

Clinic with Alexandra Kurland at the Irish Clicker Centre, Tralee, Co Kerry, Ireland. May, 2011

This year we had a three-day-plus-an-evening clinic with Alex. The evening happened on the Friday when we all got together at the Irish Clicker Centre for dinner and introductions. This is a great format. It meant that horses arriving to the clinic were in pens, fed and watered and getting to know their neighbours and settle in by 6 pm. This had the huge advantage that by Saturday morning, all the horses were much better settled and acclimated to each other than on previous occasions.

Meanwhile the human participants were settling down to a wonderful dinner! I can't take any credit for the meal. Aoife cooked an amazing vegetarian lasagne and brought wonderful strawberry mousse and caramel custard tarts. Maria arrived with a totally sinful chocolate sachre torte (thanks to Chris) and salad greens fresh from her garden, while Dorothy brought wine and other goodies.

We were a truly international group, Norwegian, French, Italian, half-Australian, semi-Scottish, a couple of Irish and Alex, of course, is American. Most of the participants stayed with us which meant that we had evenings of chat, discussion, video and photo viewing so all-in-all a terrific clinic!

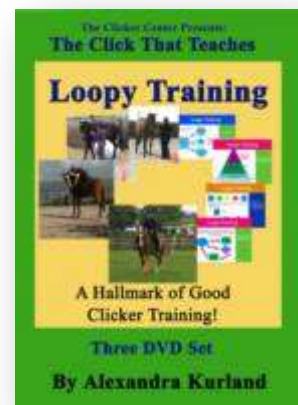
We started looking at Loopy Training (Alex has her new DVD of the same name out now). What constitutes a loop?:

behaviour → click → treat → behaviour and so on. We want that loop to be clean with no extra behaviours in between and, as Alex says, when the loop is clean, you get to go on (up the criteria) and not only can you go on but you should go on!

This year we had hoped to have 5 horse but unfortunately it didn't happen. However four can be a great number because it allowed us more time for review of some of the lessons via Alex's wonderful video camera.

Veronique and Miro:

Veronique has been working with Miro for the last year but only very intermittently. His basic manners are now pretty good and he has been wearing a saddle while doing the beginnings of lateral work. Veronique has also been teaching him the 'capture the saddle' game. Now almost 4 years old, he's getting ready to be ridden. He is however inclined to be somewhat spooky at times,



especially in windy conditions (something that happens quite a bit in the South-West corner of Ireland). Alex felt that this was what they needed to work on.

So to prepare both Veronique and Miro for if/when a spook happens, Alex set up a circle of cones and asked Vero to pick a cone and take Miro around it, clicking and treating for a really good step under.

Initially their rounding was quite wide around the cone and Vero was inclined to hold on to the lead rope too long but

after a while, she was asking and releasing with each of Miro's gives and he was stepping under nicely to round the cone. They then picked another cone at the opposite side of the circle and headed off for that. When all of that became very smooth, the next step was incorporating Hip-Shoulder-Shoulder around the cone. So Vero asked Miro to soften on the approach then yield his hip before going into a back-up CT.



In an indoor session with human horses we revisited jaw flexions, HSS into head down. Miro had a very solid head down signal from a raised hand (cue developed from hand on the poll) but he was not so good at head-down from the leadrope. He would lower his head, but then start to raise it very quickly. Veronique needed to slide down the rope as soon as his nose moved forward (which precedes head rising) to meet the snap. We practised this with human horses before going back to Miro.

In Miro's next session, Vero focussed on improving the quality of his head down. When he lowered his head, he turned his head away from Vero so she now concentrated on waiting until he moved his head straight on or with a slight bend towards her. By picking on just this criterion and having Vero slide down the leadrope when he started to lift his head, we realised that Miro was building quite a bit of duration with his head down. This was not the only thing they did during the session....they did lots of Grown-Ups and walking off, rounding cones and mat work, but this was the main focus. One other important detail was getting Grown-Ups after a change of side. This is so the horse waits to be asked before moving off and doesn't assume that a change of sides means, now we race off again.

By their last session, all the elements were in place to cross the circle to a cone, round it neatly, go into HSS and head down. These are also all the elements needed to control a spook, so both Vero and Miro had built in the pattern and muscle memory for what need to happen in a scary situation.

By working on this in a controlled environment you can develop a reaction pattern where scary means HSS and Head Down – in other words scary means calm down. Again in a controlled environment you can introduce spooky items, get HSS and HD and you're on the way to having a brave horse!

Human horse handling :

Where you need to work on a skill or just get the feel of how the horse should be positioned, a dress rehearsal with human 'horses' can work wonders. It takes away the pressure and allows for verbal feedback, which your horse can't give!!! We looked at jaw flexions and how it feels to be the horse. Backing in a square around the kitchen worktops was a skill needed for Miro when he over rotated on the turn around the cone and also helpful for Rua who injured his right hip during the year.

Shoulder-in and Haunches-in. We all walked these steps as horses around the kitchen to feel the differences in our own bodies. We also walked through corners and the change from Shoulders-in to



haunches-in and VV. Then we repeated the exercise with handlers where the handlers used small circles to set their 'horse' up correctly before moving down the kitchen. We all got to feel how the horse felt and needed to bend as well as how the handlers body position changes relative to the horse as they change the movement – very cool indeed!

Marte and Rua:

Marte had been working with Misty intermittently for the last year and they were all set for the clinic but unfortunately it was not to be and so Marte had just 3 short sessions prior to the clinic to build a relationship with Rua. Rua is a strange character who will happily trot up to investigate noisy diggers at work but can be very worried by and suspicious of people. In their first session together Marte needed to ask for lots of HSS and head down in between steps of Why-Would-You-Leave-Me. In the next session he was much happier and in tune with her and by the third session they had a wonderful ride, so they were ready for the clinic.

On the first day of the clinic Rua came out tacked up. He was a bit unsettled and wanted to go and see the other horses. Marte used lots of WWYLM and he settled. Alex then asked if she wanted to ride, so they walked to the mounting block but Rua continued walking and headed to chat to Prince so Marte brought him back to the circle and did some more WWYLM until he was calm and relaxed again. They tried the mounting block one more time but Rua still did not want to be ridden so after a bit more ground work they finished for the day.

When he came out the next day Rua, Marte started straight into WWYLM. He settles down reasonably quickly and Marte went to saddle up but Rua was reluctant to stand. As clicker trainers we listen to our horses. Rua is usually happy to be tacked up and ridden so why was it a problem now? We had asked Sam, our osteopath to come to us as soon as possible after the clinic as she had been home in Australia for an extended holiday prior to the clinic. She came about 10 days after and discovered Rua had a couple of compressed ribs which needed a bit of work and were positioned just where the saddle would put pressure on them – All better now!

To help Rua settle Marte used the 'magic' Irish Clicker Centre saddlecloth in the same way as we used it with Newbie, throwing it over the good scratchy spots and rubbing through it! Marte did some really nice WWYLM work with Rua on the ground and when he reached the mat, he got saddlecloth rubs to enhance the mat experience.

Mary and Newbie:

Once again, Newbie has been injured – he got a very bad cut on the inside of his hock in January and still has an reasonable sized unhealed wound almost 5 months on! Nevertheless his body shape has been kept reasonably good with equine pilates and jaw flexions. He was just back in light work– mostly in-hand, for about 3 weeks prior to the clinic.

In the first session, when we started WWYLM he was overbending. Alex had him target her hand with his chin so that he held his head in a much more 'up' position. So I continued with this exercise for a bit.

The other issue that Newbie had is that all his ailments have made him something of a grump and I have not been as mindful of this as I should have been. He gets impatient and also frustrated if he feels he's not being rewarded for a good effort and sometimes gets annoyed almost because he knows he can do better.

We started to work in-hand with both reins just for a few brief steps before returning to the mat but the time required to reach the mat for just a step or two away gave him time to grump again. Alex had us set out three mats close together so that his few steps now almost landed him on the next mat. Happy face CT.

Once on the mat, Newbie got lots of scratches and rubs – very firm and much more like horse mutual grooming then gentle rubs! – He normally hates to be rubbed, barely tolerates grooming, but he loved this and when he showed pleasure, then he got a click and treat. After a while we added in rubbing through the saddle cloth which made him almost delirious with happiness – talk about a change!!!!



In the picture below, you can see Newbie moving very correctly before landing on the mat. Note also the 'magic' Irish Clicker Centre saddlecloth!



When Newbie got too deep I used HSS to reset him. Alex pointed out that resets are not a bad thing (although initially Newbie did not agree with her!) but at the early stages the resets got lots of clicks and treats until it became, the more resets, the better. This leads to a happy and ultimately, very balanced horse. When our loop was clean we moved on, firstly by changing rein, then by enlarging the distance between mats. As we improved over the couple of days, the need for resets reduced and I got better at 'catching him falling off the balance beam' sooner.



Aoife and Prince:

Aoife and Prince were definitely the stars of the clinic! Aoife had been working on getting Prince to lunge in balanced trot and we were all entranced watching the two of them in action. At just 16 years old Aoife has taught her pony wonderful self carriage and produce a beautiful cadenced trot. After a while of watching and admiring, Alex decided that Aoife should ride this lovely movement. Once on board, Aoife found it difficult to get the same level of energy and forward movement from Prince, so Alex had me provide the energy by 'lunging' Prince with no rope attached, while Aoife rode. The result was amazing as Prince gave us a forward energetic walk in beautiful balance. We then asked for and got trot, again with lovely balance and cadence. It was just a pleasure to watch (some of it is on video at http://irishclickercentre.com/wordpress/?page_id=38 entitled "From lunging to riding")

Over the next couple of days Aoife had more rides on Prince where she was able to get a soft pick-up of the reins then lower them until she was riding on the buckle while Prince remained in self-carriage throughout. Alex explained how the inside rein controls bend and head elevation while the outside rein is responsible for engagement (hindleg action) and leg speed (cadence).

Alex also worked with Prince to start him on haunches-in in-hand using the side of the arena, and Prince showed what a clever pony he is by picking it up quickly.

Overall we had a terrific three days with lots of fun, learned loads and have plenty to work on and think about. For me, the clinic really cemented the importance of clean loops. I have since gone back to re-teach some of the simple behaviours where Newbie grumped even as he carried them out well and he is learning to look (and be) much happier with these lessons. We were, as ever, very sorry when the clinic finished and all participants went their separate ways. The Loopy Training DVD is a great reminder and several wet days meant that I got to see it all. It will all have to be looked at again but it contains a wealth of information and reminders that will keep me going until next year!!