



Rewarding the Slightest Effort and Smallest Try

by Scott Jaycox

Renown horseman Ray Hunt (Aug. 31, 1929 – March 12, 2009) would repeat over and over in his clinics, “Recognize the smallest change, the slightest try — and reward it!” Sounds clear enough, so how do we do it?

THE BREAK DOWN

Recognizing: Recognizing is the first part of the equation. What we’re wanting to recognize is any effort, any try, any thought and any attempt by the horse to do as we have asked. This is very important because of part two of the equation — timing.

Timing: As one clinician put it, “Reward the horse’s thought of doing it.” Timing of the release — the activity taking place at the time of release — is what the horse learns and wants you to repeat so that he can get the release of pressure.

Pressure: Anything you would ask or do with your horse, i.e. leading, standing still, lifting their hoof, turning, lowering their head, stepping forward, being happy and even petting can be pressure. Recognize that pressure can be, and often is, everything. So how do we release it? By rewarding.

Rewarding: Rewarding is reducing or releasing pressure, sometimes accomplished by change of energy, reduction of movement, yielding to or moving away from the horse, or even turning away from the horse.

Time to think: Many trainers have suggested waiting twice as long as it took to get a task accomplished. I feel that the better the horse responded — the better my timing of releasing the pressure — the longer I allow the horse to think about it.

EXAMPLES OF HOW AND WHEN TO RELEASE PRESSURE/REWARD BEHAVIOR

- Your horse goes when you ask: At the precise moment your horse goes when you ask, move from the asking position to a relaxed or neutral position. People often make the mistake of increasing pressure when their horse does what they asked, as if to keep his momentum going. But this has the opposite effect — the horse will become more uncomfortable and will begin looking for another answer in search of the release of pressure, such as fleeing.

- Your horse stands still as you approach to mount: To reward him for standing still, stop the mounting process and turn/move away from the horse. This reinforces/rewards the horse for standing still. In this way, you build trust with the horse. It says to the

horse, “Each time I approach you, you will not be harmed — you have nothing to fear. You can trust me.”

USING THE RELEASE OF PRESSURE TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

Communicating with horses is not a simple mechanical procedure: “do this, get that.” Horses think, feel and react. Every thing is constantly changing. To be effective in communicating with horses, it is necessary to recognize these changes and adjust accordingly.

One of the fastest ways to improve your



communication with your horse is to learn to read your horse’s expressions. Read the whole horse. The signs that your horse is relaxed are the slow closure of the eyes, lowering of the head, sighing, licking the lips, chewing, and cocking a hind leg. If you acknowledge these signs of relaxation by releasing pressure (stepping away or turning your shoulder to him in a repeated approach-retreat manner), he will, in most cases, become much more communicative.

Try this as you’re petting your horse. Continue petting until you observe one of the signs of relaxation, then quickly stop petting, wait a few seconds, then start petting again. You should notice him relaxing sooner and sooner. As an end result of this exercise, every time you touch the horse, he should change from a once pressure moment to now a cue to relax.

EXAMPLES OF WHEN NOT TO RELEASE PRESSURE/REWARD BEHAVIOR

As easy as it is to reward good and positive behavior, we can inadvertently reward bad behavior as well. As an example: You have your horse on a lead rope or bridle. As you turn toward your horse to approach, he starts to backup. You stop your approach,

thinking that if you stop, maybe the horse will stop. The truth is you had just rewarded the horse by releasing pressure (stopping). Instead of stopping or hesitating, you could have continued to approach until he stopped on his own, and then released pressure by turning away.

Another example, one that I see all the time: You’re riding your horse and you ask for a trot. Some people squeeze and then release their leg pressure before the trot happened. Then they try again, even harder this time, kicking or nudging. The problem is this — because timing matters, a quick squeeze/kick is more often confusing to a horse because a release of pressure followed the sharp request. Because the horse learns from the release of pressure, he is thinking, “Okay, I’ll keep doing what I’m doing. I’ll keep walking rather than trotting.”

WATCH FOR MINISCULE MOVEMENT AND REWARD IT

Recognizing and rewarding *the smallest effort and the slightest try* means that we have to develop the eyes of a hawk and the clarity of a clairvoyant when it comes to being effective communicators with horses. I would like to emphasize that this is where the biggest gains and changes can take place with your horse.

If, for example, you get your horse to move, but his attitude is bad, keep the pressure on by continuing to ask until his attitude improves, then release the pressure. By doing this, he will learn that his improved attitude will cause YOU to release the pressure. Another example: If you ask your horse to back up and he does so with his ears pinned back, keep moving him back until his ears relax, then stop/release the pressure. You can change your horse’s attitude.

Once you begin to use this type of training, it becomes sort of a game. Try it while leading a horse through a gate; moving his hips away; asking him to move his front end over; backing four to five steps; moving over in the other direction. Load him through a stall door from either side; teach him to lower his head on command before clipping or bridling/unbridling.

It is a never-ending list of possibilities. It’s like mental calisthenics to supple and strengthen a horse’s mind. How soft, how supple, how responsive can the horse become? That is entirely up to you. Try it! You will like it! ■