

## **Open letter to the British Horse Society Horse welfare and training for equestrians**

### 1. Introduction

After many years away from riding I decided to take it up again. My main interest is in hacking and long rides. Before returning to riding and acquiring my horse I did quite a bit of background reading, both online and recently published books on equitation and horse care. I sought information based on objective scientific information on horse care and training wherever possible. I have a reasonable knowledge of animal behaviour in general, having studied this during my degree. I have also tried to keep up-to-date with behavioural work, reading relevant literature on the subject. I have worked for 14 years as a behavioural consultant advising clients on the care of birds, mainly parrots, with behavioural issues. I've written several books on the care of birds and run training courses for animal care staff. Parrots do have many things in common with horses and share several behavioural adaptations. Both animals are highly social, with complex social structures and well-developed abilities to communicate among their own kind, using calls, and body language. Both are also vulnerable to predation, hence the wary, nervous disposition they show, together with their default flight response to threats to their safety.

### 2. Issues regarding professional equestrians.

Before returning to riding I talked with some of my horse keeping neighbours and sought their advice about the many issues involved in keeping horses these days. To try to get more of a feel for the horse world, I also went to several local horse events and watched some professional trainers working, largely with other peoples' horses. Sadly, this is where things started to fall apart. At these events I saw horses being hit, shouted at and kicked as part of their 'training' and the administering of the aids. There was no reaction from the audience to these methods. One horse endured 45 minutes of continuous negative reinforcement and flooding by a BHS qualified trainer. These practices, it seems are all part of the 'normal' accepted treatment meted out to horses on a regular daily basis. In terms of an animal's abilities of comprehension, it is bizarre to see people actually remonstrating with a horse using complex sentences in English! Many 'professional' trainers seem to have a strange relationship with horses.

It soon became clear that while there have been great improvements in horse tack and veterinary care since the 1980s, most aspects of *training* horses have neither taken on board welfare considerations, nor even learning theory. In a survey of professional equestrians' knowledge of learning theory in Australia, Warren-Smith and McGreevy (2008) found a dire level of ignorance and misunderstanding, even regarding the basic terminology of the main principles of learning theory. This extract from their paper sums up their study and its findings.

*"To assess the knowledge of learning theory among **accredited** equestrian coaches in Australia, a 20-item questionnaire was distributed to all coaches registered with the National Coaches Accreditation Scheme in Australia (n =*

830). Of the 206 respondents, 79.5% considered positive reinforcement to be "very useful," yet only **2.8% correctly explained its use in horse training**. When asked about the usefulness of negative reinforcement, 19.3% of coaches considered it "very useful," with [only] **11.9% correctly explaining its use**. Punishment was rated "very useful" by 5.2% of respondents, although only **eight coaches (5.4%) explained punishment correctly**. Release of pressure was considered the most effective reward for horses among respondents (78.2%). These results indicate that many equestrian coaches lack a correct understanding of positive and negative reinforcement [and punishment] as they apply to horse training. Given that qualified coaches play a significant role in the dissemination of information on training practices, this highlights the need for improved education of equestrian coaches. Education to remedy this situation has the potential to **enhance the welfare of horses** through reduced behavioral conflict and improved training outcomes." (Emphasis added).

Ward and Bell also discuss this issue on the Association of Pet Behaviour Counselors' website. "... However, there is a recent trend to describe the removal of pressure as a "reward" or "positive reinforcement" because the horse desires it. The fact that something aversive needs to be applied for its removal to be desirable is an ugly truth that is often swept under the carpet by this inaccurate use of the term."

Indeed, training methods remain much the same today as 30 years ago, despite the names given to some of the so-called 'newer' methods such as 'natural' (sic) horsemanship. Horses are still treated largely in a way that Barbara Woodhouse was 'training' dogs back in the 1970s. These methods talk of 'dominance' issues, being 'firm' and showing the horse who is 'the boss'. Professional equestrians still use words such as 'respect' and 'trust' in talking about our relationships with horses. These colloquial terms are open to much misunderstanding. They also entrench an anthropomorphic attitude towards horses. There is of course no scientific evidence that shows horses to be capable of understanding such concepts as 'respect' or 'trust', let alone their being moral beings who can make 'mistakes' and therefore need to be 'disciplined' for their 'errors'. Indeed it is still very difficult to show, scientifically, that any of these qualities can be seen in most higher animals, whose intelligence in other areas appears to exceed that found in equines. So, while there have been great advances in recent decades in human/animal communication and the emergence of anthrozoology as an academic discipline, it appears that the horse keeping world has either rejected a scientific approach to behaviour, or simply not woken up to modern, humane methods in animal/human communication and training. Those who adhere to these 'traditional' ways, might **assume** or hope they are being as 'horse-friendly' as possible during training, but assumptions and hope are not the same as the application of objective knowledge.

With a non-scientific approach, we are likely to see these animals either in anthropomorphic terms, or merely as insentient objects to which things are done (Hanson, 2011). An unscientific approach does not allow us to see horses objectively, as the sentient animals they clearly are.

So, my efforts to find a professional trainer conversant in animal behaviour and learning theory proved extremely difficult. Most equestrians still rely almost entirely on the use of aversive methods; largely negative reinforcement, positive punishment, and flooding when working with horses. Flooding is used in round-pen training by those who adhere to so-called 'natural' horsemanship methods. The animal is trapped in a fearful situation from which it cannot escape. In nature, horses are not subjected to flooding by other horses! Sadly, the use of *benign*, horse-friendly methods, such as positive reinforcement and perhaps even negative punishment, was virtually absent in all professional and non-professional trainers. The use of **enduring** negative reinforcement, to which many horses are routinely subjected for long periods in daily training sessions, is clearly distressing to them. Horses often show agonistic reactions to such methods; these include increased breathing rate, sweating, eye rolling, foaming at the mouth, rearing, bucking and ears pinned back. Such methods are not merely unnecessary, but often counter-productive and have serious implications for the safety of both trainer and horse.

The presumption that horses should be bitted and shod with metal shoes persists, without any scientific justification. Again the introduction of milder forms of bridling would have benefits for both horse welfare and riders' safety. Horses bitted or bridled where forces are exerted on the soft, sensitive tissues can often be seen having difficulty with swallowing, and, when the tongue is depressed by the bit, breathing. Dr R W Cook has recorded the growth of painful bone spurs in the jaws of ridden (bitted) horses, but never found these in non-ridden equines. Horses are then expected to try to perform (and even learn new) manoeuvres while the bit is already causing them pain or discomfort. This compounds one stressor upon another and again has serious implications for horse welfare and safety.

Despite lengthy searches I have not found a scientific article which shows the need to have any horse used for leisure purposes to be shod. Shoeing appears to be unnecessary and may be cruel, due to its many negative effects on the feet.

All this, and several other aspects, brought me close to abandoning my idea of taking up riding again. I could not see why professional training methods for horses had to be different from the methods employed by professionals for all other animals. Why should horses be subjected to particularly aversive methods by default, when professional trainers of other animals would not do this? Clearly horses are not some exempt animal different from all others on the planet who do not obey the 'laws' of behaviour (Thorndike in Lieberman, 2000). Horses are much the same as any other creature including ourselves, when it comes to the principles of how we all learn, why some behaviours are retained and others cease. So, returning to my understanding of animal behaviour generally and learning theory in particular, I decided to take up riding again, but to avoid training methods unless these were clearly both benign and supported by learning theory. Despite being a member of the BHS, I have to say, the Society has not been able to help me understand and

train my horse *humanely*. I went to other sources for such information. I have now backed my horse, a four year old Arab gelding, using methods based on LT (Lethbridge 2009; Hanson 2011) with minimal negative reinforcement.

I did eventually find a few people who had both studied animal behaviour, and applied it to the training of horses, but none of them were within the BHS. I asked, the BHS, by email, if they had any courses grounded in equine ethology and learning theory, and was promptly told 'No!' Clearly the hold on 'traditional' methods was so strong within the BHS and this explained the response to my request. Indeed I was told by others in the horse riding world to not even think of bringing this issue up; it seemed almost a taboo subject. And, save for one reason, I would not have done so; but that reason is the welfare of horses. Where trainers do not have a reasonable understanding of both the ethology of the species they work with and learning theory, then **they cannot be sure that the methods they are using are as benign as possible**. They may hope, claim or assume that they are using horse-friendly methods, but without some formal knowledge of equine behaviour, based on the animal's ethogram, such notions remain mere assumptions, not facts. And that is a dire situation for any horse to be in, let alone when this relates to professional trainers with letters after their name who should be setting the standards for horse welfare in all their interactions with horses and people.

It is important to understand and accept that learning theory is not some 'alternative' method, which one might choose in 'preference' to other methods such as those espoused (and sold by) Parelli or Monty Roberts or others, etc. LT is not a commercial franchise 'owned' by anyone and there are no gadgets or methods which can be 'sold on' to others. Indeed it is not really a method of training at all; but merely an explanation of learning. All animals including ourselves, are subject to the laws of behaviour, whether those doing the training know this or not. LT is simply the academic discipline of learning, as applies to all animals including ourselves. It is to horse training, what veterinary science is to the medical care of our animals, or the periodic table of elements is to chemistry. It is available to all who care to study it.

A trainer's knowledge and attitude to the animals they train has a **profound** effect on the behaviour of the animal. I should state that I am **not** saying that negative reinforcement (and even positive punishment) do not 'work' with regard to training horses. They certainly can work; but the problem with relying on these methods by default is that they risk serious side effects which impinge on the safety of the rider and horse due to the nature of the relationship which is likely to develop between the two. Some negative reinforcement will always be used on horses and can be a valuable tool. But to ensure minimum side effects, including initiating dangerous behaviours, these methods have to be used with a much greater understanding than is currently the case with most equestrians. Professional equestrians are working with dangerous animals; often this is combined with working with children as riders. A sound knowledge of learning theory and the species' ethogram is vital in ensuring the animals' welfare and the safety people when interacting with horses. While equitation science (or at least some of the

methods used by Andrew McLean) are rightly criticised for the continued reliance on aversives, the authors do, at least in print acknowledge the issues of the horses' limitations regarding training:

*"Much of our traditional ... practices are at odds with the physical and behavioural adaptations of the horse; some horses cope, some do not. Equitation presents significant ethological challenges and in many cases training fails to reflect the physical abilities and learning capacity of the horse."*  
McGreevy & McLean, 2010.

### 3. A Proposal.

With the above issues in mind, and particularly the welfare of horses, I am writing to ask you, as the board of trustees to review the content of the training literature and courses devised and/or run by BHS. I'm asking that we adopt a much more objective, scientific basis for the training methods: that these methods be properly grounded in learning theory and ethology. For example, with each of the three main stages of the BHS training schemes, students should be made aware of both the ethology of the horse and the principles of learning theory, as appropriate to the level of the qualification being studied.

I understand the problem of resistance to change; behavioural inertia is well explained by learning theory! So, if you are not familiar with LT, I would ask that you look into this subject so you can make an objective decision yourself regarding my proposal. A commitment to a cultural change is needed, so that everyone from new/prospective riders, to those who judge a rider's performance in top level competitive events is aware of the horse and its behaviour **as understood by science**. For far too long the BHS and other national horse societies have relied on the need for 'submission' in horses. This reveals a failure to grasp the main principles of both learning and animal welfare. For the sake of their welfare, not to mention our own safety, horses need to be trained with methods we **know** are as benign as possible, not merely methods we **think or assume, or claim** are benign. Please do not think of this matter as merely a 'training' issue. It is more properly an animal **welfare** issue and I ask that you consider it as such.

I hope you will accept this note in the light intended. Also, that you will talk to others who have more expertise in this matter than I have. A few years ago you changed the appearance of the BHS with a new logo, and you've done great work regarding the number of 'unwanted' horses and issues of over-breeding. So I hope you will consider my proposal. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you at some time to discuss this issue. I would ask that you publish this note in the Society's magazine, and our website, to help generate a wider discussion on the issues.

For horse welfare,

Greg Glendell  
January 2014.

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