

## **The Panda Reports** **Written by Ann Edie**

*The following articles were reports to email guide dog lists written by Ann Edie, describing Panda's early guide training.*

December 23, 2002

Hi, All,

Yesterday I went to Saratoga with a group of friends for our second annual Holiday stroll with Panda, my miniature guide horse in training. Last year when we went for our walk in the downtown shopping district of Saratoga, Panda was not yet one year old. She had been with us for only three months, and was very much in the "puppy walking" stage of her training. Alexandra Kurland, Panda's trainer, was teaching her to walk politely on a loose lead and exposing her to a variety of environments and situations that she would be likely to encounter as a guide. I was working Quarry, my German Shepherd guide who had come to me just a month earlier at Thanksgiving. Already we were struggling with the animal distraction issue which would lead to our parting ways in less than a year's time. How much things have changed in that year!

I feel a little sad when I think about last year's walk, because I was on edge while working Quarry, worried about meeting other dogs and concentrating on keeping his attention on his work. When we did encounter two small dogs coming out of a building with a man who was obviously wary of large German shepherds, Quarry did react with strong "interest" in the other dogs, and it took me several minutes of obedience work and correction to get him working tolerably well again. It was not a very relaxing or sociable event for me because of my preoccupation with working a new guide dog.

This year I was working Panda as my guide, and Alex walked a little behind us in the instructor's position to monitor our progress and give me feedback on our work. My other friends walked sometimes ahead and sometimes behind us, enjoying the festive atmosphere and the surprise and delight on the faces of our fellow shoppers at seeing a tiny horse walking among them.

Saratoga is a small city with a thriving downtown shopping district, and on this last Saturday before Christmas everyone seemed to be out taking advantage of the relatively mild weather and enjoying the holiday decorations, music, and, of course, the shopping. There were crowds of people everywhere, many children, and many dogs.

From the moment we got out of the mini van, Panda assumed her usual focused, confident, businesslike working manner. She found the way out of the parking lot and to the sidewalk, and we were on our way. Almost immediately, our ears were accosted by the blaring siren of a rapidly approaching ambulance. As the ambulance came abreast of us it let out two tremendous blasts of its air horn. I startled at the noise, and Panda gave a tiny start forward, then immediately resumed her steady pace without a hint of residual concern. If that's the extent of her "spook" reaction, I can certainly deal with it!

For the next several hours we strolled and shopped. Panda threaded her way through crowds of people, ignoring the many who reached out hands toward her to pet her or blocked her way to ask questions about her or to say how thrilled they were to see a little horse working as a guide. I don't know if people in other towns would react in the same enthusiastic way—Saratoga is, after all, a horse-loving town—but we certainly haven't had any trouble with access or acceptance wherever we've gone so far.

Panda stopped precisely at every up and down curb we came to. She did her best to take me around large puddles and patches of snow and ice. She was unflappable in the face of blowing plastic, a falling sign, bouncing helium balloons, barking and lunging dogs, baby strollers, and Salvation Army bell ringers. We went smoothly through doors into and out of stores, up and down flights of stairs, and across busy streets.

The sidewalks of Saratoga are dotted with low square planters with stone edges. Panda wove her way around these giving me good clearance every time except one, where I bumped harmlessly into the corner of the planter. I uttered the natural response of "Ouch", and simply brought her back a few steps and again asked her to go forward. This time she gave me good clearance, and there was no hint of fear or anxiety in her attitude. When she performed successfully, I clicked her and gave her a tiny peice of carrot as a reward. (Panda has been trained using a bridging signal, a clicking sound, which marks the precise moment when she has performed a desired behavior, and positive reinforcement, rewards, for these correct responses. Because of this, she is motivated to repeat the behaviors that brought her rewards, and she is happy and relaxed in her work.) Another time Panda took me around one of these planters and then between the planter and a bus shelter and a protruding sign. Alex was about to warn me of the situation, but Panda deftly guided me through without so much as a brush.

We took a break at the cafe in the Borders Bookstore. While we sipped our hot cocoa and ate sticky buns, Panda lay down and curled up on the floor beside my chair to take a nap. A Borders employee came over to our table and asked if she could take pictures. She remembered us from last year's visit, and said they like to take pictures of all the celebrities who stop in. She made a point of inviting us back any time. We resumed our stroll and stopped in at a gift shop and at Mrs. London's, a famous pastry shop, to admire the beautiful cakes and torts in the shapes of flowers, crowns, and logs, wrought in chocolate, fruit, and creams and to make the difficult decision as to which delicacy to buy for later consumption at the evening's festivities. Panda waited patiently while we considered our purchases.

On our return walk to the car, we met a woman who was testing the experimental, gyroscope-balanced, personal vehicle, the Segway, and we stopped and had a lovely chat with her. The Segway seemed to be operating safely in the very congested traffic of the holiday crowds. They really don't go very fast, much slower than a bicycle or skate board can. And while they are certainly silent, and therefore, difficult to detect, they are very maneuverable with just a shift in the rider's weight or focus of attention. It is certainly the operator of the Segway's responsibility to avoid pedestrians, but it doesn't look as if this is going to be a major problem. The woman who we spoke to said that the biggest problem that she had found with the Segway was that you don't get any exercise when using it. Naturally, Panda was unphased by the Segway.

I gave Panda a chance to relieve before we all piled into the car for the trip home. She had no difficulty relieving in an unfamiliar place. In the car on the way home, she dozed with her nose on my knee while the five "grown ups" chatted merrily. It had been a lovely, congenial afternoon spent with friends in the holiday spirit. Panda's pace is easy to follow, and allows me to converse with others as we walk along. Even at this early stage of her guide work, she seems to have a solid understanding of what her job is, and a sure focus and confidence in her ability to do that job. It is a most wonderful joyful experience to be guided by her, and it is the most exciting Christmas gift ever to have her walking by my side as my partner.

I wish you, your families, and your guides, all the happiest of Christmases, and great joy in the new year.

Ann

January 13, 2003  
Hi, Friends,

Yesterday was Panda's 2nd birthday, so I thought I'd give you an update on her recent progress in training, and tell you how we spent the special day.

Panda is my miniature horse guide-in-training. She has been with us and in "puppy-raising"/guide training since September, 2001. She is being trained by Alexandra Kurland, and lives at Alex's house most of the time. Recently, since I am without a guide dog, I have been taking part in more of Panda's training sessions. We have been working outdoors in the heavy-snow conditions of the Upstate New York winter, and also indoors in areas congested with stationary and moving obstacles and people, such as shopping centers, malls, and stores.

After our second 2-foot snowfall a week ago, I jokingly remarked to Alex that I would expect to see Panda at 7:00 a.m. Monday morning to help me find my way through the snow to work at the high school. I knew that 7:00a.m. was a bit early for someone to be up and about who doesn't have to punch a time clock, so to speak, so I wasn't really serious about expecting to see them at that hour. But I was pleasantly surprised when I emerged from an after-school faculty meeting at 4:00 p.m. to find Alex and Panda there waiting to do a training walk home with me.

Panda did a fine job of finding a path through the snow and of slowing down or going around slippery patches. She also did well staying over close to the left edge of the road where there are no sidewalks, despite the fact that the high snow banks made that difficult. Alex left us once we were in my home subdivision with instructions to check the shoreline frequently. She went back to the high school to get her car. We wanted to test whether Panda would continue to do her work accurately without the subtle cues that Alex might be inadvertently providing while walking behind Panda and me. Panda continued to work well; the only mistake she made was to fail to turn into my driveway as we approached it. The snow plows had pushed quite a pile of snow into the mouth of the driveway during the day, so I had a hard time knowing exactly where the driveway was myself, and I guess Panda couldn't find a clear path to it. Anyway, we walked past it the first time, but when I realized that was the case, I asked her to turn back, and then to find right, and she found it successfully.

The next afternoon, Panda and Alex appeared at my office door once again. This time we worked for a while in the halls of the school avoiding janitor's carts, trash bins, audio-visual equipment carts, and sports teams. (The sports teams were sometimes sitting in the halls waiting for their coaches or practice times, sometimes standing around, and sometimes running down the corridors, as a substitute for jogging outdoors during the winter weather).

Panda thinks well ahead as we walk down a corridor, and begins to give me information that there is an obstacle or an obstruction ahead well in advance. Unfortunately, at least for Panda's training, it is often very difficult to work through these obstacles, because people see us coming and scatter, and Janitors hurry to get their carts out of our way. It must make Panda feel pretty powerful to be able to cause all those big people and things to move out of her path!

Sometimes I ask them to stay where they are just so we can have the practice working past the obstacles. And sometimes we have to set up obstacles ourselves, so that they stay there long enough for us to work past them.

One of the really nice things about Panda is that when she does work through and around groups of people, she does not sniff or seek attention from them, but stays focused on her work. Another nice thing is that when she comes to an intersection, she pauses and waits for me to indicate which direction I would like her to go, rather than assuming we will go the way we did the previous time or the way we usually go. I like this pause, so I will have to remember to keep reinforcing this

behavior, rather than just giving the "find right" or "find left" command while walking toward the intersection, so that the pause remains part of the behavior chain.

While we were in the high school, we went to the special education classroom where I spend most of my teaching time this year. The classroom is actually made up of three small rooms; one we call the office, one the apartment, and one the classroom. All three are crowded with furniture, and there is little space for moving around, even after school when the nine high-school-sized class members, two wheelchairs, and three walkers, and swarms of teachers, therapists, and teaching assistants have gone home. We scratched our heads for a few minutes trying to think of a good place to put Panda in that setting, but came to no conclusions. When I had my guide dog, I used to have him lie under one of the tables; but the furniture has been rearranged since that time, and the space under that table has been appropriated for other uses. But that's a matter for another day.

We also did some stair work in the high school. Panda has gotten very good at handling outdoor stairs and steps. She has learned to walk up and down them carefully, stepping on each step in turn, and not jumping over the last couple, especially on the way down. But we haven't done a lot of work on indoor stairs, which may be narrower and more slippery than the outdoor ones. The last time we worked on the stairs in the high school, Panda was a bit reluctant to go up and down them, and when she did, she rushed a bit. But this time, she approached them with more confidence, and went up and down them without hesitation. She is still rushing a bit, especially at the bottom, but she has made very good progress.

After working inside the school for about half an hour, we went on our walk home. Again Alex left us to return to the high school to get her car once we were in the residential subdivision. Once again Panda continued to work well in the absence of her trainer. And this time she had no difficulty finding my driveway.

And so we arrive at Panda's birthday. Alex and I had planned a little combined training session/celebration for the occasion. We met a few friends at a local shopping center for some shopping, and then went to the coffee shop there for sandwiches and yummy desserts. Panda worked very well both in the outdoor sidewalk and parking lot environment, and inside the bookstore and toy store, where the aisles were very narrow and full of obstructions.

In the bookstore, we looked for books that would be suitable to read to a young horse--we settled on "The Carrot Seed". And in the toy store we searched for a busy box that could help her learn her shapes, colors and alphabet. We didn't find that perfect toy for Panda, but we did purchase an electronic piano for our big horses to play. Learning to ring bells, squeeze bicycle horns, bang on drums, and play keyboards with their lips helps horses to overcome their fear of strange and loud noises.

Back outside, as we were approaching a corner of the sidewalk, Panda started to go around a pillar on the left, or inside of the turn. Then she noticed that there was not enough clearance for the two of us between the pillar and the curb. She stopped, and then took us around the pillar to the right, or the outside of the turn. In the coffee shop we enjoyed an early supper of wonderful sandwiches and scrumptious chocolate desserts. Panda stood beside my chair for a while, then lay down and took a nap. She was very well-behaved and inconspicuous throughout the meal, which was the point of the exercise. Until now, we hadn't taken Panda into any restaurants where we would eat a full meal and stay for more than an hour. But we thought she was now ready for that, and she proved us right. The people in the coffee shop were very welcoming and appropriate in their behavior toward Panda. They offered us a bowl of water as they would have offered for a guide dog, and did not ask to pat her or feed her. They understood that she was working.

We were at the shopping center for about three and a half hours, and Panda had no difficulty going that long without a relief break. We gave her an opportunity to relieve before getting back into the car for the ride home. She relieved promptly on cue.

We spent the early evening at the barn caring for and riding our "big" horses. Panda spent part of this time standing on a tie and part of the time in one of the stalls. After tucking in the big horses, we went back to my house and continued to celebrate Panda's birthday. We sang "Happy Birthday" to her, and this time she actually got to share the goodies. I had made a carrot cake, and instead of cream cheese frosting on her piece I had heaped applesauce with shredded carrot. We stuck two baby carrots in the cake as candle substitutes. Panda enjoyed her piece of cake, especially the topping! While the grown ups enjoyed a nice cup of tea, I brought out a selection of my old dog toys to see if she would be interested in any of them. She picked out the canvas frisbee, and we had soon shaped the beginnings of a retrieve. It was well past her usual bedtime when we decided to call it a night.

Throughout the day, Panda showed a great deal of maturity and flexibility. She worked, ate, relieved, played, and rested on a human schedule, and seemed perfectly happy to do so. The point of the shopping trip was not to treat her like a human child, but rather to prepare her for the normal family activities that she will be part of in her life as my guide. She practiced navigating through the crowded and narrow aisles of the stores, and waited patiently while we looked at products and considered purchases. It was a fun and non-stressful day for us all, and a nice way to mark another milestone in Panda's training.

Happy travels in the snow to all of you, that is, if you are lucky enough to have snow.

Ann Edie

March 3, 2003  
Hi, Friends,

Traffic Checks

I had the pleasure of having Panda, my miniature horse guide-in-training, stay with me over this past weekend. On Saturday, since the weather was sunny and relatively mild compared to what we have become accustomed to this winter, I decided to go out for a little walk with Panda as my guide.

We were still doing "country work" in my residential neighborhood, which has no sidewalks, when we encountered our first naturally occurring traffic check. (Up to this point, our traffic work has been carefully monitored and traffic checks have been as controlled or "set up" as possible.)

We were walking along the left edge of the road toward the main street, when a car turned from the main street onto the road we were walking along, and stopped with its motor running at the mouth of a driveway in front of us. The people in the car were apparently talking to someone standing on the driveway. Before the situation had even registered on my consciousness, Panda stopped abruptly and took a couple of steps backward, very deliberately stopping my forward motion along with her own. I asked Panda to go forward, and she looked toward the left, but the lawns were still covered by banks of plowed snow, so we couldn't get around the car by that route.

Since the street is very narrow, and going around the car to the right would have put us right in the middle of the street and in the path of cars approaching from either direction, Panda rightly judged that that was not a very safe choice either. She turned to the right in front of me, then stopped and pressed against me as if to bar my way. I agreed with her that it would not be safe to go around the stopped car as we would have gone around a trash bin or a leaf pile at the curb.

Instead I decided to cross the street and walk along the right edge of the road until we got past the car, then cross back to the left edge and proceed to the corner.

Panda followed my directions willingly and flawlessly. I was glad that I had chosen to cross the street rather than walk out and around the car, because as we walked along the right side of the street, a car passed us in either direction, and I would have felt distinctly uncomfortable being out in the middle of the street at that point. Panda's response to this incident gives strong evidence, in my opinion, of the ability of miniature horse guides to exercise the same level of intelligent disobedience that we expect of our guide dogs.

We crossed the main street at the traffic signal, and then walked on the asphalt sidewalk/bike path down a long block, about half a mile, broken only by driveways and very wide parking lot entrances. There are no curbs or ramps marking the transition from bike path to parking lot entrance, only the slightest change in the asphalt surface. My guide dogs frequently failed to stop at these non-existent curbs. Yet Panda stopped at every one, 10 for 10! Is that due to the naturally high trainability of miniature horses, or to the power of Clicker Training and positive reinforcement?

Only once did she stray off course, and that was when I directed her to "find the curb", and she took me to a real curb at the end of a real sidewalk which leads to the high school. I love the way she tapped the curb with her little hoof to let me know exactly what she had found. I easily redirected her to the left and back to the bike path.

On the long straightaways I asked Panda to "hup up", and she picked up a delightful, perky trot that allowed us both to stretch our legs and get a little much-needed exercise. I felt the thrill of fluid forward-moving energy without feeling as if I were being pulled off my feet. The reactions of the fellow walkers and joggers we met along the way ranged from delighted surprise at seeing such a small horse to a matter-of-fact comment about the "seeing eye pony". But everyone commented on how lovely she is and how well she is doing her guide work. And she never became the slightest bit distracted or alarmed by the people. If I stopped to answer curious questions, Panda waited patiently. If I kept on walking, she did not object or seek attention from the people.

On our return home, I could tell that Panda was very pleased with our walk, as was I. We are learning to trust one another, and growing in confidence as a working team. And that is a very satisfying and happy outcome for both Panda and myself.

Thanks for opening this list and your minds to these reports of Panda's training and our progress as a working team.

Ann Edie

May 19, 2003

*Ann originally wrote this report for a guide dog list. Part of her post addresses a discussion people on that list were having on the use of leash corrections. In the last section of the report she describes the use of the "reset" to train what is wanted, as opposed to punishing directly an unwanted behavior. Her descriptions of Panda's recent walks give a good illustration of how the reset is used in working situations.*

Hi, All,

I thought you might like an update on what Panda, my miniature horse guide-in-training, has been doing since my last report in March.

I have been without a dog guide since last November, so I have been using my cane to get around, back and forth to school and generally whenever I travel. We had a long, unusually cold, and very snowy winter, which limited the amount of outdoor walking and training we could do. But now that spring has arrived here in the Northeast, we are getting out more and doing more training with Panda.

In April we attended the Equine Affaire, a large educational horse event and trade show in Columbus, Ohio. Panda had been there last year when she was just beginning to learn her guide work. This year she was able to serve beautifully as my guide animal as well as serving as the demo horse for her trainer, Alexandra Kurland's three demonstrations of Clicker Training with horses.

The fair grounds where the Equine Affaire is held present a complex and challenging setting in which to work a new guide. The indoor environment includes many stables with all breeds and sizes of horses, excited by the novel surroundings and calling to one another; trade show buildings with multiple aisles and shops and booths selling everything from jewelry and riding apparel to saddles and horse feed; demonstration areas ranging from small rings with bleachers to huge arenas with blaring public address systems, loud music and flashing lights, and seating for thousands of people; and exhibit areas for horse trailers, trucks, farm equipment, barn equipment, and fencing. Outdoors there are roadways clogged by huge tractor-trailers and horse trailers, expansive and jumbled parking lots, walkways with traffic barriers across them, horses of all kinds trotting by, some pulling fancy carriages with jingling harness bells, food vending stands with lines of people to navigate around, and a variety of food distractions, stairs and doors to work through, and of course, crowds of curious people who want to stop and talk about and pet, if they can, the tiny guide horse.

As soon as I picked up the harness handle, I could feel that Panda remembered this place from a year ago. She walked out confidently, stopping to indicate the changes in footing from concrete to brick and from brick to dirt, stopping at each of the widely spaced steps and tapping it with a dainty hoof, pausing before going through open doorways and curtains hung across aisles, stopping at chains strung across roads and touching them with her nose to make sure I knew they were there before working around them through narrow gaps. She remembered the routes between the various buildings and made changes in the route she chose in order to avoid vending stand lines and other congested areas.

One of the questions we wanted to pose during this weekend was how Panda would cope with the large crowds of people, many of whom might try to pet her or interrupt her work. The answer that Panda gave us consistently was that she could be patient while I spoke with the people, and that she could remain focused on her work despite interruptions and distractions and hands of all sizes reaching out toward her. One child even poked Panda in the side with the spurs she was carrying in her hand as she passed! But Panda just kept on her path! Whenever she paused, even on the stairs, people would form a semi-circle in front of us, blocking our way, and I would have to explain to them that Panda is a working horse and that they must not pet or distract her. Since the people who come to the Equine Affaire are there because they love horses and can't get enough of stroking them, it was even harder for these crowds to resist the temptation to ruffle Panda's mane or touch her tiny ears than it is for the ordinary city crowds.

Inside the trade show building, Panda worked through the crowded aisles like a pro. And she proved to be an excellent shopper, too! We shopped for sweatshirts for me at the Icelandic horse booth and for a raincoat and halter for Panda at the miniature horse booth. Panda was very patient, even for trying on her halter and raincoat, which is very hard for any youngster, human or equine!

During the Clicker Training demos, Panda showed the people how she can follow a target, stand quietly on a mat while posing beautifully, come when called, and heel. She helped demonstrate how behavior can be shaped through the use of a bridging signal and positive reinforcement and how individual behaviors can be strung together to form behavior chains.

Panda also spent hours in the tiny space of The Clicker Center booth, where Clicker Training books and videos are sold. She showed that she can be very good about just "hanging out" in the booth and not demanding attention from her people. She even lay down and took a nap. And to answer the concerns of those who are worried about housebreaking--she went for stretches of three hours or more without a relief break and had no accidents.

The Equine Affaire is a four-day event, plus another couple days of set-up and travel, of what could be very stressful working conditions for any new guide animal. Panda worked splendidly throughout, and handled all the stimulation, attention, and activity cheerfully and with curiosity and willingness. It was a very useful and successful training experience for all of us.

Back home we have been working in progressively more complex city conditions. Panda has proven adept at weaving among the lamp posts, front stoops, basement stairs, mailboxes, planters, window boxes, vehicles parked on the sidewalks, tree branches, dumpsters, and countless other obstacles encountered while walking along the narrow old side streets of Albany, while simultaneously avoiding or stopping at cracks and bumps in the sidewalk. She maintains a steady, unhurried pace which is comfortable and easy to follow, and shows excellent judgment in working around pedestrians, bicyclists, skateboarders, and baby strollers. She is doing very well finding crosswalks and curb cuts, and picks up her pace when crossing streets, so as to get us out of the street before the light changes. The older government buildings downtown provide wonderful long flights of stairs for us to go up and down. Panda is becoming very confident on outdoor stairs, and her even pace and solid back provide just the stability that make it so pleasant to follow her while coming down the stairs. She takes in stride loud construction equipment, scaffolding, blocked sidewalks, and construction site detours. She seems unconcerned by barking dogs or dogs straining at their leashes to get at her. We even encountered our first working guide dog in our travels, and Panda behaved entirely appropriately, despite the interest and distraction shown by the other guide.

Another lesson which we have been working on with Panda is that of just "hanging out" while her person attends a meeting or a concert, or eats dinner in a restaurant. Panda is learning that there are periods of time when she is to just relax while her person attends to business or social affairs. She has accompanied me to several full-length dinners in restaurants, including my family's Mother's Day dinner at a local Japanese restaurant. In restaurants we find a place where she can stand by my chair or alongside the table and be out of traffic. Then she goes into napping mode and waits patiently until I stand up and pick up the harness handle once again. By the way, although we are almost invariably greeted by excited whispering among the staff, followed by the appearance of faces peeking through half-opened doors from back rooms to verify the news that a miniature guide horse is present in the establishment, I have had no problems so far gaining access with my guide horse to places of public accommodation, such as restaurants and stores. And, of course, Panda's behavior gives proprietors no reason to object to her presence.

Panda has also been spending more time working with me in the high school where I teach. We are introducing her to this environment gradually, both to give Panda time to adjust to the high level of stimulation there, and to give the 1500 students time to get used to the notion of seeing a little horse in their school. Panda seems to enjoy working through the throngs of students moving, sometimes in surprising ways, down the corridors of the school. She is very consistent in stopping at intersections and waiting for directional cues from me before going on. She is doing very well at maneuvering through tight spaces and at finding doors and other landmarks. She has been

introduced to the nine students with disabilities in the special education class where I spend most of my workday. And in this setting, too, Panda is learning a "long stay", that is, to stand quietly in a corner near where I am working with students until I pick up the harness handle and ask her to guide me once again.

The way we are teaching Panda the "long stay" is to build the time she stands quietly literally one second at a time, clicking and rewarding each successful trial. If Panda moves before I have released her with the click, I simply ask her to move back into position, and I begin counting the seconds again. We have only begun to build Panda's understanding that duration is the criteria in this exercise. In the months ahead I will continue to work on this exercise, perhaps giving Panda a small "target", such as a mat, to stand on, while I gradually lengthen the time before I click and reward her. I will build this duration first in one location and then in others, gradually adding criteria of increased distraction levels and distance from me, as well as the time she is expected to stay.

I have been eager to begin panda's training in working on public transportation. But, as with every aspect of her training, we wanted to break the work into small steps and introduce the steps one at a time, so that Panda could experience success at each step, gain confidence and skill progressively, and not be overwhelmed by too much that was unfamiliar or confusing to her at any one time. So, before I took her onto an actual city bus or subway with a schedule to keep and all the noise, crowds, and movement of those conveyances, I wanted to find a stationary vehicle on which we could practice boarding, finding a seat, backing into a space, and standing quietly until it was time to get off. Happily, our State Museum in Albany provides just such an opportunity. The museum has an exhibit called Life in the City. As part of this exhibit they have an actual old subway car and a mock subway platform.

As it turned out, the stairs leading up to the subway platform were a bigger challenge to Panda than was the actual subway car. Panda has been learning how to walk deliberately and steadily up and down flights of outdoor stairs, and she has done very well at this task. We have done some limited work on indoor steps, but the slippery surfaces of the steps seem to worry Panda a bit. Although we have wanted to avoid putting cute little sneakers on Panda, we have concluded that some sort of non-skid footwear would be helpful to her, at least while she is learning to go up and down those indoor stairs. We have decided, however, to use non-skid shoes designed and made specifically for miniature horses, rather than sneakers made for human babies.

When Panda hesitated at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the mock subway platform, and gave evidence that something about those stairs worried her, we did not "correct" Panda or force her to go forward. Instead we welcomed this training opportunity and used the training method that Panda is familiar with, clicker training, to help her gain the confidence she needed to figure out the solution to the puzzle. Her trainer, Alexandra Kurland, placed her hand as a target a short distance in front of Panda and asked her to "touch". Panda stretched out her neck and touched Alex's hand with her nose. Alex gave her the signal that Panda knows means "yes, that is the right answer," a clicking sound, and gave Panda a tiny bit of grain as a reward. Then Alex again presented her hand as a target, this time a few inches further away from Panda's nose, so that Panda had to stretch further to touch it. When she did, she again heard the click and received her reward. This was repeated until Panda found she needed to place her front feet on the first step in order to reach Alex's hand. Then Panda made the decision herself to take that first step, and she was clicked and rewarded as before.

As the training session proceeded, Alex continued to move her target further ahead of Panda and up the stairs. Eventually, Panda found that she would need to place her back feet up on that first step in order to move forward to the target. When she made this choice, she was again given the click that means "that's right" and the reward for her correct response. Each time Alex clicked and delivered the treat, she asked Panda to back down to the bottom of the stairs and start again. So

Panda did not simply go up the stairs once, she got lots of opportunities to practice finding her balance and walking deliberately up the steps, placing each foot individually on the stairs until she had the rhythm of the footfalls and had gained the necessary confidence to walk all the way up the eight or so stairs to the simulated subway platform.

In this way, training remains a positive experience for Panda, and she gains confidence on the stairs because she is allowed to move at her own pace and to find her balance on the unfamiliar surface. Panda, like a dog, is small enough that she could be forced to go where we want her to go by simply pulling on her lead or pushing her around. However, we have found that the more positive and patient training method produces more solid and consistent results, a happy and confident worker, and none of the fear and anxiety associated with punishment and force.

Once up on the platform, Panda walked across the narrow gap between the platform and the subway car without hesitation. We found a seat and asked Panda to back into the space between our seat and the one in front of us and to stand sideways across our knees facing the aisle. She seemed very content to do this, and remained still and calm even when a young child began swinging from the overhead straps as if they were some sort of playground equipment, her swinging feet coming within inches of Panda's face. After viewing a video describing the workings of the New York City subway system and listening to the sounds of the subway, we exited the car and went on our way. Panda went down the steps from the platform much more readily than she had gone up. This surprised me, since I thought that going down stairs would be the more worrisome of the two directions. The next lesson in the public transportation series will involve getting on and off a stationary city bus, if we can find one, and then a short ride on an operating city bus. We will continue to work on stairs as they are encountered in our travels. But we will save the slippery, narrow indoor stairs until after we acquire the non-skid shoes.

In the meantime, Panda and I have been racking up walking miles by hiking the one and a half miles from my house to the barn where my riding horses live. Since spring has burst upon us and the grass has sprung to life, green and juicy, as tempting to a horse as the chattering squirrels and darting cats every step of the way along the route would be to a dog, we have been presented with another splendid opportunity to use the tools of clicker training to help Panda understand exactly what her job is. A typical training walk goes something like this. We start out from my suburban home, "country walking" along the edge of the road, the delicious green feast scant inches below Panda's quivering little nose. Before long, quite understandably, the temptation becomes too much for her two-year-old equine brain, and she dives to the grass for a scrumptious mouthful.

We treat this lapse as we would any other error in maintaining a straight line of walk, that is, I slide down the lead with my right hand, stop my forward movement, and ask Panda to take a few steps backward with me. This automatically brings her head up from the grass as we back up. If I am prompt in my pick up of the lead and backing up, Panda does not succeed in gaining the positive reinforcement of a bite of grass. But, in any case, her forward progress, as well as her grazing, have been interrupted. Then I simply ask her to go forward once again, and when she goes a few steps past the point of temptation, I click and give her a bit of grain or carrot.

This correction is not a "leash correction" or a punishment. There is no jerk on the lead, but rather a smooth pick-up and rock back. It is a "reset and start again" procedure. And even if Panda goes for the grass again as soon as she starts forward, I do not get angry or impatient with her, but merely pick up the lead and rock her back to start again, keeping her in position at my left side. After just one or two resets, Panda is able to go forward past the grass. I withhold my click and treat for a few more steps each time, until we are just walking down the road without a thought for the grass beneath her feet. As we go along I click and treat Panda occasionally for other criteria as well, such as walking straight down the center of the bike path, stopping at crosswalks, curbs, and other landmarks, and responding to my requests for changes of pace. If Panda again gives in to temptation at a spot where the grassy verge rises alongside the path, I simply repeat the slide down

and rock back procedure, and we go forward once again. I find this a very pleasant way to train, and Panda seems to find it an understandable and non-frustrating way to learn. So we arrive at the barn feeling energized and relaxed, rather than stressed and tired. And our relationship is strengthened and deepened with each successful walk, as we learn to trust each other, to read each other's signals, and to enjoy moving in freedom together down the road.

By the way, lest you think that Panda's life is one of unmitigated toil and confinement, let me hasten to assure you that Panda is given time, when out of harness, to graze and romp in the spring grass. She is doing her best to keep the lawn mowed in both Alex's back yard and my own. And, just as for our "big" horses, Panda's grazing time must be limited so as to prevent excessive weight gain and other health consequences. And Panda is learning that certain behaviors are expected when she has her harness on and others are reserved for times when the harness is removed and she is "off duty."

Panda's training is not yet complete, but she has certainly attained an excellent foundation in her guide work and gained many skills and tools which we can call upon to refine her work in the months ahead. I am very pleased with her progress so far, and I am greatly enjoying traveling with her as my guide and companion. If you would like to learn more about Panda's training or about Clicker Training in general, you are invited to visit Alexandra Kurland's web site: [www.theclickercenter.com](http://www.theclickercenter.com). Alex's book, **CLICKER TRAINING FOR YOUR HORSE**, is available in both cassette and braille format from the NLS. And if you have questions, feel free to contact me by E-mail at [annedie@nycap.rr.com](mailto:annedie@nycap.rr.com).

Ann Edie

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VISIT  
THECLICKERCENTER.COM**