

# Teach Your Horse to Paint

By Cheryl Ward © 2009

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Teaching your horse to paint is not so much about teaching your horse to wield a brush as much as it is understanding pressure-free, attraction-based training. These methods are brought to you in part by two very difficult horses that didn't respond well to traditional pressure/release methods.

In my quest to find a way to reach them without activating their defense mechanisms, I found a way without force or pressure. They suddenly became relaxed, curious and very eager to participate. I then practiced these methods on an attention-deficit Paso Fino mare and a young, happy-go-lucky, Clydesdale gelding. The results were the same—all four horses learned to paint and I learned the power of motivating without pressure.

## The Physiology and Psychology Behind the Brush

I've had folks tell me that it doesn't seem very natural for a horse to paint. My reply is that it's probably one of the most natural things for a horse to do. By manipulating an object in its mouth, it emulates many of the skills it would be using at liberty in search of food.

I first began training *without* food. When I observed the amazing things horses would do naturally in search of food, it made me wonder if I could inspire the same amazing things if I used food as a reward.

The training dynamics immediately changed. I no longer needed to use force or pressure-and-release to get the behavior. I also noticed there was no ongoing need to establish my dominance or passive leadership. Once the horse understood that something it did willingly at liberty like digging up a root earned it something it wanted, I suddenly had a 1,000 pound lump of putty in my hands.

I've found that teaching horses using food as a reward, with the rules surrounding food that horses establish amongst themselves, the use of food becomes much larger than a simple reward or motivator. It establishes you as a provider, not a predator.

It seems when I become the provider, and the horse understands how I provide, the need to establish dominance through pressure/release diminishes. Instead of a horse challenging me to see who's in charge, I have horses with ears and eyes fixed on me. I think the reason is simple. They know that I know what's important to them, and they listen to me because I first listened to them by honoring what they want.

## What a Horse Wants

In my humble observation, to be a horse means having a seriously long digestive tract that needs continual filling of small amounts of food. This keeps things moving. If things don't move, the horse knows it's in for something unpleasant, usually pain or colic or worse.

I think the first thing horses enjoy when a human trains with food is that the human is meeting the horses' first and most crucial biological need—to eat small amounts of food all the time. Because I train this way, I'm able to keep my horses' attention much better than if I train without food. The reason is simple. If the horse were alone grazing in the field without me, what would it be doing? It would be eating. So when my horse is with me and he gets praise, attention, and food, I instantly become more attractive for the horse to be with me than to be alone. In my horse's mind, I become the best thing around. I get the feeling he doesn't want to be anywhere else except with me.

Using food seems to say to the horse, "I know what you need and I hear you." The main point I want to stress is that once this understanding is established, I create a situation where *the horse works for food*, just like it would in the wild. I no longer dole out food in my hand or hand him food in a bucket. To me that's unnatural. Even at feeding time, my horses have to do something before they get their food. Just like they'd have to if no human were present to feed them.

Consider, for example, horses at liberty grazing in a big field. The grass does not detach by itself and fly into the horse's open mouth. There is work involved for the horse. They walk towards the grass. They take the grass in their teeth. They shake the grass to free it from excess sand. Then they eat it. Before consuming the tasty morsel, there were three purposeful activities: walking, grasping, and shaking.

I simply ask the same of my horses before giving them any food. I do this all the time, every time they get any food. I also use a sound marker such as a click with my tongue, a hand held clicker or the word 'good' to mark the exact moment when the horse has performed the activity I wanted. The sound marker says to the horse, "Right on. You did what I asked. Now you get something really important to you—three alfalfa pellets." All my horses very quickly understood this dynamic. Some action earns them a click, which means something they like is on the way.

The reward for horses at liberty who are constantly moving in search of grass is getting to eat the grass. For the horse being trained with food, the reward for some movement or behavior I've asked of them is getting to eat a few grass pellets.

I've been studying my herd of four who are turned out on pasture 24/7 to see exactly what they do during the day. From almost any window in our house, I can see what's happening in the pasture at any time. In contrast, dogs and cats have the advantage of living in our houses, often sleeping in our beds. It's very easy to observe, minute-by-minute, the behavior of our dogs and cats. I felt this close observation was really important to help me observe what happens with my small herd of domestic horses at liberty.

What I see with my herd is that a large part of their day is spent moving *towards what they want*. A very small part of the day is spent *moving away* from pressure or something irritating. Most of the time I see them moving towards grass, shade, water, and companionship. The times when I see them moving away from what they don't want usually takes place during a squabble over some resource that another horse is concerned about keeping. Predominately it seems horses are very comfortable moving towards, or being attracted to, something that feels good.

I believe this starts at Day One when its gangly little legs hit the ground running. The foal immediately seeks Mama. It's programmed that its mother is the source of all good things—warmth, security and

food. She quickly becomes a target for the foal to move towards. The foal is instantly reinforced when it reaches her with all the things it needs.

Not only is Mama a target, but the foal is attracted to the target. Rarely is it pressured toward the target. I think the first lesson a horse learns is to move toward what it wants. Later, it learns to move away from what it doesn't want.

Using this dynamic, I've tried to develop and keep working on ways to create a situation where a horse is attracted into a behavior rather than pressured. I personally don't enjoy being pressured to do anything. With pressure I often find myself feeling tense, bitter and filled with avoidance. I've noticed the same characteristics in horses that are subject to excessive pressure with no clear reward. Often the release is not a meaningful enough reward. I've found that one of the best ways to use their innate drive to move toward what they want is to create a target.

## **Bull's Eye**

In my experience teaching a horse to target an object has been one of the most practical things I've taught my horses to do. It was also the easiest, I think, because they are innate targeters. From day one Mama is a target. As the foal matures, the herd eventually replaces her as something to target. All the things that I routinely would use pressure to achieve, I now accomplish by simply asking the horse to follow a target. I often use a target stick, but as my horses progress, they can target my hand or anything else that I establish as a target.

What I've noticed is that horses regularly target objects with both their mouth and hooves. My dear Paso Fino Romeo can dig up a root hidden six inches deep with the dexterity of one of my terriers. The act of digging earns him something that feels good. With each strike of his hoof, I believe he's targeting the root.

I've also noticed the horses taking a fallen branch covered with moss in their teeth only to drag it along the ground or fence line to loosen the moss. Sometimes they'll even use their hooves to hold the branch in place for more leverage as they pull the moss with their teeth. In the first example they've actually created a double target. The branch itself is a target, but then they target the branch to the fence or ground, all for the purpose of a food reward.

In the second example, where they hold the branch with their hoof, they're targeting with both their mouth and hooves. This realization has been most important for understanding the dynamics of teaching a horse to paint—to create a situation where the horse understands the concept of targets and then can target a target. (Say that quickly five times.)

The psychology behind teaching a horse to paint, I believe, uses the horses' innate desire and ability to manipulate objects in their mouths and with their hooves. The physiology behind this resonates with their biological need for frequent amounts of food all the time. When I combine these two aspects, I believe it amounts to training by attraction, allowing the horse to move towards something that feels good without having first been poked or prodded or otherwise pressured into the behavior. When I first train the behavior by attraction, it makes it very palatable for the horse to learn that same behavior later, with pressure if it's needed.

## **Power Play**

I'm middle aged, barely over 5 feet tall, not much over a hundred pounds and I have a quiet personality. I've never been a candidate to assert my dominance over much of anything. When using targeting and food rewards with clear guidelines as to how food is received, it seems the dominance issues disappear.

In my experience horses vie for dominance when they feel threatened or when they're not certain who is in charge. This stems from wondering if their needs will get met and if they'll be safe. By training with attraction and food rewards, it seems the horse instantly feels safe. Its important, basic need is met. When I clearly mark the moment in the horse's mind identifying the behavior that I want, it makes the horse feel that I have heard, seen it and validated it with something very important—food. The horse then looks to me as the provider and has no need to challenge me because I appeal to their logic and meet its needs.

In my experience, working with my horses with attraction makes me instantly popular. I never have to go catch my horse because the moment they hear me or see me, they know the fun is about to begin. I ask them to do things they enjoy doing, and they receive meaningful rewards and positive attention. What is more meaningful to a horse than the substance that keeps them alive and free from pain?

I think food as a reward is important to a horse. I think it also serves to enrich their environment and makes them feel useful. For me, I've enjoyed the ability to clearly communicate with my horses in a way we both enjoy.

On a side note, I don't always train with food. When I use food as a reward, it's always paired with a click, the sound I use to let them know food is coming. When I do not use food, I do not click, instead I'll say "Good." My horses know that the word "good" means they did what I asked and no food is coming, but they receive praise in the form of rest, or a soft scratch on an itchy spot. They still receive a reward, just not food. When I use pressure/release techniques, I always make sure the release is either highlighted with a click-and-food or "good" and some other non-food motivator.

In essence this type of training is not about the food, it's about understanding positive motivation and making the horse feel good, without making it first feel irritated or pressured into a behavior. I've found that it creates a "What good thing is going to happen to me next?" attitude in my horses.

## **Getting Started**

The techniques I use have their basis in Operant Conditioning, also commonly known as Clicker Training or Positive Reinforcement training. Since there are many wonderful books written on this topic I will leave a deeper discussion about the details to the experts. Until I have a more scientific understanding of why it works so well, I'll stick to what I've found works for me, and it is this:

**Create a situation where the horse moves towards  
what it wants, rather than away  
from what it doesn't want.**

How does this apply to teaching a horse to paint? I believe the secret is to keep in our minds the question, “How can I get my horse to do what I want without pressure?” Or, to put it another way, “How can I attract my horse into the behavior?” Often you’ll hear trainers say, “Make the right thing easy and the wrong thing difficult.” I say make the right thing so attractive and clear that it never occurs to the horse to do the wrong thing.

With this in mind, you’ll quickly find that the horse already knows how to paint. It is quite adept at picking things up and manipulating objects. Your job is then to put those behaviors on cue and perform them in a safe and orderly fashion.

There are four steps that put it all together.

## **The Four Steps**

Step 1 - Getting your horse’s attention

Step 2 - Getting your horse’s attention on the object

Step 3 - Ground manners (targeting feet to one spot, side-pass, back up and stay)

Step 4 - Manipulating the object

### **Step 1 - Getting Your Horse’s Attention**

*Yoo-Hoo!*

This very important first step usually begins with the horse and handler on opposite sides of a fence, round pen or stall with a hanging bucket that’s within reach for dropping treats. I call the horse over. Every time the horse looks at me, I click or say good and I drop a treat in the bucket, loudly enough so there’s no mistaking that food has arrived. The ‘treats’ are usually a few alfalfa pellets, a teaspoon of grain or something exciting enough that the horse is interested, but not so much of it that it gets distracted eating it. I try to give the equivalent of what they’d gather from a few strands of grass grazing at liberty. I keep the treats in a fanny pack strapped to my waist, with the pouch usually to the side or on my back so the horse can’t easily see where the food is coming from.

I click and drop the food when the horse looks at me. I do this enough times until the horse can’t take its eyes off of me. If there are no food aggression issues, I begin to dispense the treats from my hand, outstretched, far away from my body—every time, no exceptions. The horse needs to know the treats come from my outstretched hand, not anywhere near my body.

If there are food aggression issues, it’s usually because the horse is confused as to how to get food and has found by past experience that force brings food (biting or mugging its handler). I’ve found once the horse learns that food only appears upon hearing a click, the food aggression disappears because the

horse seems to clearly understand how it can get what it wants. I've found they seem to relax and enjoy the game.

If there is confusion, I'll spend a little more time making certain that the horse knows that some behavior, like looking at me, earns a click and click means a treat. Soon the horse begins thinking about what it did to earn the click and begins to repeat the behavior, rather than using force to get what it wants.

## **Step 2 - Getting Your Horse's Attention on an Object**

### *The Magic of Object Training*

I then move on to introducing an object such as a supplement bucket lid, a ball—something different in its world that would peak its attention. I'll present the object over the fence, panel, stall door etc. I click when the horse first looks at the object. This teaches the horse to be able to change focus. First I click for looking at me, then I click for looking at the object. Once the horse is consistently looking at the object, I withhold the click until it touches the object. Once the horse knows the game of touch the object, I assign the verbal cue, "Touch." I move onto either ground manners or manipulating the object.

If the horse has decent ground manners and is respectful of my space, I'll start offering the horse a chance to play with the object. If not, I'll secure the object, such as a ball or supplement lid, on the end of crop or stick at least 18in. long. I teach the horse to target the object as it first learned with the verbal cue "touch." I find this is a great way to get ground manners fast.

Instead of shanking a horse to make it hold still, for instance, I find that if its attention is on the object, it will be holding still. I use the target to teach pressure-free ways to walk forward, back up, move over and head-down. The power of targeting a horse into a behavior is, I believe, no less than a magical way to begin attraction-based training. It creates a powerful reason for your horse to really want to be with you.

## **Step 3 - Ground Manners**

### *My Space, Your Space*

The ground manners I focus on are stand and stay. I do this with a 20x20x1 in. cement block. It's raised slightly yet is a large enough target for the horses to plant their front feet on. I teach the horse to target their feet to the block. After a while the horse completely understands, "My feet are on the block and this is my spot." This behavior has helped me immensely with any kind of medical procedure or teaching to stand at the mounting block. I even sat on my young horse's back the very first time while he was unhaltered and unrestrained. I knew he'd stay with his feet planted on his block. He had absolutely no reason to walk away. All my horses are groomed and tacked up, sometimes all four at the same time, unhaltered because they know "stay."

Teaching stay is important if you decide to paint with your horse at an easel. I'm frequently on my knees reaching for dropped brushes. I want to know my horse will stay in his space. Once the horse is accustomed to keeping two front hooves on its target, I teach it to move its hind legs over. I then teach

it to move its shoulders over. I do all of this through targeting with my target stick. I never have to use pressure to teach the horse to move.

To teach the horse to move shoulders over, without pressure, I simply stand on the side opposite of where I want the horse to move and point the target stick in the direction I want the horse to go. As the horse begins to move I'll offer a verbal cue "Shoulders Over." After the horse understands the cue "shoulders over," I then begin placing my hand on its shoulder. My hand resting on its shoulder becomes paired with the verbal cue.

The hand is not pressure, it's a cue, more like the use of the DeafBlind alphabet for those whose vision no longer allows them to see sign language, so they have to "feel" sign language manually on their hand. I could simply push/force/use pressure to make the horse move its shoulders, but I've found that when the horse is invited by targeting to move they seem more eager. Then when the horse feels the touch to move over, it moves because it knows my alphabet, not because it was pressured.

To get hips over without pressure, I use the target stick to target the horse forward and towards me as I step back. The moment the hips move I say, "Hips over" and I click/treat. Eventually the horse responds with the verbal cue or when I step back. Sometimes I'll use pointing towards the hips as a cue.

I then put the two cues of 'shoulders over' and 'hips over' together, and I get a lovely side pass. This helps the horse reposition its body at the easel without moving forward or backwards.

I also use the target stick to teach 'back.' Instead of pressure on the lead, nose or chest, I place the target stick in such a way that the horse has to back up to touch it. After it understands the concept, and the verbal cue, I then establish a touch cue, usually it's my hand placed on their chest. I also teach through targeting that pressure on the nose band of the halter also means "back."

Targeting backwards has been an amazing tool for teaching horses pressure-free loading, especially into head-to-head horse trailers where they have to back into their stalls. They simply target the stick backwards. Often this is a relief to horses that may feel claustrophobic or threatened by pressure on their nose.

I've found that teaching a horse to target is one of the most user-friendly ways to train a horse. Pointing the target where you want the horse to go—or where you want it to place its head, or to stand—has replaced any of the fancy footwork, waving of arms or strategic eye contact. In the past, I was told that unless I knew where to stand or where to position my body, I'd never have control of my horse. With my target stick, now I just point and click.

## **Step 4 - Manipulating an Object**

### *Play Ball*

If I feel the horse and I have a sufficient vocabulary of common words and gestures to converse, then I start by teaching them to manipulate objects. This is my favorite part as you often get to see the horse open up and start to play. Most horses are not allowed to use their mouth or their hooves, and when

encouraged to do so in a safe and structured environment and with rules as to how to do so, it's amazing what they'll offer.

When I first started teaching Romeo to roll a ball around with his nose, he began to try to pick it up in his teeth. Once he got it in his teeth, he began vigorously shaking the ball, making it look like he was holding a speed punching bag. Fortunately the ball was very light, otherwise he may have knocked himself out!

I've also found that if one of my horses is afraid on an object, the fear disappears the moment it can hold the object in its teeth or touch it with its hooves, like tarps or trash can lids.

If a horse knows how to follow a target with the touch cue, teaching it to manipulate the object is easy. I'll present the object for the horse to touch, but I won't give it a verbal cue. I wait until it starts to play or move the object around, then I'll click. If I want it to pick up the object in its teeth, then I'll let it move it around a bit, then withhold the click, or click the moment I see it mouthing the object.

I follow this until the horse picks up the object. Once it knows that I want it to pick up the object, I'll give the verbal cue, "Pick it up." After it is consistently picking up the object, I withhold the click until it hands me the object. After it knows how to hand it over, I give a verbal cue of "Give" or "Thank you" and a hand gesture of reaching out.

Eventually you can throw the ball and the horse will chase it and bring it back to you. I use this technique to teach all my horses to move away from me without pressure. Raleigh, my Clydesdale baby, had his first driving lessons where I'd throw the ball where I wanted him to go. He learned to go forward without pressure from behind. Eventually I added the verbal cue of "Walk" and a touch cue with a light touch of the driving whip.

After the horse is consistently picking up the object I then teach it to target that object to another object, such as a canvas or small, flat piece of plywood. I start by having the horse target the canvas. Once the horse is sufficiently interested in the canvas, I'll tuck it under my arm and then immediately ask them to pick up the ball, or practice brush. As they're holding the object, I present the canvas and say, "Touch." Nine times out of ten, they'll touch the object to the canvas. This is the basis for teaching the horse to run the brush along canvas or paper.

Around now your horse should be ready to paint!

## **Supplies**

Here are a few items that help make things a bit easier. I make all of my brushes. My theory is that since horses have flat teeth, I think it's easier for them to hold flat handles in their mouths. I make all of my handles out of hardwood or cardboard that's about 1/4" thick, and, depending on the horse's preference, anywhere from 1 1/2in. wide to 4-5in. wide.

I vary the brush stroke textures they provide by the variety of materials I attach to the brush handle. The length of the handle will also vary based on the horse's preference. I have used store bought bristle brushes, but I still modify the handle. I usually use my scroll saw to shave off pointed end and then

cover it with duct tape so it doesn't splinter. I usually cover all of my handles with a smooth layer of duct tape because the wood can often splinter. I think the tape also gives them a better grip.

When starting out, canvas board is the easiest as it's rather sturdy. Otherwise you can use stretched canvas, but for my enthusiastic painters, I back the painting with cardboard so the canvas is reinforced and can't be ripped as easily.

You may choose to paint at an easel. If so, just make sure it's sturdy. As with the brushes, we make our easels. I've also found that self-standing, wooden saddle racks transform nicely into easels. They're not necessarily portable, but sturdy.

With all of these items, I take great care to make sure the horse is 100% familiar with the sights and sounds, especially with the paint. I always use non-toxic, water-based acrylic. I like to apply a bit of moisturizer to my horses muzzle as added protection from the paint and it makes it easier remove if it gets paint on its muzzle.

I make certain to introduce the sound of the paint coming out of the container. Often it's a very unusual squirting, hissing, gushing sound that can take a horse by surprise.

I like to use the large, Styrofoam food plates with the separate compartments so my paints can stay separated. These are also reusable. They can be rinsed off and reused if the paint dries to a hard finish. If I don't use Styrofoam, I'll use recyclable paper plates. If it's windy, I'll tape the plate to a heavier object, like a dinner plate. If you decided to use a plate, make sure it's not glass so if it gets stepped on it won't shatter.

## **Dry Run**

Once I feel both the horse is comfortable with the easel, the canvas, the brushes and paint, I'll put it all together. I like to take the flat cement block and place it front of the easel to get the horse used to standing at the easel. I'll do this until the horse stands eagerly in one place then the block is not needed.

I then place the canvas on the easel and let the horse smell it. I also make sure the horse is comfortable if the canvas falls off the easel. I practice a few times dropping the canvas, and clicking and treating so that it associates the canvas falling as something fun, rather than scary.

I then bring out the brushes. I ask the horse to hold the brushes and wave them about. In general we just play. If they are consistently standing in place and holding the brush, I offer them the canvas. Since the horse should be used to targeting one object to another object, it should readily bring the brush to the canvas. If not, I keep offering the canvas until they touch the brush to the canvas, making sure to reward like crazy.

## **Bring on the Paint**

It's important to have everything you need prepared in advance. Usually when horses first start painting they can lose focus quickly. It's your job to not only manage the paint, brushes and canvas,

but also to keep your horse's attention. Do this by frequently reinforcing the behaviors you want, more so than usual.

I find that if I'm busy squeezing paint with my back toward them, it's easy for them to think I'm not paying attention and they'll wander off to do something more fun. I prefer to paint with my horses where they are unaltered in a large field free to come and go. I like the challenge of being more exciting than grass. This often requires multitasking. While I'm pouring paint, I'm also clicking and treating the horse for standing in one place. If you're in a round pen or sandy paddock (minimal distractions) then your horse will be more inclined to focus on you. I prefer to paint in open areas, always making certain the horse has a safe exit in case it spooks.

By this time, however, the horse should get the idea to hang around the easel, as this is the place where good things happen. After a few sessions of painting with my horses, the moment they see me carting the easel around the yard they come running. Then they proceed to argue over who gets to stand in front of it. I love that the easel becomes a symbol of something that represents good times for them.

If we're painting and I need to take a break, I can go in the house, grab a drink and come back to find the horse that was painting is still standing at the easel waiting.

### **And, Action!**

With your easel positioned, your plates and paints ready, your horse standing at attention, simply dip your brush in the paint and hand it to your horse. Use whatever cue you use to direct his attention to the canvas. If he's not ready to paint with the canvas on the easel, or hesitant to step up to the easel, bring the canvas to him. Later you can practice stepping up to the easel.

If your horse doesn't readily take the brush, or stand next to you like you'd like, then just go back and repeat some of the earlier lessons. With new horses, before we begin painting, I'll do a run through of all the lessons, like retrieving, head down, shoulders over and more, just to refresh their memory. It also serves as a warm-up before painting.

From here, you and your horse will develop your own style. You'll find your own rhythm and flow of preparing and handing the brushes as well as managing the placement of the canvas. Watch your horse to see if he prefers painting with his head down, you may not need an easel then. Your horse will tell you how he likes to paint. The more closely you can observe what he likes, the more enthusiastic he will be to help you create your memorable works of art.

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### **Send us your comments**

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Thank you and Enjoy!

*Cheryl Ward & Sam Sharnik*