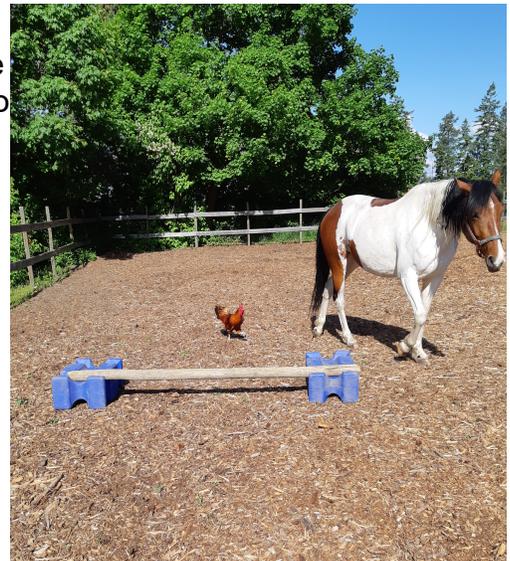


What Horses Teach Us by Marilee Moss 11.10.2020

Sweetie Pie is such an endearing name, but when you get to know her, maybe sweetie isn't the most accurate description. She's lovingly known as Pie and she knows what she wants. Horses are interesting to work with, well they fascinate me really! An opportunity came for me to work with this young mare at The Equine Connection. Most of Pie's herd mates are established in the tooth but she arrived as a baby. As she reached her 5yr old year, she started to be a little too pushy of a princess baby. Wendy asked if I could work with her.

I started working with Pie to establish her basic responses in hand. Go, stop, turn and yield. I thought, perfect, I will give her the basic parameters of being an easier to handle full sized horse. Well, it progressed much further. Pie was never destined to be ridden. She was born with a crooked foreleg. I had to think further out of the box as my training almost always progresses to riding. I had watched friends clicker train horses and was quite intrigued. I had lightly played around with it on my own mare with good results but hadn't delved too deep. I was happy to have a chance to learn and see what we could accomplish. Pie was very willing to learn, but who wouldn't be? There are treats involved! She very quickly progressed and learned fun games in the process. She can weave in and out of the cones as I point to them. She will go to a 'target' almost the whole arena length away. The best game, is called 'perch'. When I first started working with Pie, she did a lot of pawing. Any time she was impatient, she would paw. I taught her to 'perch' by rewarding with the click when she kept her hoof up on a stump. She's able to perch with either foot if I point towards one. Pie is very enthusiastic and really enjoys showing anyone willing to watch her 'perch'. She's also able to 'roll' the stump on comand as well. The interesting part was that, by giving her a task, she stopped pawing as much!

Pie also enjoys liberty work. Liberty work is when the horse is loose and has complete freedom to decide if they want to participate or not! There were a few times I was a little concerned with pinned ears or her scooting past me exuberantly kicking up her heels. There were definitely moments when she would bugger off. But then there were these moments of connection that almost made me question if it really just happened. She would connect and follow my body language. I walked, she walked. I trotted, she trotted. I halted, she halted. I was surprised at first at how easy she learned this dancing sequence. She learned to turn her hind quarters when I point my finger at them. She crosses her front legs when I cross mine.



Rooster helper during liberty work

I am quite particular about following my training methods using equine learning theory. Starting with operant conditioning, she learned the basic responses using negative reinforcement also known as pressure and release. Then I started using the clicker with positive reinforcement. I then progressed to classical conditioning by using my body language to communicate what I was looking for. My logical brain could explain how I had such success. But there was a deeper level. I felt there was more to this than just teaching her ground work.

I love training horses, they bring immense joy to my world. The unconditional love, the understanding and the unspoken words. There are times though that I struggle in thinking that they necessarily want to spend time with ME, if given a choice. About a month ago, I had a few gaps of time where I couldn't coordinate to spend time training Pie. I figured she had learned a lot and was doing well, so she would be fine while my schedule was full. Well, Sweetie Pie has come to teach me a lesson. I had a call from Wendy that Pie was acting out, being like the princess baby she was before I started working with her. I had worked with a few of her herdmates over the course of the month without working with her. She was upset I wasn't spending time with her.

Throughout the time I was training Pie, her crooked leg actually started to look slightly straighter and the muscles surrounding more supple. (I have to add in here that she has fantastic regular body work and nutrition to support her so I definitely am not the only one to contribute to her happiness.) The exercise I do is methodical, consistent and equal going both directions. For some reason I really didn't connect that this could help her in a physio type way. When I hadn't worked with her for nearly a month, I was astonished at how stiff and crooked she looked. I actually felt quite guilty that I hadn't found time to train her. Thankfully after a few sessions, she is doing much better and looking more supple and happy.

Pie is teaching me about connection, self confidence and self worth. I didn't think she really 'needed' me, but she has proved me wrong. She knows my heart is in training horses. She knows she wants to spend time with me. Point taken Pie, I will spend more time with you! I really am so blessed with all of the horses I get to interact with and maybe, just maybe, they are blessed to spend time with me too. I've also learned that they don't all need to be ridden to feel accomplishments and teach us amazing lessons. Thank you Sweetie Pie, you are a very accomplished therapy horse.



The grass is greener under the snow!