

Choosing the Correct Bits and Achieving True Flexion and Responsiveness

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One of the most common areas of concern I come across while instructing at clinics and workshops is the topic of bits. People ask me many times, “What bit do you think I should use on my horse?” The answer will often begin with a question of my own, “Well what is your intended purpose of your riding and what level do you currently see yourself at?” The bit that we choose should be a direct reflection of the level of our horse, the event/activity we participate in, and the level we are at as horsemen.

Unfortunately, I have found that the more we rely on the bit we are using, the more we stray away from true harmony with our horse. Having a bit with long shanks combined with a high port doesn’t make our horse more broke. What it can do, in turn, is add a certain amount of polish on a “finished” horse. A smooth snaffle bit can cause just as much damage as a correction bit if in the wrong hands. Likewise, a correction bit (see below) can be just as mild as smooth snaffle when used correctly. That being said, when riding at home, most of my time is spent riding in a snaffle bit, such as the one seen below.



A Western correction bit.

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A smooth snaffle bit.

The advantages of using a snaffle bit are many. But before we advance to the snaffle bit, the horse should flexing in the halter. One of the first things I teach a horse before I even throw a leg over him is to give to pressure. This can be done as early as their yearling year. Stand at either side of your horse (horse should be haltered) with lead rope in hand. Slowly pull his head to the side you are standing. As soon as he gives to the pressure, give back. Repeat 5 or 6 more times on each side of the horse. Once the horse gets closer to being two years old, or has passed his two year old year and has mastered flexing with the halter only, you can now begin to think about putting a smooth snaffle bit in his mouth and flexing him with that. It is a good idea to let him stand tied in 15 minute increments with the bit in his mouth. This will require very little from him the first time you put the bridle on him and will

allow him to see that there is breaks. In doing so, I am giving him a chance to carry the bit and get used to it without me ever pulling on it. Once he has carried the bit for awhile, you can begin to flex him in the same manner you did with the halter. The best benefit of this exercise is that he can get more and more used to the bit without having to be saddled, thus avoiding any added stress. If you ride with me long enough, you will find that one of my goals around horses is to keep their stress level down as much as possible.

One of the main advantages of having this head start with your horse will be that you will have much more control over him when you decide to begin the breaking process. I tell many of my students that they will have much more control of their horse when they begin to break their horse if they have spent some time flexing him first. After you get on for the first time and your horse acts as though he's going to pitch a fit, having the option of pulling his head to one side and walk or trot in a small circle will settle him down. However, it can't be done if his neck isn't soft and bending properly. I will typically keep a horse in a smooth snaffle bit his entire 2 year old year. In any bit that you use, it is acceptable to use both hands. However, when riding with a snaffle it isn't just acceptable, it is recommended.

Depending on the level of the horse after his 2 year old year, I may use a snaffle bit that has a slow twist to the mouth piece.



D Ring snaffle with a "slow twist"



Snaffle with a "faster/harder twist"

The intended purpose of a bit with a twisted mouth piece is strictly for training purposes only. It serves as a tool to "soften up" our horse's mouth and make them more responsive.....if used responsibly and carefully. The larger the mouth piece and slower the twist, the more mild the bit will be. In turn, the smaller the mouth piece and faster/harder twist, the more severe it can quickly become.

Every time I lift on my reins, no matter the type of bit, I preface with a squeeze from my legs. This is my cue to the horse that something is coming. I never want to sneak up on my horse and pull on the reins without giving a warning first. But what are some the other benefits of using legs first? When we use our legs first, we are training our horses to rely on our legs as our means of communication. We can also keep them more collected and prevent them from breaking gait. Maintain forward motion is extremely important when training horses. Horses tend to understand things when we combine our training methods with forward motion. Before we know it, our horse is dropping his head and rounding up his back, based solely on a squeeze from our legs and with very little or no contact with the bit. When we squeeze with our legs and lift with our hands, our horse should give his face and pick his back up. Some horses do it better at the walk. Some do it better at the trot or jog. Each horse has his own

personality and it is up to us to figure out what that personality is, and how we can adapt our training program to that particular personality.

If we have been successful up to this point, we can possibly advance to the next level of bit (usually halfway through his 3 year old year). I consider the below bit on the left side to be good one to move up to. It is considered a snaffle bit, but with shanks. Thus, it is a shanked bit. The bit below on the right is considered bit with a “medium” port bit with a roller.



Snaffle bit with shanks



“Medium” port bit

These types of bits allow for more leverage and greater amounts of control. However, we must be careful when using them to be soft with our hands. It is critical at every moment of working with our horses that we are soft. This gets multiplied by about 10 when using leverage bits. If you choose to show in a shanked bit, it is only permissible if you are riding with one hand. In training, I will often ride with two hands, for the simple fact that I can do a better job training and communicating with my horse.

Choosing the bit you use can be a challenging task. There will be times when you have several options and all may have advantages. When starting out, it is important to seek that soft and supple reaction. If we don’t have that achieved, the best option is to rewind a few steps. You will find that your ride will be much more pleasant with a horse that responds to contact with your legs and hands in a willing and responsive manner. It all begins with those bending exercises and releasing as soon as they give to pressure. If we reward them at the right time, their responsiveness will begin to be quicker and quicker and will ultimately lead to more harmony with our horse.