

# Let's talk training

## A preliminary exploration of horse training discourse within online videos

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### Introduction:

Training underpins most horse-human relationships. Yet training as a concept remains poorly understood, highlighting a need to consider how it is perceived and communicated within the equestrian sector.

### Method:

This study utilised publicly available online videos featuring horses being trained to perform one of three (non-ridden) goal behaviours (*Table 1*). Audio transcripts of trainers' narratives were obtained from videos meeting pre-set criteria and discourse analysis applied. A range of themes were identified for further investigation.

Table 1 – Goal behaviours trained within online videos

Name	Description
'Catching'	When loose in pasture/ arena, horse comes to human or allows human to approach and put on a headcollar
'Mounting'	Horse stands still in desired spot to be mounted by rider or repositions their body to line up with a mounting block
'Loading'	Horse walks into/ out of a stationary lorry/ trailer when led or cued by trainer

### Results:



Frequent reference to horse emotions by trainers suggests they were considering the horses perspective. However, the **emotions ascribed to them did not always align with scientific understanding of equine behaviour and cognition. Additionally, high arousal behaviours were typically attributed to positive emotions** rather than considered reflective of negative states.

"he just simply wants to show off"

"Acting like the wildest horse in the world there for a bit, obviously feeling pretty good in himself"

"He's licking his lips... that means he's thinking"

"If he wants to run away, he's obviously full of beans and just wanting to play"

"I don't tell [the horse] where the be. I just tell her where not to be"

Trainers regularly highlighted their use of rewards, whilst **references to the application of aversives were limited** and often described using ambiguous language and phrasing.

"Now he's done our groundwork he understands how to get away from my body. He understands the stick means move"

"She left so I'm going to put pressure on"

"I also have a dressage whip here so I can give her a couple encouraging taps"

"I'm now being more of the alpha horse because I just committed her to going in a specific position"

Many trainers spoke about **giving the horse 'control'** yet also underscored the importance of **themselves adopting a leadership role** by directing the horses' movements and attention.

"...he can later decide to not park if he doesn't want a rider on. It's considered a start button, start signal, or just simply consent"

### Conclusion:

These themes may represent **conscious or subconscious attempts to positively frame the training applied**, thereby increasing its social acceptability, helping trainers rationalise their own actions and preserve a positive self-image. They also **suggest a lack of awareness, or unwillingness to engage with, scientific evidence** may exist within the horse training sector. Work to further explore and address these potential concerns would serve to enhance both horse and human wellbeing during training interactions.

