
Yielding to Pressure

The Reality of the Myth

by

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(A preliminary draft designed to elicit debate for further refinement in the future.)

Yielding to pressure, also known as pressure and release: the term refers to the core approach to training advocated by the conventional equestrian establishment, including the classical tradition, and yet it is also at the heart of the “natural horsemanship” movement which has evolved as a challenging response to the former. You will hear the term bandied about by instructors in horse training facilities around the world and trotted out tritely by their students, all intent on applying this approach when training horses to do what humans require of them. The approach it denotes has been the subject of numerous books and probably as many videos, if not more, while also constituting the core premise of most well-known training methods. Yet, when we strip away the jargon and rationale, how many of us fully realise what it entails and whether it is appropriate for training our equine friends?

YIELDING TO PRESSURE

When horse trainers refer to the application of the aids, they generally tend to mean the application of pressure to the horse followed by its release. The pressure is consistent and gradually increased until the horse yields to it by responding as the human intends, which is when the latter releases the pressure to reward – and hopefully reinforce – that behaviour.

The internationally renowned Australian researcher and horse trainer, Andrew McLean, explains the process by setting it out in the following steps:

- only the targeted behaviour results in the release of pressure;
- the first pressure that the trainer applies is light because this will later transform into the signal;
- the pressure should be increased consistently. Any fluctuation constitutes a reduction in pressure and thus reinforces the wrong behaviour. Pressure is increased until the targeted response emerges;
- if intermittent pressures are used (nudging of the rider’s legs or tapping of a long whip), there should be no pauses greater than one second so that the horse does not perceive the pause as reinforcing;
- at the onset of the targeted response the pressure should immediately be discontinued so that the horse recognises and associates the targeted behaviour with the reward.

(Andrew McLean, *The Truth about Horses*, pp. 41-42)

The theory is that at a certain point the horse’s behaviour will become so reinforced and conditioned that only the lightest pressure (the “aid”) will be required to elicit the targeted response. The result is that the horse’s behaviour is modified to suit what the human requires of the creature, how the human requires it and when.

Ultimately though, what this approach entails is the exposure of the horse to an experience which the human acknowledges is unpleasant to our equine friends but yet feels the need to do in order to train that sensitive creature.

THE HAPPY ATHLETE

Around the world most humans who employ the pressure and release approach have the horse's wellbeing in mind in the course of training. At least, we should perhaps assume this to be the case based on the noble statements one may read in this respect in the rules or public relations materials published by the organisations representing or espousing the interests of those humans.

For instance, the FEI (International Equestrian Federation), which represents conventional equestrian pursuits states the following in Article 401 of its dressage rules:

The object of Dressage is the development of the Horse into a happy Athlete through harmonious education. As a result, it makes the Horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with the Athlete.

(Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) Dressage Rules, 25th edition effective 1 January 2014 including updates effective on 1 January 2015, p. 10)

Although the second sentence contradicts the first in that the latter refers to the horse as a potential happy athlete, while the former draws a distinction between the horse and the athlete (presumably, its human) with whom the horse is to achieve "perfect understanding", the sentiments are undoubtedly admirable. The horse's education is to be harmonious, a term which implies a form of education that is both commensurate with the horse's nature and conducive to the development of harmonious relations between horse and human. This implication would appear to be premised on the assumption that in the course of any training horse and human need to interact with each other as partners albeit while the latter assumes the leading role, as in a dance, and perhaps more importantly, that the wellbeing of the horse is as important as that of the human.

QUESTIONS

Yet, if the wellbeing of the horse is indeed as important in its interaction with us humans, perhaps we need to reconsider the pressure and release approach in the light of this. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves whether this approach is indeed compatible with the horse's wellbeing. And perhaps we need to do so in the light of the following concerns, which I have phrased in the form of questions:

- Are the aids indeed as light as what is generally claimed?
- As a form of negative reinforcement, is the pressure and release approach the most effective form of horse training and, more importantly, is it commensurate with our avowed commitment to the wellbeing of our equestrian friends?
- More profoundly, is the pressure and release approach actually compatible with the nature of the horse?
- Is it not indicative of an attempt to dominate and control horses instead of empathising and empowering them?
- And if it is, is this approach not exploitative even if the horse does not object to it?
- Moreover, does the pressure and release approach not objectify the horse and reduce this sensitive animal to the status of an accessory to a human's pursuits?
- As importantly, is the pressure and release approach not dehumanising in that it is a mechanistic one relying predominantly on the use of mechanical aids in the absence of any true human presence and input?

“LIGHTNESS”

It is a term that holds appeal. “Lightness”: it conjures up images of graceful movement, almost ethereal in the near-levitation which it implies. It is with lightness that we must ride and apply the aids.

And just what exactly are those aids that we must lightly apply? Pressure and release or yielding to pressure, of course, but is that all? Do we not do this with the aid of tools which have the capacity to injure and maim? The saddle through which we communicate direction, movement and rest, does it not begin to compromise the tissue in the horse's back within about fifteen minutes, especially the western variant, which is usually heavier and larger? What of the spurs? Do they not dig into flesh which is sensitive enough to detect a fly alighting on it? And at the apex of refined riding, dressage, do we not employ a curb bit with leverage massive enough to break the jaw in which it rests, frequently in combination with a snaffle bit, the use of either or both of which frequently require the modification of the horse's physique in the form of the removal of a tooth? Even the more refined versions of riding, whether they are dubbed classical equitation, straightness training, centred riding or some other ostensibly enlightened term, do they also not demand the use of a massively leveraged bit?

Of course, there are many humans who rationalise the use of such instruments of force. They argue that the horse does not object to them. Some even contend that the horse seeks to be privy to them in order to acquaint themselves with our world. Perhaps they are right. Possibly, they may have misinterpreted the horse's forward-pointing ears to mean much more than that it simply knows no better. But let us be generous and assume that the horse actually enjoys the application of such instruments of force, perhaps a little like a member of a sect who offers her soul and her body to its leader's whims of self-gratification and indulgence, firm in the conviction that this will lead to her salvation. Even then we might ask whether the victim's acquiescence, surrender to or even embrace of her exploiter's abuse excuses the latter of his responsibility to respect the personal integrity of his victim. So too, should we not ask whether the horse's complicity in its subjugation excuses us from our duty of care to safeguard its wellbeing?

Yet let us be even more generous and assume that these instruments of force are used so lightly - at least by those experts who are capable of employing highly leveraged instruments of force without resorting to such leverage - that the horse is not forced to do or refrain from doing anything. Even then could we not legitimately ask whether the horse is not acting under duress, its behaviour compelled by the threat of force, especially in the light of the training that is the inevitable precursor of such “lightness”?

NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

Andrew McLean is probably not alone in arguing that the pressure and release approach represents the most effective form of training precisely because it constitutes a form of negative reinforcement, that is, a method which involves the application of an increasingly unpleasant experience until the horse produces the desired behaviour. At that point the horse is “rewarded” with the termination of that unpleasant experience in the form of the removal of the pressure involved.

Although the reasoning is eminently logical, perhaps we humans may want to consider the nature of the application of pressure. I know of no scientific study of the pressure and release approach to horse training which not only does not acknowledge that the application of pressure constitutes an unpleasant experience to the horse but also does not recognise that its unpleasant nature represents the very basis for its efficacy. As such, we may wish to ask ourselves whether we are really acting

in the best interests of the horse by subjecting it to such an unpleasant experience. Would you really want to do this to a creature whom you claim to love?

Then again, perhaps it is possible to present a legitimate argument to the effect that it is entirely acceptable to subject a horse to an unpleasant experience on a regular basis for the purposes of eliciting behaviour from it which is entirely in the interests of its wellbeing. For instance, this could be argued in the case of straightness training, which is designed to teach the horse to carry itself straight, although one might question whether this does not serve any purpose other than to carry a human while simultaneously mitigating the risk of personal injury due to that very act, one for which the horse was not designed.

Again let us be generous and assume that it is possible to present a legitimate argument to this effect. Even then we may wish to question the rationale for adopting such an approach, if only because available evidence reveals the relative inadequacy of negative reinforcement as a method of horse training. In recent years a growing body of evidence has come to show that the pressure and release approach is significantly inferior to positive reinforcement methods of horse behaviour modification (such as clicker training) in terms of both the speed at which behaviour is modified and the relative permanence of such modification, as well as the obvious benefits it yields in the form of a positive attitude on the part of the horse. In that it also involves the reward of desirable behaviour in the absence of the application of an undesirable experience, a rapidly growing number of humans are also embracing positive reinforcement as a preferred approach to horse training.

NATURE OF THE HORSE

Perhaps the most profound reason for questioning the use of the pressure and release approach to training lies in the fact that it fails to take the nature of the horse into account. It fails to do so in that it:

1. does not acknowledge that horses may react differently to the same type of pressure depending on the nature of the horse concerned and the circumstances in which it finds itself;
2. ignores the fact that horses react differently to different types of pressure;
3. assumes that a horse can only learn by modifying its behaviour;
4. is unable to address and utilise the horse's sensitivity to energy.

A closer examination of each of these points may reveal that the pressure and release approach to training fails to accommodate the nature of the horse to a significant extent.

1. Horses react differently to pressure

Here we can draw a distinction between the individual responses of different horses, on the one hand, and the different responses exhibited by one and the same horse in different situations.

a) Individual responses of different horses

Horses are individuals and, as such, respond differently to pressure. This statement may be trite but it is very true and I do not have to leave my domain to ascertain that this is the case. For instance, the difference in the response of our two mares, Pip and Anaïs, to any physical pressure which they perceive to be threatening is that of day and night. Whereas Pip will initially resist but eventually yield if the perceived threat appears to be overwhelming, Anaïs is inclined to resist with growing intensity until she is transformed into a potentially dangerous monster.

b) Different responses by the same horse

Have you ever noticed that the same horse can respond differently to pressure from one situation to another? Let us take slapping as an example, and here I am referring to a pretty hard slap anywhere on the horse's body with the exception of the head and between the hind legs. What

would normally happen if you were to slap your horse nice and hard? They would move away, would they not? What? You do not slap your horse? Never? What if I were to tell you that I do and not just my horse but my wife's too? What if I were to tell you that my wife slaps her mare and mine too? And what if I were to tell you that both our horses come to us when they want to be slapped and position their bodies in front of us, so that we can deliver the slap to exactly where they require it? Actually, our horses do not normally do this. They only do so in the summer when swarms of horse flies descend upon them from the nearby forest and corn fields, reducing their lives to fly-bitten misery. Even when wearing fly mesh, there are still occasions when a horse fly alights on the mares thin summer coats and the only sure way of liquidating it is to slap it smartly. Our horses know that we are helping them when we do this and they are willing to accept the slaps – and even beg for them – if this is what it takes to eliminate the pests.

2. Horses react differently to different types of pressure

If it is still not clear that a horse's perception and experience of pressure are nowhere nearly as simplistic as the notion of yielding to pressure implies, let us go a step further and examine how horses respond to different types of pressure. Here we are concerned with various types of pressure experienced by one and the same horse.

a) Pressure with or without physical contact

One does not have to venture far into the practice of equine training before encountering the notion that a horse ultimately responds in the same way to any form of pressure, irrespective of whether that pressure is accompanied by physical contact or not. Indeed, so prevalent is this assumption that it is tempting to conclude that this notion is almost universally elevated to the ethereal heights of equine training dogma. There are few humans who seem prepared to challenge this fundamental principle imposed on equine training, yet every horse initially does until ultimately compelled to act accordingly in one way or another.

b) Pressure with physical contact

So how does the horse challenge this human dogma? In the first place, it is in the nature of most horses to draw a clear distinction between pressure accompanied by physical contact and "pressure" that is not, especially if the physical contact is firm enough from the outset. Where this the case, horses tend to do the very opposite of yielding to such pressure, at least initially before training has advanced far enough to successfully demand the requisite response of yielding. The untrained natural response of most horses to physical pressure is not to yield to it but to resist it and to do so with increasing force until that pressure is strong enough to overcome the horse's resistance. The reason for this is probably twofold. When such physical pressure is initially applied, the horse's muscles automatically resist it. The horse is physiologically primed to respond in this way. As such, it is not a cognitively ordered process. If this response fails to secure the release of that physical pressure, which it is designed to do, many if not most horses would then be likely to enter panic mode and resist it even more fiercely, prompted largely by their instinctive propensity to flee perceived danger, a factor which plays such a prominent role in their response to pressure in the absence of physical contact.

Where pressure is not accompanied by physical contact, horses tend to respond differently on the whole. Instead of resisting such pressure, they appear to be more inclined to yield to it and to do so far more readily than in the case of physical contact. In this case too the reason is quite straightforward in that it lies within the nature of the horses. All too frequently we humans trot out the trite mantra to the effect the horses are creatures of flight. When faced with a perceived danger, they almost instinctively seek to flee first. This also explains in part why they are likely to yield to pressure in the absence of physical contact.

If this sounds only marginally less simplistic than the notion of yielding to pressure, it may well be so, for horses also reveal that they are capable of responding very differently to both pressure that is accompanied by physical contact and that which is not.

c) Pressure without physical contact

Viewed from an external perspective, horses appear to respond very differently to contact-free pressure, depending on whether they perceive such pressure to be focused on them or not. Indeed, it is precisely this distinction which is so clearly discernible in herd behaviour. By way of an example, in one of the herds in which my mare, Pip, spent part of her life there were two geldings, a heavily built Dutch warmblood called Bentley and a grey Polish quarterhorse dubbed Duke. At the top of the pecking order, Bentley could pass calmly through the herd without causing any consternation. All the other horses acknowledged his status as the dominant presence in the herd and yielded to that presence in the knowledge that any pressure which they may have experienced was not directed against them.

Duke, on the other hand, was an aggressive, maladjusted individual who felt a constant need to charge any horse that he felt was entering his rightful domain or was close enough to do so. As a result all of the other horses with exception of the acknowledged leader, Bentley, were frequently sent scattering, almost always creating potentially dangerous situations. Duke directed his aggression towards his herd mates and they responded by ducking out of the way and rushing off to escape his perceived reach. Instead of simply moving out of his path, as they did with Bentley, safe in the knowledge that no aggression was being directed towards them, they immediately felt Duke's focus on them and responded accordingly.

It is precisely this difference in focus which Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling exploits so effectively in his work with horses. By assuming the energetic presence of a creature at the peak of the pecking order, one who does not entertain any doubts about that presence and who therefore has no need to resort to dominant behaviour, Hempfling indirectly induces horses to acknowledge his presence, respect it and ultimately follow it. Those humans, on the other hand, who fail to acknowledge this important difference in focus are left with little choice but to adopt the presence of a Duke, securing compliance through the threat of force.

DOMINATION AND CONTROL

In so far as the application of pressure is designed to secure the horse's compliance without affording it the opportunity to decline such compliance, it amounts to a form of domination and control on the part of the human responsible for it. This is the case because such pressure is designed to force or compel a horse do or refrain from doing something as required by that human. This also applies where such pressure and its accompanying intent are manifested in the lightest form possible, because in this case there is always the underlying threat of the pressure being applied more forcefully.

In this respect the FEI must be commended in being so disarmingly honest in its dressage rules. Let us return to the FEI's statement of the object of dressage, which is "development of the Horse into a happy Athlete through harmonious education," which "makes the Horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with the Athlete". This statement is immediately followed by the assertion that:

These qualities are demonstrated by:

- The freedom and regularity of the paces.
- The harmony, lightness and ease of the movements.
- The lightness of the forehand and the engagement of the hindquarters, originating from a lively impulsion.

- The acceptance of the bit, with submissiveness/throughness (*Durchlässigkeit*) without any tension or resistance.

Here we have it from the horse's mouth as it were. The insistence on domination and control is stated with refreshing candour in that the horse is required to accept the bit (two are actually used simultaneously at the peak level of FEI dressage) and be submissive. Anyone who seriously pursues dressage in line with FEI dressage rules is unambiguously required to dominate and control their horse by compelling it to be submissive and accept the bit.

OBJECTIFICATION OF THE HORSE

As such, the horse is reduced to playing the role of a cog – albeit an important one – in a machine which its human has devised to achieve a goal defined by that human, no matter how noble and laudable it may be. Because the horse is denied a choice, it is stripped of its individuality and becomes a mere object in service to the human's grand design and, as such, is ultimately little more an accessory to the human's ego and/or pursuit of self-enrichment.

SELF-JUSTIFYING FALLACY

Yet how many of us humans will be able to resist the temptation to object to this critique of the pressure and release approach by pointing out that the horse's ears are forward, its eye is bright and it is forward. Clearly, the horse must be enjoying what it is doing, even if it is doing so by yielding to pressure.

This is an argument that exhibits a logic which is similar in its self-justificatory nature as that of the assertion that the leader of a sect is not exploiting his (they are usually male) followers by taking their money and/or using their bodies, because what is taken has been freely given. The assumption is that only the victim of such exploitation is responsible for it and that the perpetrator is exempt from bearing any responsibility for it by virtue of the victim's willing submission.

I have yet to understand why anyone who knowingly exploits another creature should not bear responsibility for such exploitation irrespective of whether or not the victim knowingly and wittingly submits to it, where that victim is an adult human. How much more responsible is such a perpetrator where the victim is a creature that is entirely dependent on them and is unable to make the choices which an adult human, in full control of their mental faculties and acting entirely rationally and reasonably, is capable of making?

Consequently, by asserting that the horse consents to and even enjoys the application of the pressure and release model amounts to not only the abdication of such responsibility on the part of the human applying it but also the amoral employment of that assertion to justify their actions. In that the assertion lacks veracity, it is fallacious. And in that it also seeks to justify the perpetrator's actions, it is a self-justifying fallacy.

SELF-PERPETUATING FALLACY

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of the myth of the yielding to pressure approach lies not so much in the false assumptions on which it is premised, as discussed above, but in the temptation it holds for humans to justify the constant application of that approach. This is at once most decisively and most deceptively evident in the starting point which asserts that all interaction with a horse inevitably involves the exertion of pressure on it by a human with some commentators even contending that such pressure is readily evident in a horse's immediate response to a human entering its presence, which is one of alarm.

This approach is deceptive in that it is invariably postulated as an unquestionable, self-evident universal truth, whereas it is most decidedly not. In the first place, what is frequently taken to be a horse's recognition of pressure when a human enters its presence is little more than an acknowledgement of what comes entirely naturally to the species known as *equus caballus* and is an intrinsic part of its physiological makeup: a finely honed sensitivity to energy and in this case that of the human who seeks to interact with it. Secondly, evidence militating against this assumption may also be found in the fact that horses sometimes ignore a human who enters their presence. Indeed, it is often this refusal on the part of the horse to acknowledge that a human has anything remotely interesting to contribute through their presence which serves as the basis for the adoption of the pressure and release approach. After all, what other course of action is left to a human whose horse so mercilessly exposes their impotence? Actually, there is another course of action open to the human but it is bound to make such demands on their character that they almost always opt for the seemingly more effective approach of pressure and release for no other reason than that it is easier on them and appears to secure almost immediate results.

Similarly, this approach is decisive in that it serves as its own rationale for its adoption and application. The logic involved goes something like this: because a horse always feels pressure exerted on it by any human who chooses to interact with it, the human has no option but to employ that pressure in such interaction. As such, the only question that remains is how that pressure should be applied.

In that this approach is based on false assumptions, as explained above, is it not fallacious? In that it also serves as its own rationale, is it not a self-perpetuating fallacy? And in that an approach such as this, which is so hostile to the horse, masquerades as a logical, reasonable one, is it not also insidious?

NON-ENLIGHTENED

To the extent that the pressure and release model exhibits all of the flaws discussed above, is it not a non-enlightened method that is diametrically opposed to an empathetic, empowering approach which is designed to encourage the horse to become a willing partner in the dance with the human?

A CHOICE

It is important to realise that a human has a choice in how they interact with a horse. Far from being unavoidable, requiring our equine friend to yield to pressure we exert represents a choice that we make in relation to such interaction. There are other ways of interacting with a horse, although they may make demands on us which may initially seem to be incomprehensible initially and, once understood, daunting. Should this deter us? Perhaps the answer depends on what type of relationship we seek with our horse.

THE ALTERNATIVES?

So what alternatives are available? The answer to this question is one which I hope to explore with others seeking them through forums such as the Horses and Humans blog and Facebook group page.

One alternative which almost immediately suggests itself is positive reinforcement, especially as exhibited through clicker training. What are the benefits? Are there any disadvantages? Here are some other ideas which we might also wish to consider in the course of our discussions:

1. tapping into the horse's sensitivity as an energetic being;
2. tapping into the horse's capacity for play;

3. tapping into the horse's capacity for friendship;
4. tapping into the horse's desire to follow a reliable, trustworthy creature;
5. becoming the kind of human a horse seeks to be with.

IMPOTENCE OF THE HUMAN

Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling contends that, if we are to truly become the kind of human a horse seeks to be with, we will need to develop our physical and spiritual potential to the extent that horses recognise in us someone who is completely and authentically present with them in the here and now, someone whom they can trust in that we are dependable and decisive, and someone who is able to communicate with them using their mother tongue, body language. To the extent that we are incapable of doing this, we find it necessary to rely on an external approach employing external aids: pressure and release coupled with all the implements of compulsion and restraint that are essential to such an approach.

As such, to the extent that we rely on it, the pressure and release approach reflects the impotence of the human who resorts to it, namely, our inability to be the kind of human a horse seeks to be with. Indeed, in this respect we might wish to postulate a theorem to the effect that the more a human endeavours to apply pressure in their interaction with the horse or to threaten to do so, the more tools they require to apply that pressure or threaten to do so, or the more force they bring to bear when applying such pressure or the more severe the threat they imply when wielding the means to do so, the greater the impotence they exhibit in their dealings with their horse. As such, until we abandon the pressure and release approach in our interaction with horses, will we humans not always be confessing our impotence in our dealings with those sensitive creatures? And if we will be, how much longer do we wish to continue to do so?

(This is a work in progress. As such, your feedback is more than welcome. You may post feedback through the Horses and Humans website (www.horsesandhumans.com), the Horses and Humans Facebook group (www.facebook.com/groups/horsesandhumans/), the Horses and Humans Publications Facebook page (www.facebook.com/horsesandhumans) or my Facebook page (www.facebook.com/andrewglynsmail).

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