

HOOFBEATS

EDITED BY HEIDI YOUNG, ENTRIES FROM CLUB MEMBERS ...

Membership forms and previous newsletters and articles and an expanded calendar are all on our website at: www.gaitedhorseclub.com

Facebook: Search for "SCGHC" or click <https://www.facebook.com/groups/636027703108388/> and request to be added. Here, club members can post pictures or share quickly and easily. This is a PRIVATE group, for members only. We have a public page as well, where anyone interested can see postings: "Southern Comfort Gaited Horse Club Public Group"

Lifelight Insurance: Club members get a discounted rate of \$10 off the \$60/year rate for a family. We all renew together in the early summer for a policy date of July 1. www.lifelight.org

2017 and Beyond Calendar of Events

SUNDAY 4 pm December 17th	Christmas party at Weber's in Star: 12221 W. Lanktree Gulch Rd.
January	NO Club meeting
February 12	Club meeting at Anne Martin's house in Nampa

Christmas party information

Please join us in celebrating this year at the lovely home of Nick and Catherine Weber. The club is providing TENDERLOIN and a HAM for our main dishes. Use our on-line sign up to pick a potluck item to bring (one item per person (so a couple brings two items). If you have any trouble, email me. <http://www.signupgenius.com/go/409084aa4ae2da5f94-2017> And yes you can bring a guest, its just \$10 for them to attend.

GIFT EXCHANGE: \$20 value, bring one, get one. This is a fun part of our celebration with standard "stealing" rules in place (item can be stolen only twice).

CRAZY CHRISTMAS OUTFIT: got an ugly sweater, a crazy outfit? Go for it! Winner gets a gift certificate to D&B Supply!

RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP: Please renew ahead of time or bring your check and release forms to the party (available on our website).

OTHER INFO: This time of year we look for next year's officers. Lois is heading up the committee – meaning she'll be in touch. Elections for the four officer positions will be held in January via email with RENEWED MEMBERS. Dues are \$30 single, \$40 family.

Good or Bad Learning? ‘Same Diff’ to Your Horse

Evidence-Based Horsemanship is a cowboy-scientist collaboration by Dr. Stephen Peters and Martin Black.

By Maddy Butcher

A horse's learning is often about relief from or release of pressure, also considered negative reinforcement. From a brain chemistry standpoint, this feedback is linked to the release of a chemical or neurotransmitter called dopamine. In barnyard terms, we can think of dopamine release as tied to the relief of pressure. In other words, horses want comfort and relief from pressure. They will seek out the dopamine release because, quite simply, it feels good to them.

If you're sensitive, observant, patient, and able, you can take advantage of that specific proclivity. You can make your riding cues more and more subtle. You can create a refined, learning machine in your horse. At that point, your horse will perform incredible moves while you sit in the saddle making near-invisible adjustments. And the crowd will roar.

But first, it's crucial to better understand the horse's learning process. For starters, from the horse's perspective, there is no difference between good and bad learning.

We're not talking flying lead changes or piaffes here. Let's take the much beloved task of trailer loading as an example. The horse may load into a trailer and find a release of pressure as the trailer is closed up and he finds hay to eat. There may be a dopamine release and a learning moment here. Alternatively, the horse may pull back, get away from its owner, find relief of pressure, and get a dopamine release. The "learning moment" might be more reinforced if he gets to graze.

Horses don't discriminate between these good and bad learning moments. They will search for the dopamine release regardless of how humans interpret their actions.

Another aspect of learning related to dopamine release is a horse's comfort level. A horse won't learn much if he's scared or really uncomfortable. Nor will the lesson hit home if he's bored or over-drilled. It's when you find a balance between these two ends of comfort that the best learning occurs.

As Martin Black writes: *"...When we get the balance just right, the horse can operate at a place where he is interested but not worried. The more he experiences operating in this place, the more he looks for this place because it feels good to him."*

When Being Negative is a Good Thing

by Maddy Butcher



When it comes to working with horses, our very humanness can get us in trouble. Take our use of language: Do you consider “negative” to be bad and “positive” to be good? When working with horses, the opposite is often true.

I’m talking about negative and positive reinforcement, two avenues of learning that stem from operant conditioning, an umbrella theory popularized by B. F. Skinner. The American researcher was preceded by the Russian physiologist, Ivan Pavlov, and others.

Briefly, negative reinforcement is applying a negative stimulus until the subject acts or moves in the requested manner. Then, the stimulus is removed. “Pressure and release” is an example of negative reinforcement.

Positive reinforcement is rewarding a subject when it acts or moves in the requested manner. Clicker training and training with treats are examples of positive reinforcement.

Why is negative reinforcement appropriate and positive reinforcement less so? Watch horses with horses. Watch almost any prey animal with any predator. In both instances, negative reinforcement is what you see.

Horses understand negative reinforcement and they understand the related idea of increased pressure, which Ray Hunt described as: *“Be as soft as possible and as firm as necessary.”*

Example: You’re a new horse in a herd. You approach the alpha mare. She pins her ears. You don’t move away. She pins her ears, purses her muzzle, and turns her head to you. You still don’t move. She spins and double barrels you. You move away and the alpha mare takes away the pressure.

The beauty of negative reinforcement is that the stimulus gets smaller and smaller as the horse learns what is being asked. The alpha mare will likely not need to double barrel the new horse again. A good ear pinning will yield a sufficient response. The new horse understands what comes after an ear pinning and will act to avoid that event.

It should be noted that many horse folks never see indications of negative reinforcement (between horses or between horse and rider) until it becomes glaringly obvious.

“When it comes to negative reinforcement, there’s escape and avoidance,” said clinician Warwick Schiller. *“Horses use mostly avoidance, but most people see only escape.”*

Tiny shifts in leg, seat, and hand position can all be quickly and accurately interpreted by the horse as pressures. When the horse quietly and willingly reacts, it feels release. “Negative” is not bad or cruel or mean here. It’s natural.

Here’s another red flag on being human: We tend to think in linear terms. Schools of thoughts and training models are all linear concepts. You do A and your result will be B. But horse work is more like weather. It’s not linear or necessarily predictable. It relies on the ability to be in the moment, to adjust to different conditions and different horses, and to be able to think outside any scholarly box.