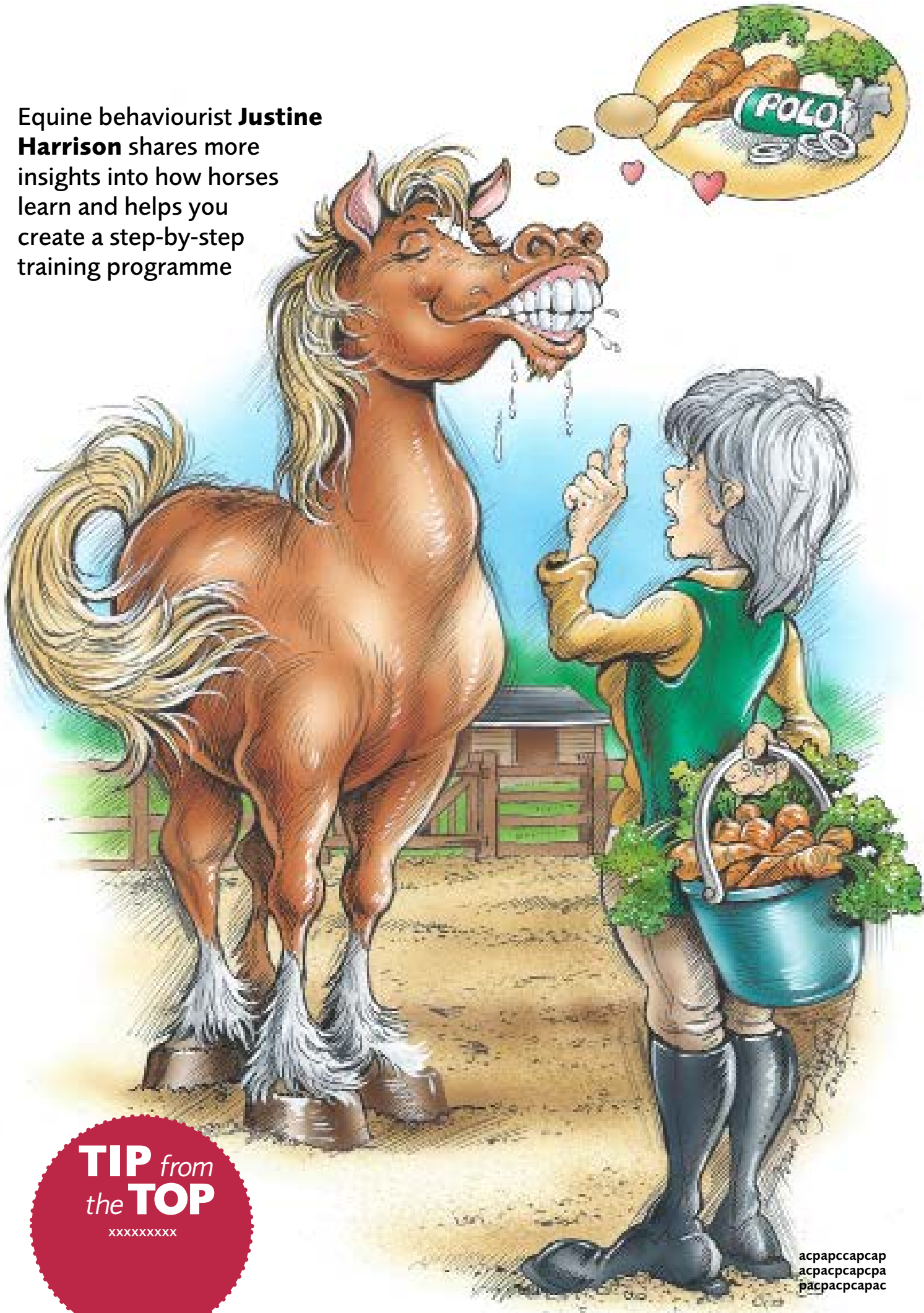


Equine behaviourist **Justine Harrison** shares more insights into how horses learn and helps you create a step-by-step training programme



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Positive thinking

There are so many equine training methods and techniques being promoted, it can be difficult to know what is the best route to take with a horse.

Last month, we looked at the science of how horses learn, to help you decide which methods are effective and ethical.

Here, we consider how horses are affected by the training methods that we use, and how this influences our relationship with them, their behaviour and performance.

The way a horse learns, behaves and performs will depend on how he is trained.

We have all seen horses that look anxious, frightened or uninterested during training, just

The dogs had paired the sight of the assistant with the unconscious physical reaction for preparing to eat.

He went on to research how the dogs made these associations and famously taught the dogs to salivate at the sound of a bell.

Horses learn by association in exactly the same way as Pavlov's dogs. For example, if a horse becomes excited at the sound of the feed bin being opened, he has learned that something good is on its way.

Over time, the horse has paired the sound with the arrival of his daily feed.

This is a very powerful process – associations are formed unconsciously and may be learned after only one event.

Horses can associate anything in their environment with a good or a bad experience and this will affect future behaviour.

An animal that has been forced to do something will have a very different attitude to work than one who has been rewarded and encouraged.

For example, if one day you chase your horse around the arena or smack them for refusing a jump, they could then associate the arena with that bad experience.

The next time you take them into the manège they may immediately become nervous and possibly anticipate the same thing happening again. They may nap, spook or even buck to escape the situation, even though you are no longer chasing or hitting them.

Using punishment or excessive pressure in training can potentially mean our horse associates the bad experience with everything that was involved – this could be the rider, an instructor, the arena, saddle or even a wheelbarrow nearby.

If your horse has ever gone to the back of the stable when you approached with your saddle, did you wonder why? ▶

“If a horse is frightened or reluctant to do what is being asked of him, something is going wrong with his learning”

as we will have seen those that are enthusiastic and motivated to learn.

So why is this? Horses are sensitive creatures and they can easily learn something after one or two attempts.

But if a horse is frightened or reluctant to do what is being asked of him, something is going wrong with his learning.

Just like us, a horse is affected by his environment and things he experiences.

If our boss tells us off at work, we may well dread going into the office the next day. It is possible that some training approaches can cause horses to feel the same way.

Classical conditioning

Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov is famous for his research into classical conditioning – the automatic and unconscious pairing of an event or stimulus with a reflex action or emotion.

Pavlov was studying the gastric function of dogs in the 1890s when by chance he noticed that the dogs started salivating when they saw the assistant which brought their food.



Horses may associate the rattle of feed bins with the imminent arrival of their dinner



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“Fear responses can be difficult to undo and will require time, patience and often professional help to resolve”

Think back to what happened when he was ridden previously and you may find the answer. As these are unconscious reactions, fear responses can be difficult to undo and will require time, patience and often professional help to resolve.

Positive associations

We can easily create good associations with our horses, and this will do much to improve our relationship with them.

It makes sense that if you do something your horse enjoys he will associate you with good things happening.

Perhaps take him for a walk in-hand to graze at a particularly good spot, or give him a daily scratch on his itchy spot.

In addition, the principles of classical conditioning can improve our training. Using positive reinforcement whenever possible will mean your horse will associate the training process with being rewarded.

We regularly teach our horses by associating actions or words with specific tasks. For example, saying 'good boy' each time your horse does something correctly to reinforce the message that he has done the right thing.

But if you also pair giving a food reward with 'good boy', then your horse will have the same positive feeling when they hear the phrase that they have when they eat the treat.

Now the sound of the phrase has become a reward in itself.

This can change your horse's attitude to training so that he learns faster and is more motivated. It is a great training tool and so simple to use.

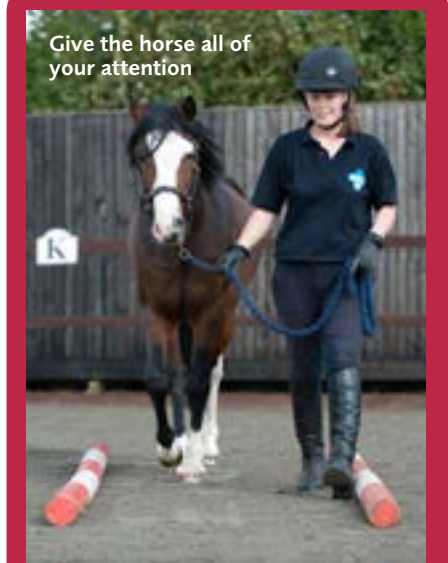
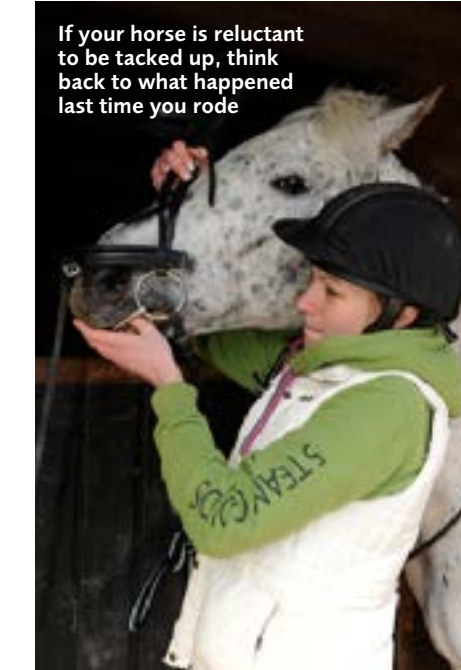
The appliance of science

Two methods of training were tested by a team of researchers at the University of Wales.

They compared techniques used on two groups of rescue ponies that had been subject to long-term cruelty or neglect.

One group of ponies was trained using positive reinforcement and given food rewards when they performed the correct behaviour.

The other ponies were trained using negative reinforcement (see 'Training insights', Spring issue) and they learned to avoid pressure from a riding whip. ▶



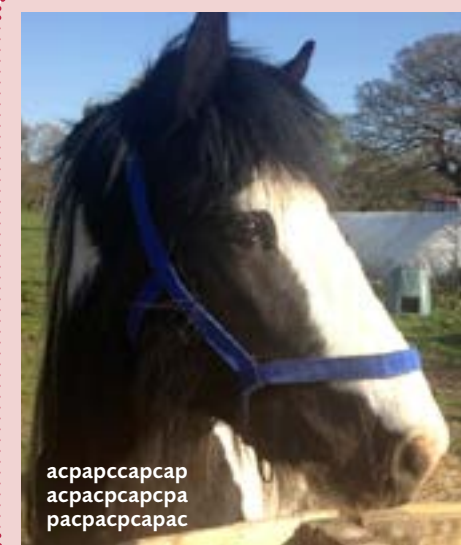
THE GOLDEN RULES OF TRAINING

To ensure a successful training session with your horse by following these rules:

- Ensure you are in a safe environment before you start.
- Make sure the horse is relaxed in the training environment
- Whenever possible, have a steady, well-behaved equine friend to keep your horse company.
- Think about what you are training all the time – have you just punished or reinforced a negative behaviour without realising?
- Use positive reinforcement whenever possible – your horse will learn faster, be more motivated and it will improve your relationship.
- Have your horse's attention and concentrate fully on him during the session.
- Be patient – horses can take time to respond to what is being asked.
- Don't use excessive pressure or your horse will have bad associations with you and training.
- Be clear, consistent and ensure your timing is good.
- Keep sessions short.
- Try not to make the training all hard work and aim for you and your horse to have fun.



CASE STUDY



“WILLIS WENT FROM FEARING TO LOVING PEOPLE”

Justine was called out to help Willis, a three-year-old feral and unhandled stallion who had lived on his own in a field since he was eight months old.

The youngster had been frightened by an earlier attempt to put a headcollar on him and was fearful and aggressive towards people.

“Willis needed to be castrated and moved from his field urgently, so I created a programme that would change how he felt towards people by creating more positive associations,” says Justine.

“I paired saying 'good boy' with him eating carrots – first put on the ground, then fed by hand when he was confident enough to come closer to me.

“Gradually, over a couple of training sessions he let me stroke his shoulder, then his neck and face.

“As soon as he experienced a good scratch in his mane and on his withers, Willis's demeanour totally changed and he loved coming over to people.

“He was retrained to wear a headcollar using rewards, which changed his previous bad associations. In fact, within a very short time he was keen to put his nose in the headcollar himself.

“Willis went on to be successfully castrated, then was loaded up and taken to be reunited with his dam, where he lives now. He is now a much happier pony.”

Horse world Influencing behaviour

Initially, the ponies were touched lightly with the whip and the pressure was increased until they performed the task correctly.

The ponies were taught to perform tasks such as standing to be groomed, being led in-hand, walking over obstacles and loading in a trailer.

The research team found the ponies that had been given food rewards were more motivated than those that were trained using negative reinforcement.

They positively trained ponies were keen to enter the arena for schooling sessions, performed more exploratory behaviours, came closer to new objects and their handlers and initiated more contact with the people working with them.

These ponies were also more likely to come to their stable door.

This indicates that those trained with positive reinforcement were more willing to try and were bolder and less fearful than the negative reinforcement group.

The ponies trained with food rewards had good associations with both the training and the handlers involved, and so were more willing to interact and be trained. ■

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Train your horse the right way and he will want to try for you

CREATE A STEP-BY-STEP TRAINING PLAN

Teaching a new task can be quite daunting, for both trainer and horse.

Breaking training down into small and achievable steps is the most effective way to teach. This process is called shaping, and you can make your own shaping programme for whatever you'd like to train.

To create your plan, have step one as your starting point – what the horse can do now – and your final step will be the finished skill or required behaviour.

Then, create as many small steps in between the two points as you can, adding a small level of difficulty at every stage.

The key is to make each step as clear and simple as possible and train only one thing at

a time. If you are training your horse to pick up his foot, for example, don't expect him to immediately learn to pick his foot up higher and for a longer period of time.

First, teach him to pick up his foot. Once he can do this happily, in another session ask him to lift it a little higher, and in a further session to hold it up for a little longer.

Training two criteria at the same time will be confusing for him.

Each training session should be no longer than five to seven minutes – short periods repeated often will achieve the best results.

Always go back a few steps when you start each session to make sure your horse remembers what was taught previously.

If you aren't making good progress, then the steps may be too difficult – break them down further and don't move on until your horse can consistently perform something well.

And, of course, always end on a good note!

Putting it into practice

This is an example of how to train a horse that won't stand still to halt and wait while the owner walks five steps away:-

Step one: The horse won't stand still at all.

Step two: He stands calmly with the trainer for five seconds. If he achieves this, say 'good' and reward him immediately. However, if he can't manage it, aim for two seconds instead. Say 'good' and reward him immediately if he does what you ask.

Once he is consistently standing for five seconds at a time, add a cue when you ask for the behaviour, such as saying 'stand'.

Step three: The horse stands still, beside the trainer, for 10 seconds. Say 'good' and reward him. If he tries to move, go back a step.

Step four: To stand calmly with the trainer for 15 seconds.

Increase the time the horse is required to stand still at 10 seconds increments, up to two minutes. When he can stand calmly next to you for 30 seconds, up the challenge by stepping back, forward and to the side.. Every time the horse is successful, say "good" and immediately give him a reward.

Step five: To stand calmly while trainer takes one step backwards.

Step six: To stand while the trainer takes one step sideways to the right.

Step seven: To stand still while the trainer takes one step to the left.

Step eight: To stand while the trainer takes two steps backwards.

Step nine: To stand while the trainer takes one step backwards.

Continue until the horse consistently stands calmly while the trainer takes five steps backwards.

If the horse achieves what you ask, reward him immediately

