

# Natural Horsemanship: A Further Assessment



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## Introduction

What exactly is natural horsemanship? As time goes on, this term is used in many different contexts and therefore has different meanings. I like to think of it as a collective term for training methods based off observation and understanding the horse. There are many methods of training that vary greatly between disciplines and trainers. The experience one has with equine also influences how they train. Not all reflect understanding the horse and the learning theory. Older training methods of breaking horses can be unethical and Natural Horsemanship is glorified and not all that. What would the ideal training program and methods be?

Natural Horsemanship came about as an alternative for the tradition breaking of a horse and has turned into a market display of having a deep connection with your horse using a rope halter, lead, and carrot stick. There are good aspects of this training, but there are also downfalls. Are the horses learning through these methods or responding from fear and submission? Is positive always a good thing and punishment always mean?

In this paper, the depth of the issues will arise. Starting with where it started and where it is now, the perceptions and terms have different meanings. The differences in marketing and reality of the rope halter, carrot stick, and lead will be described. Horses naturally and instinctively move away from pressure. Joining up with a horse is simply advancing and retreating no matter what or who is advancing them and retreating. Moving forward in training horses, the industry requires change in proper education of the equine community.

## History

Evidence of Natural Horsemanship was documented as far back as 300BCE with an ancient Greek military leader by the name Xenophon who came from a wealthy equestrian family. The observational training methods spread throughout Europe. In the 1600s, there were a few classical dressage practitioners in France that took to these training methods. A man named Antoine de Pluvinel was deemed the first French riding master and Francois Robichon de La Guerniere followed in his footsteps. Natural Horsemanship started to appear in the United States in the mid-1900s and has rapidly grown and evolved since then. The techniques shared a philosophy to be the kinder cowboy and use training methods found from observed natural horse behavior. Bill and Tom Dorrance are perceived to be the founders of Natural Horsemanship.

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*“When people think of natural horsemanship that could mean a lot of things. It isn't natural for a horse to be around people, and it's not natural for a person to be sitting on him either. When we use these words we speak about what's natural for the horse to do within his own boundaries.”*

*~True Horsemanship Through Feel  
By Bill Dorrance and Leslie Desmond*

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Through their unique work and teachings came many different students; most commonly known and remembered are Ray Hunt and his mentee Buck Brannaman. Refer to *Figure 1* for a picture of Bill, Tom, and their mentee Ray.

As the popularity of these beliefs and training methods grew, there was an availability in market. There were many



Figure 1: Bill Dorrance, Ray Hunt, Tom Dorrance trainers that took this opportunity to capitalize on. As the market grew, the values of learning horse behavior were lost, and the possible horse-human connection was sold. Common items in the equine industry started to be viewed as the only and best option for training and the uniqueness of these items raised their prices.

## **Marketing and Advertising**

Today, we see Natural Horsemanship with Pat Parelli, Julie Goodnight, and Clinton Anderson to name a few. Monty Roberts is also recognized of his join-up training in the round pen. These trainers were the lucky ones that took the opportunity to make a living off their personalized “Natural Horsemanship” brand.

What is so special about these people and what qualifies them to run the idea of Natural Horsemanship? Yes, all of them start with the value of training horses with a human-horse relationship and tossing the “traditional” tough cowboy methods. However, the relationship with your horse, though important, is not based off joining up. Long training sessions and drilling behaviors is possibly overworking our horses. Their videos are given with context you understand horses but are marketed to beginners and people just starting out. There is no preparation for outbursts and spooking from overworking

and not understanding the horse first. Because of the overloaded market, it is not the only alternative to breaking a horse with force.

What is seen in training videos may differ from reality and can give some people the wrong idea about terminology and how horses think. Most of the time, they are looking at the best case scenario or changing a behavior but not preparing anyone for an explosive frustrated horse.

## **Positive vs. Negative Feedback**

### **Perceptions**

Within the equine community, and the world as a whole, the terms negative/ positive and reinforcement/ punishment come with certain connotations. Positive usually meaning a “good” thing and negative usually meaning a “bad” thing. In training, you can think of positive and negative like math symbols where a positive means addition and negative means subtraction. Reinforcement is taken as a “good” thing and punishment is taken as a “bad” thing. In training, you can think of reinforcement as encouraging a behavior to continue and punishment as encouraging a behavior to stop whether you are adding something or taking something away.

### **Terminology**

Positive (+) is the addition of a stimuli.

Negative (-) is the removal of a stimuli.

Reinforcement increases the frequency of a behavior. A stimulus is applied before the behavior and reinforcement occurs after the response.

Punishment decreases the frequency of a behavior. Punishment is applied after the undesirable behavior.

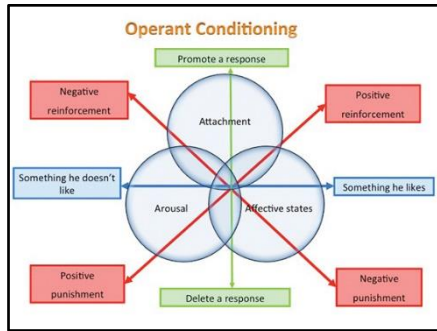


Figure 2: Operant Conditioning

Refer to *Figure 2*, a basic diagram of how to promote or delete a response with something the horse either likes or doesn't like. This graphic also demonstrates the connection between horses and humans in terms of learning.

### Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement is the addition of a (most likely pleasant) stimuli that is going to increase the frequency of the behavior. In general, this is the most efficient way of learning. An example would be you signaling your horse to come to you, and as soon as they do, you give them a treat. You are encouraging the behavior with a reward.

### Negative Reinforcement

Negative reinforcement is the removal of a stimuli that is going to increase the frequency of the behavior. This is the most common training approach in horses. An example would be by placing your hand on your horse's shoulder, and as soon as they step away, you remove your hand. You are encouraging the behavior by releasing the pressure.

### Positive Punishment

Positive punishment is the addition of a (most likely unpleasant) stimuli that is going to decrease the frequency of the behavior. An example would be if you were leading a horse to the paddock and they

start rushing the gate so you put a chain on their nose. Because your horse started to rush to the gate, you add the chain.

### Negative Punishment

Negative punishment is the removal of a stimuli that is going to decrease the frequency of the behavior. This is the least common training method in horses. An example would be ignoring your horse if they are mugging you for treats. Because your horse is mugging you, you take away the reward.

### Learning Theory

The Learning Theory is a process that describes how one receives, understands, and retains knowledge while they are learning. In the equine world, the Learning Theory is applied to horses through what is known about horse behavior and how they respond to training. Horses have great motor skills as we see them move and twitch specific spots in their skin as a fly lands on them. However, they lack cognitive skills as they have a proportionally smaller cerebral cortex compared to us humans. Horses are still very trainable despite this difference, but they have little understanding of time. Horses do show evidence of having a great memory which becomes easier to build on learned tasks, but fears more difficult to overcome.

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*"The thing you are trying to help the horse do is to use his own mind. You are trying to present something and let him figure out how to get there."*

*~True Unity: Willing Communication  
Between Horse and Human  
By Tom Dorrance*

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## Time

Horses live in the moment. While training and learning, timing is critical for making connections. So, horses need a reward or adverse stimuli as soon after the action as possible. Poorly timed reinforcements/punishments can teach the wrong association. Horses are able to discriminate between cues well so long as they are consistent.

The efficiency of learning decreases with longer training times. Staying clear and consistent in communication is important with your horse just as it is with one another. Think of a situation you were asked a question, you answered, and in response you were asked the same question again. This time, you answered differently, and in response you were still asked the same question. You may have responded correctly, but being asked again and again made you rethink your answer and frustrated you had to keep answering it. New things should be introduced after working on things that are familiar. This gives a base on where to start and confidently begins the session.

## Impediments to Learning

The main barrier for learning is fear and stress. Fear and stress are counter productive to learning as they trigger the flight instinct guarded by adrenaline. The efficiency of learning will decrease and teachings may be associated with fear rather than what you want them to learn.

Retraining tasks may seem simple when you write it down. In Kentucky, it is very common for performance horses such as jumpers to have been retrained from thoroughbred racing. This process takes months to perfect as for horses first learned is best learned. As horses have a great memory, they have difficulty replacing old

learning with new learning. This includes their fears and aversions.

## Classical Conditioning

By Ian Pavlov's experiments, we understand how to correlate a repeated pair of stimuli to get a response, then only use one of those stimuli for that given response. An unconditioned response to stimulus is a natural and instinctive reaction. This would appear in a situation where a person steps into their hind area, flicks a whip, and the horse runs away. A conditioned response is learned through familiar sounds and routines. This can appear in voice commands as in a situation where a person clucks and the horse moves forward.

## Understanding

From studies with horses, they learn best in smaller time sessions and it is suggested to stop after they complete the correct task. Drilling behaviors is only going to tire the horse and may be a causative agent to future outbursts or unwillingness to further training. It has to be understood that although the brain and thoughts between humans and horses is different, horses are unique from one another. May this be coming from different backgrounds in training, or abuse, or developmentally not all there yet.

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*"It's really quite amazing what a horse will do for you, if he only understands what you want. And it's also quite amazing what he'll do to you if he doesn't."*

*~Bill Dorrance*

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During training, a horse will lick and chew. There were many thoughts that this was a sign they were relaxed and it was a good thing to see. Later it was thought to be a sign of submission which some people

looked for while others disliked the idea of not being on the same level as the horse. Recent studies show it may be a form of stress relief as the horse carries stress in the temple area and they chew to relax the jaw.

## **Tools and Tack**

The rope halter, lead rope, and carrot stick are the deemed tools of the modern training methods of Natural Horsemanship. The intended use and actual use of these items varies between disciplines, trainers, given guidelines, and manufacturing labels. Depending on how these pieces of equipment are made influences how they affect the horse. The material of halters and leads is now unique to this training method. A carrot stick is to move off pressure as extension of arm but can still be used as a whip or riding crop.

### **Rope Halters**

The rope halter has become the staple item of Natural Horsemanship. It is designed to be flexible as it has no hardware and easy to use if you tie it correctly. Reference *Figure 3*.



*Figure 3: Weaver Silvertip No. 95 Rope Halter*

For what can be purchased from Tractor Supply company for \$15.99 costs double at \$31.93 for a Parelli brand. There is no difference between the two as they are both rope halters of the same material, thickness, and durability.

Knotted rope halters are different as they have more knots along the noseband to add control, see *Figure 4*. Horses have

many facial nerves and the placement of the knots lays on them. This is not much different than adding a chain on the noseband of a nylon or leather halter. The goal is to gain control and stop the excited/rushed behavior.



*Figure 4: Dura-Tech Rope Control Halter*

The fitting of the halter is very important to this case. If any halter is too large, the noseband will lay low on the horse's nose. This may seem like it does not matter, but the halter does not serve the purpose to gain control while leading as it is laying on soft tissue and has the possibility of breaking the tip of the nasal bone or obstructing full airflow as horses only breathe through their nose.

### **Carrot Stick**

The carrot stick was designed to be an extension of your arm while working on the ground and under saddle. See *Figure 5* for a reference image. It provides a better view for the horse as your arm can blend into your body when you are moving around. The purpose is provide clear communication which is only possible if your own body language reflects what you are asking with the stick. For example, if you are ground working a horse around you and asking them to move forward with the stick, your body needs to be behind their shoulder as to encourage them: If you place yourself in front of their shoulder you are asking them to slow, stop, or turn around.

This creates mixed signals and the horse can be frustrated with what you are asking.



Figure 5: Parelli Carrot Stick

There are many variants of the carrot stick and can also be called a riding crop/bat or whip. There is controversy as to whether a carrot stick is in fact a whip as it does not have a string at the end to “whip” with, but it serves the same purpose. Notice the zoomed end of the carrot stick in *Figure 5*. A normal carrot stick can be purchased for around \$20, but Parelli charges \$42.60.

### Lead Rope

A lead rope or chain is essential to any discipline or training method. Although a horse may follow you with ease, there are unplanned distractions and others that require you to have a hold of your horse. A normal lead is shorter and only serves the purpose to lead a horse close to you from point A to point B. There are longer leads on the market that allow for error when leading and to use during training. A good quality 12 foot lead can be purchased for around \$25, but to have the Parelli brand it will cost you \$46.60.



Figure 6: Parelli Lead

Features of leads do vary. There are different clips from normal snaps, bolt snaps, and quick release. Reference *Figure 6*, this lead has a quick release snap and a leather string at the end. It is common to see a string of some sort tied to the opposite end of the snap on longer leads, it is intended to assist moving the horse along from behind.

### Round Penning and Lunging

Horses naturally move off of pressure. Round penning is advancing and retreating (applying pressure and releasing it) to move the horse. This is seen as the main focus of Natural Horsemanship today. Monty Roberts was made famous for his round penning and the ability to make any horse join up with him.



Figure 7: University of Sydney

The reality of understanding horses and their behavior in the round pen is more recently being discovered. Research was led using advance and retreat methods in a round pen but with a remote-controlled car instead of a person, refer to *Figure 7*. The



car was driven around the pen, gradually less aggressive, to the point it would slow down, stop, and the horse would turn in and approach it. The findings from this research leaned towards a training method that did not mimic horse behavior but instead instilled fear and a sense of safety from the pressure and release.

In reference to how horses learn, the pressure applied in round penning that is driving the horse forward can be seen as unpleasant so the horse moves forward to get away from it. The removal of this pressure is rewarding as they can relax. It is still unclear as to why horses turn in and join up. There are possibilities of fear, submission, curiosity, or as a learned behavior reinforced with the release of pressure. Unfortunately, horses do not join up because they love you or trust you.

The state of mind the horse is in when asking them to work will determine speed and attention. It is very important to be clear in what you are asking for. The more excited or nervous the horse, the higher the tendency of quickening the stride and breaking gaits rather than staying a consistent and comfortable speed. They also tend to carry their head higher opposed to normal relaxed head carriage. The more relaxed horse tends to be more consistent with stride and within gaits. Temperament of the horse depends greatly on if they will listen and pay attention to you, but the more relaxed, the better. Keeping in mind that you are controlling where they go and how fast, you also have influence on mood as horses can pick up on your own heart rate.

Lunging is the same concept as round penning but with the assistance of a lead. Lunging can happen wherever you have the space as where round penning requires a round pen. Having the lead line

can help in training and teaching a horse how to turn in towards you when changing direction in the round pen. Body language is just as important. The tension on the lead line factors into reactivity and learning for the horse.

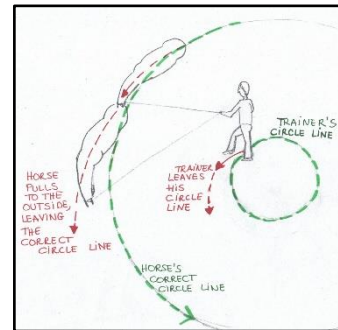


Figure 8: Lunging Circles

The same concepts of speed, attention, and pressure apply the same from a round pen to lunging. The most important idea to transfer is that you move with the horse and the horse moves off of you. Please reference *Figure 8*. There will never be a perfect circle when lunging, horses do not understand the notion of moving in a perfect circle around you standing still. As mentioned when discussing leads, there are a variety of lengths. With the length of the rope, there is discussion as to how much the horse gets. Too much slack in the lead may give too much freedom to the horse and not enough control to you as well as room to step on or over the lead and trip or get tangled and get scared. Too much tension on the lead may strain the horses body if asked to go too fast for that space and may quicken their stride into a more anxious state.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Natural Horsemanship started as the alternative training method opposed to the traditional breaking methods. As Natural Horsemanship became more popular, the name was sold. Understanding the horse to how it behaves and learns in its most

natural setting is the key to natural training. The purchase price and brand of tool does not matter as long as it serves the same purpose: to lead and move the horse. The tools used are not as important as how tools are used. Connections made with your horse is through quality time and understanding, not a round pen join up.

Moving forward, there needs to be more education within the equine industry. Before purchasing a horse, there should be readily available guides and options such as: what you need for basic tools and tack; how to properly feed and ensure activity; differences in breeds, age, and gender; information on how horses behave and learn; possibilities of how to train/retrain based on such learning and behavior; and preparation for worst case scenarios.

As individuals, we need to be critical consumers, understanding possibilities and taking care in actions. There is a need for other training methods to take hold. The Natural Horsemanship of today does not deserve to be in the spotlight. By no means should traditional training methods emerge. There are ways between the two where natural horsemanship first started.

We need to understand the horse better through observation and research. We need to be a calm and patient energy for our horse when training. No part of taming a wild animal is natural. Humans and horses will eventually have a better understanding. We need to listen to what the horse is saying and not make assumptions for what makes us happy or for what other people expect.

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