator of the clicker to help the horse learn faster.

GROUND CONTROL

A nervous, frightened horse, or one that has become too pushy is just as likely to run over the top of you. To gain good 'ground' control, the horse needs to learn to yield lightly out of your space. If you walk into him, he should step aside.

There are lots of ways to teach these basic lessons. For example, to get the horse to back, you could rest your hand on the bridge of his nose. If he pushes into you, keep your hand steady and focus on the direction you want him to move. The instant you feel him even think about backing up, click, take your hand away and give him a treat. Repeat, and gradually ask for more until he is backing smoothly from a light touch.

***The better the horse
becomes on the ground,
the better he'll be under
saddle.***

You could also get him to back by putting your hand on his chest, or sending him back from a whip, or the shake of a rope. You could target him back, or you could stand behind him and pull on his tail. When he yields back, release the pressure and give him a treat. It may sound silly to get a horse to back in this way, but it can come in handy on a float. The key here is to be creative.

EMOTIONAL CONTROL

On those days when your horse is coming unravelling emotionally, standing still is probably the last thing he wants to do but you can use his desire to move his feet to the exercise learnt last issue - teaching him to stand on a mat.

Then you can withhold the click so he has to stand still longer. You're teaching him to



*Above:
Use the mounting block as your 'target' and control the hips and shoulders to position the horse for mounting.*



*Right:
When the horse is still and relaxed next to the mounting block, 'click', treat and mount.*

ground tie, to load onto a float, to cross trail obstacles, and even more importantly, you are teaching him emotional control.

YIELDING THE HIPS

Even a calm horse can be startled and a normally steady horse can bolt off. Do you have the tools in place to interrupt a reaction before it's a wreck? When you take a horse's head to the side, you can essentially lever him off his feet - taking the power out of the hindquarters - so you can stop bucking, bolting and spooking.

We're asking for something hard, so it makes sense to reward it with something the horse actively wants.

AN ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN?

It may seem obvious but if a horse is afraid of you approaching him with blankets, plastic tarps, whips or umbrellas, and shys away from the feel of a saddle pad on his back, he definitely isn't ready to ride. And if the crinkling of a raincoat when you're on his back makes him tighten up, he's just 'an accident waiting to happen'.

To find out how he feels about things touching his body, use the clicker to ask the horse a series of questions. If the answer is "no", he'll move away from you. Don't correct him, just use the lessons you've already taught him.

Bring him back to a stand still and ask again. Perhaps you are just asking him if you can stroke his neck with your hand. If you think he'll dance away in four seconds, click and take your hand away in three. Then give him his treat. If he dances away before you can click, that's all right, he'll learn that if he wants his treat he'll have to control his fear and stand still longer.

Begin this lesson with simple things, your hand, a cloth, a brush, then graduate to real challenges, plastic bags, tarps, umbrellas, etc.. By the time you get to the things that

truly scare him, he'll think nothing of them. He'll understand the game and be able to accept umbrellas snapping open over his head, balls bouncing around his legs, even plastic tarps draping over his back.

LEADING AND MOUNTING

If a horse won't walk next to you calmly on a loose rein around the perimeter of your riding space, chances are he's not going to be much better once you get on. Use the skills you've already taught him to get him to walk calmly beside you without crowding into you or pulling on the lead. Targeting is a great way to improve leading and to help the horse build his confidence in the spooky ends of your riding space. If he crowds you, ask him to back up, or move his shoulders over. If he lags behind, use the skills you taught earlier to ask him to step up. These are the building blocks of riding performance. The better the horse becomes on the ground, the better he'll be under saddle. When he responds correctly, click and give him a treat.

If he dances around when you're trying to mount, the horse is telling you he isn't ready to ride. Instead of punishing him, use his fidgety, over-anxious behaviour as a training opportunity and use the skills you taught him earlier to get him to stand still. Treat the mounting block as YOUR target - bring him up to it and if he swings away, instead of circling and bringing him back, stand still and ask him to move his hips and shoulders until he lines himself up next to you. Click and treat. Not only will you be preparing him for riding, you're also teaching him the skills he'll need to load onto a float. With clicker training, every lesson weaves itself into the next. 🐾

NEXT ISSUE

Part 3 - Clicker Training and Riding. Alexandra Kurland continues the clicker training principles into the riding arena.