

Book Review

The BHS Complete Manual of Equitation

Second edition, 2001 published by Kenilworth Press 2011; reprinted 2016.

£20. ISBN 978-1-905693-37-5.

The book is divided into two parts: training the rider, and training the horse. There are black & white drawings illustrating the techniques throughout the book. The section on training the rider is quite good, in that the style and language are plain and clear. This section does of course assume one is interacting with a horse trained in the traditional (BHS) way (as in Section 2). It discusses the need for reasonable fitness in anyone wishing to learn to ride. It states that the first few times a rider is given riding lessons, the choice of horse is important. The horse should “Be generous in nature” (to cope with poor aids from the rider) should be “sensible... willing... forward-going, yet calm and relaxed.” It assumes lessons will be given in an arena. However, quite early in the book we see references to the use of aversive, even aggressive and pain-inducing methods as part of the recommended training regime of the horse. On page 30 we see:

“A purposeful, confident manner [in the trainer/handler] will instil confidence and obedience in the horse.” And:

“Authority in voice and body language will instigate submission from most horses.”

It doesn't say what to do if this instigates aggression or fear, as it may well do. It also assumes a horse is capable of understanding abstract notions such as ‘authority’ while there is no evidence for this.

The horse is seen essentially as an object to which things must be done, with little regard for its welfare or mental capacities, let alone its feelings. There are frequent references to the use of the whip. The section on Jumping, page 82 says:

“...there may be times when the whip is used to reprimand a horse, for example if he refuses to jump a fence. In these cases the whip should be used with discretion and must never leave a mark on the horse.” “Mark” is a euphemism for trauma. So it suggests you do not draw blood when whipping, but can hit as hard as you like up to that point. The notion of using positive punishment on a creature incapable of being culpable for anything it might do is both bizarre and upsetting. And of course it risks the horse becoming either fearful or aggressive. On the next page it says how the whip can be used on the horse’s shoulder to “attract his attention” or behind the rider’s leg if it refuses “for no apparent reason” to jump a fence. One does not have to be an expert in animal behaviour to realise that behaviour does not happen without sound reasons. The horse could refuse a jump for any number of reasons. Fear of it; associating it with being whipped; pain induced by being forced to jump; or other events perceived by the horse, but not perceived by its rider, to name but a few. To correct this situation the text says the horse should be turned away from the fence it refused and “given one or two sharp slaps behind the rider’s leg and then re-presented [?] to the fence.” It recommends that the whip used should have a broad flat end to reduce [!] the chances of ‘marking’ the horse.” While the notion of positive punishment is obviously unethical here, its efficacy is also likely to be zero, since the time lag between the unwanted event and the meting out of the punishment is too long.

On Page 99 the book does helpfully warn of the misuse of the aids. It includes a point saying they should not be used roughly, obviously [be visible?] nor should a horse be punished “*without justification.*” (emphasis added). Readers are left to ponder what on Earth could ‘justify’ positive punishment.

In the section on The Initial Training of the ridden horse there are many more references to the use of forceful, even violent methods for teaching a horse the manoeuvres needed for it to be ridden. There are further references to whipping and even punishing horses (use of positive punishment following an unwanted behaviour) on pages 82, 83, 96, 99

and 119. On pages 123 & 124 it recommends patting a horse to “reassure it” during training! While patting is commonly done to horses there is no evidence to show that it is reassuring; indeed it may well be aversive. Page 124 also has a reference to rewarding with ‘titbits’, but as with the use of punishment earlier cited, fails to state this needs to be done *immediately* following the desired behaviour, not as some ‘treat’ minutes later when the horse will have no association with the reward and what it did 5 minutes ago. On page 144, on the use of reward and punishment, the Manual says this:

“The following system of training uses rewards and punishments, but no force [?] to teach the acceptance of the aids and obedience to the rider. The amount of reward and punishment will vary according to the character of the horse.” The notion of a ‘reward’ is stretched to breaking point, since it relates largely to the cessation of aversive stimuli in negative reinforcement. The question of ‘character assessment’ of the horse (whatever we might construe this to be) is of course open to any amount of subjectivity, if not even prejudice.

While it does say persuasion is recommended as more effective than coercion, it fails to explain how persuasion should be done. There is very little about the use of positive reinforcement; and even then, these terms are never used. It goes on to say:

“The trainer must analyse the character of the horse and apply the appropriate discipline. ...The aim must be willing co-operation obtained by rational and tactful methods, but at the same time there must never be any doubt as to who is in command; if authority and respect are lost [how can they not be!] training stops.”

Jumping problems (page 2016) discusses the issue of a horse refusing to jump fences. It does say that the horse should not be jumping fences too high for it, and that issues of possible pain should be investigated. But again, the book cannot forgo ideas of ‘naughtiness’ in a horse, where again it recommends punishment:

“If the horse is doing it [refusing fences] out of mischief and is starting to do it frequently, he should be reprimanded once, and ridden strongly into fences.” This suggestion clearly contradicts the book’s earlier rejection of the use of force on page 144.

Indeed the above paragraphs summarises the book’s whole approach to the training of horses. This relies on the use of aversive methods, which horses have been subjected to since they were first used as working animals thousands of years ago. There is no application of the scientific principles of animal behaviour (which have been known for many decades). There are no scientific references to support any of the book’s recommended methods of training. Without this, readers’ understanding of words such as ‘discipline’ ‘punishment’ and even ‘reward’ can be interpreted however one wishes.

There is no mention of training without the use of a bit in the horse’s mouth; indeed it is seen as a requirement that the horse ‘submits’ to the bit and that this is the sole form of bridling to be used.

Since the main approach to training relies on the use of aversive stimuli, the prospects for any horse trained by these methods does not look good in terms of either its welfare or its likely relationship with people. It recalls ‘Do the Boys Hall’ but for horses. Indeed it would not be out of place were it written in Dickens’s time 160 years ago. Sadly, the book is available to anyone of any age including children and young riders starting out with riding. Those who accept the book’s methods, would be well on the road to a lifetime of interactions with horses based on outdated forceful methods for their training and use as ridden animals. The book’s fawning dedication merely to traditional methods, rather than use of objective, humane methods grounded in a sound understanding of animal behaviour is anachronistic and most regrettable. While this has serious implications for horse welfare, it also has similar implications for rider safety. The use of escalating aversive stimuli is likely to increase the risk of loss of stimulus control and so,

their safety. If this is equitation, then it is not compatible with horse welfare. Fortunately other books with a more humane approach are available. That said, a reading of this book explains how horses, probably most of them, are still commonly treated and trained, giving readers an understanding of the causes of so many avoidable and problematic issues in equestrianism and horse welfare today.

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