

## **Sitting, Scratching and other Advanced Clicker Training Techniques!**

Day 1 of the Advanced UK and Ireland Clinic.

The final clinic of Alexandra Kurland's UK and Ireland tour took place in Inglefield Alpaca Farm, Yorkshire, hosted by Hilary Cross. All participants had already attended a clinic on Alex's tour, so everyone had been on a clinic within the previous month. There were many familiar faces along with some new ones and so we started with the now traditional introductions around the circle. What is interesting is that many people already had huge insights and improvements from their first clinic.

Some comments that I noted from the discussion: Alex commented that one challenge we have with our Clicker-trained horses is how to keep them looking like clicker trained horse, in other words, horses that maintain the eagerness and visible enthusiasm that we have come to know. As horses improve with their training, they may simply look like very well behaved, balanced horses with nothing that signals "Clicker Trained". Morton Egtvedt and Cecile Koeste, who are Norwegian dog trainers have sessions with their dogs where they ask them to offer behaviours and reward them for showing a variety of behaviours. The equine equivalent of this is to play some creativity games. Charlotte had tried this with her horse Hilo. Charlotte sat in a chair and Hilo had posed and posed harder (all ignored) before engaging...then it became fun.

Kerry commented on her Oscar. She had been working on engagement at walk using Single Rein Riding (SRR) and was amazed that one day a beautiful engaged canter popped out. Another benefit emerged in that Oscar has become braver.

Liz had found a number of benefits from her first clinic. She used Hip-Shoulder-Shoulder (HSS) to get Will to walk calmly past scary objects, in particular balloons and cattle were a worry. The first clinic that Liz attended in early June focussed on Loops and the use of clean loops in training. (For more on this, see the report from the Irish Clicker Centre clinic) When Liz got home, she had an insight....there can be bad loops as well as good ones and she had allowed such a loop to develop. When Liz was tacking Will up, he was turning around and catching her clothing. She would then wait until he faced forward again and then CT. She realised that this had become a loop and she needed to break it, so Liz changed her pattern and when Will swung around she walked to his other side around his rear (she normally goes around by his head), scratched his withers as he had now straightened up, adjusted the girth and CT. This simple change stopped the behaviour.

Alex also made the comment that the two Pillars of good training are PATIENCE and PERSISTENCE and gave us an example of where this had paid off for her in the days before she had discovered the clicker.

One other thing that came up was that Leslie's horse Jim who had been at the previous clinic at Hilary's had, what appeared to the humans to be a minor incident when he and Ben (one of Hilary's horses) were ushered back into the arena from the adjacent lane when some mares got out of the field. When the mares were returned to their field and the gate of the arena was opened, Jim refused to come out again. Leslie had used a target to get Jim out but he clearly had not lost the fear of coming out the gate. He had to touch the target to leave. I'll return to this later when we look at Jim at work in the arena, but one comment made was how it would be very easy to assume that Jim's fear had arisen from a major trauma

near the gate, looking at him and the level of worry/fear he showed. Jim is clearly a sensitive, even highly strung horse who is handled beautifully by Leslie.

Horse Work: As ever with Alex, the first session is largely about discovering what the horse is feeling and how horse and handler have progressed in their work.

First up were **Nick and Loki**:

Loki is an Icelandic stallion. He had arrived the previous day with his girlfriend, a barren mare and they had settled in well. However Loki was in a new place in an arena with 2 excited mares in a nearby paddock. The cones were set out in a circle for the Why Would You Leave Me game (WWYLM) and Nick started to move around them but Loki was rushing so needed lots of HSS. Each time Nick took his hip, got a back up and then asked for forward and straight. The straight was very important for Loki who was bending his neck around too much. When a Loki settle down Nick got on board and did some ridden work. They went over and back across the circle turning around Kong's using hip shoulder shoulder mechanics. Nick slid down the rope just three or four times before getting hip.



the Why Would You Leave Me game (WWYLM) and Nick started to move around them but Loki was rushing so needed lots of HSS. Each time Nick took his hip, got a back up and then asked for forward and straight. The straight was very important for Loki who was bending his neck around too much. When a Loki settle down Nick got on board and did some ridden work. They went over and back across the circle turning around Kong's using hip shoulder shoulder mechanics. Nick slid down the rope just three or four times before getting hip.

This was so that Loki remains balanced in the circles. Loki was rushing a bit, the faster the horse goes, the slower the hand movement needs to be. When nick slowed his hand movement down Loki settled well.

**Amanda and Classic** started working on inside turns. Classic was circling around her in walk and when she asked him to come towards her he turned into the centre of the circle. Amanda could then step back to allow him to move past her changing direction.

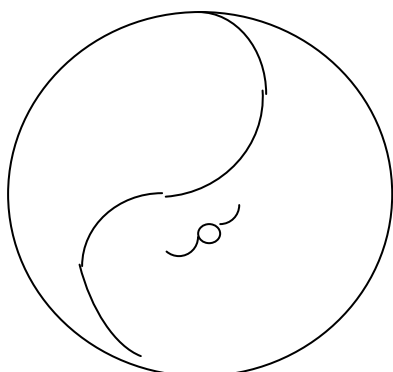




Diagram very simplified ! Hope it helps

With each turn Classic had to rebalance and change direction so that no one felt crowded. Classic performed this beautifully in walk but in trot he was stalling out. This was because the snap came under his chin as he stepped into the turn. Amanda then clicked him as soon as he gave a first step. He then continued the turn in walk returning to trot as soon as possible. She then established a solid trot before asking for the next turn.

#### **Judy and Rupert:**

Judy started Rupert in WWYLM (the Why Would You Leave Me game which becomes shoulders-in on a circle but has simpler approximations in the early stages). Straight away, Rupert started to lean to the inside and Judy had to use her tai-chi wall to get his shoulder up and over out of Judy's way. She would then click a good moment and use food delivery to get a turn, then back-up; CT; Judy changed sides during food delivery; back up; CT; walk off again. She maintained a very high rate of Reinforcement at this stage. So Rupert is still showing some of the old bargy behaviour that he had pre clicker training but a new Rupert is definitely emerging: He's becoming soft, connected, manageable and clearly knows the dance!

#### **Kerry and Oscar:**

Kerry needed a similar lesson to Loki. He was also on the WWYLM circle and had to walk off straight. Kerry did lots of HSS with him and initially was doing a bit much with her hands when asking for the





back up. Oscar was very calm and so Kerry got on board. In the ridden work Kerry was asking for 4 gives down the rein then ride straight for a bit,



change reins and ask for 4 gives again. Oscar wouldn't stop for his treat so they moved into the 'Whoa-Stop' lesson. A cone was placed in the centre of a circle and the objective was for Kerry (and Oscar!) to stop at the cone. Initially the objective was simply to get Oscar to stop. Approaching the cone, Kerry would ask for a halt and when it didn't happen she slid down the rein and got his hip, then immediately changed rein and asked on the other side. It's very important in this exercise, to stop your body riding as you do this. The other important factor was that Kerry had to keep Oscar's nose pointing at the cone. Having achieved a halt in this way, the next

progression is to only allow halt if Oscar's nose is pointing at the cone, then allow him to walk on until his nose passes the cone and have him tack back to face it. The ultimate aim is a halt at the cone!

Alex pointed out that it's very important to keep a balance with this exercise or you end up with a horse that won't move at all!!!!

### **Hilary and Calisto:**

Calisto is a young mare who has not been Hilary's main focus as Hilary has 4 other horses too. Hilary described her as a very dominant mare. Her objective for the clinic was to have Calisto standing confidently with all 4 feet on the mattress and she had been working towards this. To date she had asked Calisto to step onto a wobble board, a pillow, then the mattress with no mat on top of it, front feet only in all cases. (When the mattress is used normally there is a rubber stable mat on top of it. This spreads the horse's weight so the feet don't simply go through the material and onto the ground, it makes it much more wobbly).

Hilary also started in WWYLM with Calisto. In the lateral bend, however, Calisto was bowing out in the middle and becoming unbalanced. Alex had Hilary use lots of alternating HSS. What was very important though was walking off straight before going into lateral movement. After a lateral step they went into HSS.

Hilary was asking Calisto to move forward with purpose. In so doing, she was asking Calisto to use her body better, stepping up more from behind in balance. Calisto found this hard work initially and moved up into a trot to avoid the good balance Hilary was looking for. When this happened, Hilary went into HSS. On some occasions as she improved the trot came out of balanced walk steps and so CT.



Alex stressed that HSS must be forward. The energy of the horse needs to be redirected, not blocked by stopping. The forward is in the set up of the take of the hip, keeping the horse forward and around. HSS uses three asks – can you stay forward and soften the jaw, stay forward and give the hip, stay forward and give the shoulder. On each ask the quarters move out a bit (the amount will depend on the horse's level of experience with this exercise) and this is followed by a step under and back up.

I mentioned that Hilary was looking for more energy in the walk. Alex likened what was happening to a horse being on a treadmill. If the treadmill is gradually increasing speed, the horse will quickly go from walk to trot. We want to be able to say – wait – at that point. We need the horse to do more with the walk giving us more energy to get extension and even piaffe!

#### **Leslie and Jim:**

I have been so slow at getting around to writing up this report (life has been busy!) that Alex has written a



wonderful post on Leslie and Jim over both clinics they attended on The-Click-That-Teachs forum and I strongly recommend reading it. I'm going to very briefly summarise here. Prior to the first clinic Jim had gotten a minor scare (human opinion – clearly not Jims!) at Hilary's arena when he and Ben, another horse of Hilarys, were hooshed back into the arena just as they had been leaving it as a couple of Hilary's other horses had escaped out of their paddock to

get to the hay which had been left out for the boys. One of the mares kicked out at Jim. There was no connection and no injury and Leslie had quickly got him back to the arena and safety.



When it came to the clinic a few days later, Jim had happily gone into the arena but flatly refused to come out. Leslie had worked very patiently with mats to get Jim firstly near the gate and finally out but clearly the issue was not fully resolved. They were the last to work on Day 1 and the rain started with a vengeance, so they worked on coming out of the arena. At this stage, Leslie was able to place the mat outside the gate and she very patiently CTed every step. When Jim got a foot on the mat, loads of Praise and CT, then back into the arena. Slowly he got more confident putting two feet on the mat, then the mat was moved a little further out. Each time he stood on the mat CT, Scratches, praise and back in again. Leslie showed amazing patience as she asked Jim to move forward.



This was the first day of the clinic. With Alex, the first day tends to be all about observation and assessment of the horse and handler/rider, but of course with every clicker training session, there is lots of learning and fun too and this was the case here also. We had a further wonderful 3 days and I'll write more about these at a later stage!