

Injection Training Outline and Shaping Plan Example

Horse's name: Horace

Date: 03.08.24

Unwanted behaviour: Anxious for injections

Unwanted behaviour description: Horace becomes tense in his face and body. He often moves away when the vet approaches with a needle. He may raise his head up and become more fidgety and less responsive to cues given via the head collar.

Desired behaviour: For Horace to stand calmly while the injection is given.

Vet check: Before starting training, it is essential to ensure your horse is free of pain where possible and to be aware of any underlying illnesses, discomfort or biomechanical issues. This allows you to develop a training plan that meets the horse's needs and interprets their behaviour accurately. If the horse is older or has ongoing pain or injuries, it's best to do simple and gentle training exercises in short sessions. It's always better to stop and reassess the situation if your horse shows any signs of tension, stress or pain.

Environmental set up:

When training we want to set the environment up in a way that supports our own and the horse's behaviour, giving us both the best opportunity to be successful. Therefore, training in a quiet, calm, familiar environment, free of clutter or dangerous objects is essential. Also having a friendly, calm horse nearby helps to relieve stress. Getting the perfect environment is often a challenge, but even a small adjustment is better than nothing and can make a huge difference in the progress and outcome of training. So, focus on what you can do rather than what you can't!

If Horace is very uncomfortable with having a syringe anywhere near him to begin with you can use an alternative object such as a pen or small stick to practice and build his confidence.

Training outline:

Classical conditioning can be used to change Horace's anxious emotional response to a calmer one when an injection is presented in the environment. This can be achieved by pairing the presentation of the injection with something desirable such as food (otherwise known as "snack bar open, snack bar closed").

Positive reinforcement (operant conditioning) can also be used to change Horace's behaviour to a calmer, more desirable response. This can be achieved through playing a targeting game with the syringe. Horace can learn to touch his neck to the syringe to gain a reward. This will improve his motivation to receive the injection while also giving him more choice and control over what happens when an injection is given. As we seek to work *with* Horace and teach him to trust our

actions by being constant and predictable in our actions, this helps to improve welfare, safety and the human-horse bond.

Both operant and classical conditioning are intertwined in training, but can be used specifically depending on how Horace reacts. Typically positive reinforcement through clicker training is the most effective for producing a specific and desired behaviour, but it's important to be aware of all the 'tools' and training options available to get the best outcome. The injection should also be removed immediately (negative reinforcement) once Horace shows the correct behaviour as this teaches him that he can have control over the injection for performing a behaviour.

Behavioral indicators/Threshold: During training we must always ensure the horse is kept under their threshold (the scale used to indicate arousal and stress levels) while seeking to achieve optimal levels of arousal for learning and performance. This can be assessed through observing your horse, but will vary for each individual. It's therefore necessary to spend time getting to know your horse, their triggers and reactions to certain situations, what they like and where they feel safe and comfortable. As part of this, it's essential to be aware of behavioral signs of stress or tension to ensure the horse is engaged and motivated for training without being frustrated, confused, or tense.

If the horse shows any unwanted behaviours, it's important to stop what we are doing immediately and ask the horse for a calmer state. It's ok to take a step back and reassess your training plan or practices as you go along. Often things won't go as planned and it's a strength to be aware of both your emotional state and your horse's while training. So don't view this as a failure, but rather an opportunity to learn and develop together. We can learn as much from our horses (or probably even more) as we have to teach them! Training goals are like individual journeys that are only achieved when we work with the horse and take time to understand them.

Reinforcement type: Scratching withers, low molasses chaff, carrot pieces, apple pieces, balancer pellets, lickit.

Shaping Plan:

Starting Behaviour: Horace to stand calmly.

- Have syringe (or syringe substitute such as a pen) in Horace's environment at a distance
- Have syringe within 2 meters of Horace
- Have the syringe within 1 meter of Horace
- Allow Horace to sniff syringe
- Touch neck with your hand while holding syringe
- Touch syringe to neck
- Touch syringe to neck and pinch skin gently
- Touch syringe to neck and pinch skin briefly as if giving an injection
- Practice with vet giving syringe

Final Behaviour: Horace to stand calmly while the injection is given.