

# **-BITS DO NOT CONTROL HORSES-**

( Irrefutable Truth #2 )

*“They have never learned that the bit is for communication, NOT CONTROL! When we try to rely on the bit for control instead of communication, our approach to training and problem solving becomes a matter of trying to contain a wreck.”*

Steve Jonkheere

“Steve’s Intelligent Horsemanship Principles “

I wanted to write this article for sometime but kept putting it off because I was concerned that it A) I would not do the topic adequate justice. B) that it might take volumes to really cover the topic of bits.

So, instead, I have decided to keep it as basic as possible and use generalities instead of too much detail. Yes, there are always exceptions to every rule but for the somewhat limited space I have available, I will only concern myself with generalities. The rest, well, that’s up to you to discover and find during your horsemanship journey.

The subject of bits, and their use, has been a topic of debates among horsemen and horsewomen for decades...equal only to debates concerning Creationism vs. Evolution and the ever unpopular 1st Amendment vs. Separation of Church and State....and yes, while I am being silly, to most horse owners, the debate on bits is a very serious matter.

People incorrectly assume that I am against bits...not at all. Not even close. What I AM against is the uneducated way we think about bits...the uneducated way we use bits, and the uneducated hands that pull, jerk and manipulate bits in a horse’s mouth. Now THAT is what I am against.

Now here is where I am about to get flamed and chided for my opinions....first, almost everyone agrees that in training, horses do not need bigger bits....the bigger bit theory comes from those who are either looking for a quick fix to a problem which usually stems

from a serious hole in a horse's training way back down the line....or....the bigger bit is used to compensate for the uneducated hands operating the reins or lack of good horsemanship skills.

If you find that you are needing to go into a bigger bit of any kind, or a severe mechanical hackamore, then you need to re-evaluate yourself and your horse's foundational training. There is a serious hole in the training – either yours or your horse's. Period.

Even Dale, Ron and Bob Myler, makers of Myler bits, state this truth in their book "A Whole Bit Better". In fact, they even go on to say that if your horse is resisting the bit you don't move up into a more severe bit, but rather move back down into a smoother snaffle and begin re-training.

*"Wait a minute. Softer? With resistance? Yes, go exactly the opposite as you might have learned. Take the horse as soft as he will allow. When the horse is resisting the current bit, it's too much bit for him and he can't relax. Your communication to him is not being properly received. Go to a softer bit so he doesn't resist, can relax and accept what you are communicating..... It is important to remember, however, that the bit is only a tool. A bit will not train your horse. Proper training takes time, patience, and repetition. And you need to have the correct tools to communicate what you are asking the horse to do – hands, legs, seat, voice and proper equipment."*

Dale, Ron, and Bob Myler  
"A Whole Bit Better"

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**Even this very mild Myler Comfort Snaffle can be a torture device in the wrong hands and with the wrong idea of how it works.**

Okay, so we understand that in the early stages of training we need re-training and not a bigger bit...in fact, to borrow a 'Parelli-ism' here...."bigger brain vs. bigger bit".

But then the horse's get so smart that we need a bigger bit....so the traditional rule of thumb is to go up into a curb bit....and according to the experts, your horse apparently gets so smart that he has to go up into even a bigger bit such as a Santa Barbara Spade bit for ultimate refinement....and if he isn't into this bit, then he isn't refined or 'finished'.

**HORSE BISCUITS!!!!**

**I DON'T SUBSCRIBE TO THAT SCHOOL OF THOUGHT!!!!**

I guess all the upper level dressage horses being ridden in D-ring snaffles aren't "finished" horses....? I guess all the fancy maneuvers, the pirouettes, piaffes and the passage are all elementary school movements and these horses still have a long way to go in their training....? These finely trained horses are most certainly "finished" horses.

Most recently, the idea of a horse not being "finished" unless they are in a full spade bit style bridle comes from those who train in the Vaquero tradition. Don't get me wrong, the Vaquero tradition and it's philosophy and principles produce some of the finest horses, but it is most certainly not the last word on training horses. In fact, lately there seems to be a shift toward any form of 'natural training' stemming from those who advocate the Vaquero tradition. Don't believe me? Take a look at the horse industry magazines and you see it's influence throughout all the pictures and articles.

Look, the Vaquero way, the way I see it, is not the final word on horsemanship or training. It is a discipline. Much like saying English is a discipline or Western is a discipline.

Tell me, what does a Santa Barbara spade bit, romel reins, bosalito with horsehair mecate, chinks, expensive Garcia spurs, and flat crowned Spanish Cordoba styled hat have to do with English riding? Absolutely nothing. So I guess all those millions of people riding and training English style all over the world are wasting their time because their horses will never be a high caliber finished horse, right? NOT!!!

But there are those who jump up to defend the Vaquero way and say that it isn't the tack, but rather the principles and concepts involved in that discipline which will make fine horses. EXACTLY !!!!! So a horse, any horse, can be "finished" and not have to be ridden in a giant heavy silver inlaid Santa Barbara spade bit.

The other problem that I find with this seriously flawed thinking comes from clinicians themselves. That's right, WE are to blame for the problems that are arising out of uneducated people putting college level bits into their elementary school level horses and compounding biting problems.

In the last 10 years, we have seen great horsemen and horsewomen produce tape series which teach someone how they can, in the privacy of their own home, gently and start a 2 or 3 year old under saddle....and some even spout off it can be done in an

hour or less. What we are encouraging here is for somewhat green riders to buy young green horses and start the horses themselves.....and immediately after the snaffle bit, they put a 5 inch shank curb bit in the horse's mouth for "control" and stopping power. I have seen these bits in the mouths of horses who were barely over 2 years old !!!! Again, that's like trying to communicate in high school English Lit level conversation to a horse who is still learning about "See spot run. Run spot, run". And what does the Vaquero tradition teach after that? Well, you did fine now, so if you really plan on "finishing your horse" you need to put him up into a Santa Barbara Spade bit.

BUT WAIT.....

Has anyone even bothered to take the time to teach these home grown Vaquero video aficionados on how to use their hands so that they can communicate through that loud bit and it be only a whisper?! 99% of the time, they have not. So the backyard homeowner buys a clinician's tape series and then proceeds to buy a very college level bit and puts it in their young horse's mouth but their own hands may still be 1st or 2nd grade level. What do you think is happening in that horse's mouth?!!! What type of communication do you think we are having with our horse's at that moment?!!! Those reins connected to those spade bits need to be trained....if you are going to use a college level bit, you need college level hands!!! Nothing else will suffice. Period.

Also, the Vaqueros didn't finish a horse in one year..or even two years.....horses weren't considered full bridle horses – finished horses – until they were 6 or 7 years old....not 2 or 3 years old!!!!!!

*"Most people believe that you should start a horse with a really quiet bit, so-to-speak. Then the further along in the horse's training you go, the bigger the bit you should automatically put in his mouth because it takes a bigger bit for him to understand more. People think that there's a direct relationship between what a horse knows and what kind of bit is in his mouth. What actually happens is that the horse gets used to the bigger and bigger bits. Eventually, you need the bigger bit because the horse is used to the beating he gets with it every day.....Horses are so sensitive that they can feel a fly land on their skin. They can feel and understand a mild bit if the rider knows how to use it. But you can't train in shouts and show in whispers. When you*

*put a bit in the horse's mouth that multiplies your pressures you lose your corridor of aids."*

Ron Meredith  
"Loud Bits Destroy Communication"  
online article  
[www.meredithmanor.com](http://www.meredithmanor.com)

One last thing....again, blaming the current Vaquero fad for a lot of the misconceptions that we hold as the 'norm' in today's horse world, the Spanish word for bit is "Freno"....which translates to the English word "Brakes" So even within the Vaquero tradition there lies misinformation. If they teach that bits do not control horses and that it is a communication tool, why then do they use a word that literally translates into "brakes" ? In other words, "brakes" stop horses...."brakes" control horses. Confusing isn't it?

And again, Don't take my word for it...I would never post anything that you can't go check out for yourself....go to any online free translation website and type in the word "freno" or the word "brakes" and you will get the other word in translation.

So let's change direction here a minute....log on to almost any general horse training internet message board and you will find dozens of posts asking the same question...

*"Which bit do I use?"...."Help me get control of my horse!"...."Help, I can't stop my horse!"...."My horse runs through the bit!!"... etc., etc....these type of questions are endless.*

Despite the fact that several competent, experienced and knowledgeable people offer the advice of beginning training again and dropping back down into a basic snaffle bit, the majority of responses still boil down to using a bigger more severe bit to get the horse to listen.

Why? Well the excuses are as plentiful as there are bits in a catalog.....

Because their trainer has good success with Tom Thumb bits.....or.....because their other horse acts just fine in a mechanical

hackamore.....or the ever popular.....horses are individuals and some need to have a bigger bit to control them.

And some people ignorantly fall for such erroneous advice because they won't take the time to explore and discover the answers for themselves....they just want the problem fixed without having to go through some real problem-solving sweat. And of course, the problem never stems from the bad hands....why everyone on these internet boards have absolutely perfect hands because they have been riding for years and their grandpa taught them to ride and he was the best rider they had ever seen. Yadda, yaday, yadda....Okay, okay, you get the picture.

The other reason why they search for the better controlling bit is that they tend to blame the horse. It seems that everyone on the internet has perfect hands...by golly, they have all been riding since they were three and they know how to ride....yep, they are all perfect in the communication of their aids.....so the fault must lay blame on the horse....no, No, **NO!!!**

The simple truth of the matter is **BITS DO NOT CONTROL HORSES !!!**

If bits controlled horses and stopped horses we would never have stories of a horse "running through the bit". If bits controlled horses, we wouldn't have over 300 bits and custom parts for bits in one single catalog. We would have maybe 2 bits and that would be it.....but instead someone found a flaw in a particular bit and began modifying the bit until it became something else....and so on and so on. Look in the most recent National Roper Supply catalog and count how many bits, versions of bits and custom bit parts there are in the catalog. It will absolutely astound you!

Someone once asked me via email, if bits do not control horses then how do we get control over a horse and how far down the line do we need to go to re-train and eventually 'finish' a horse? Great questions!

**Control comes from controlling 5 very small, but VERY significant things....**

- A) The horse's mind**
- B) The horse's four feet.**

And these things are very closely connected and inter-mingled.

Okay, I can already see you guys rolling your eyes and letting out this long sigh....I make no apologies here.....this is the truth no matter who says it and regardless of the individual horse.

Long before you can ever willingly move a horse physically, long before you can ever stop a horse physically, turn a horse, side pass a horse, jump a horse, etc....long before any of those physical actions can be done, there must be a yielding of the horse's mind ...and once the horse yields to you mentally, the feet follow right along.....and when the feet follow along willingly, the body just naturally does what you want it to do. It is the same way in uncontrollable situation as well. If the horse is scared the mind will cause the feet to act in a certain way....prance, spin, RUN!

On the trail, when a rider does not have the horse's mental and emotional components under control, what do you see? A horse that speeds up all the time, a horse that cant walk slow because the other horses are getting too far ahead, a horse that will jig and toss it's head, and a rider who is having to fight their horse the entire time. What a physically and emotionally draining experience. Instead of enjoying our horses and creating partnerships, these people spend their entire lives trail riding the same old horse in the same old way with the same old training using the same old tack.....but they expect different results. Now THAT'S insane!!!

*"Bits are a mystery to most people. The most common misconception seems to be; the bigger the misbehavior, the bigger the bit you need to correct it. I, on the other hand, teach people why they really don't even need a bit to control their horses. In most cases it's a revelation for the person and a relief for the horse. Horses run off or bolt out of fear. Its starts in the mind, goes through the body and down the legs to the feet. Once the horse is this frightened the rider is essentially riding scared feet. Most of the time it doesn't matter what bit is being used in the horse's mouth he can't be stopped. I've seen horses with huge shank bits, martingales and nosebands stick their chins on their chests and go! When prey animals get that emotional, and they need to save their lives, they will run through anything, painful or not."*

Pat Parelli

"A BIT OF SAVVY: Where, When and Why To Use A Bit"

online article  
www.parelli.com

*“A bit doesn’t mechanically slow a horse down. Horses must be taught what the use of the bit means and must have an incentive to respond to it’s message. But novice riders generally don’t understand this and think of the reins and bit as brakes, that somehow pulling on a bit mechanically affects a horse’s speed.”*

John Lyons

“Communication Through Cues pt 2”

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*Do tough horses really need tougher bits? Big bits are used when the common belief is that to get control of a horse, you have to over-power him. Having to use a bigger bits a sure sign you have little or no communication with your horse’s mind.”*

Pat Parelli

“Level 1 Partnership Pack

Now I can hear a lot of you already saying, *“Yeah, okay, I understand that I have to control the mind and emotions to be able to control the feet, but that takes time and I need to control this horse now. So what can I do?”*

## **GET OFF OF THAT HORSE !!!**

If you are in such a rush that you cannot spend the time it takes to develop that mental, emotional and physical connection with your horse – or any horse for that matter – then you have no business riding that horse!!! That applies to trainers and clinicians as well!!! Get off that horse because you are essentially riding a “train wreck waiting to happen”.

Look, if you think I am going to suggest some magical piece of tack that is going to solve the horse industry’s problems or give you a 10 second cure all exercise, then you are mistaken and you really don’t know what I am about and how strongly I feel about my philosophy of horsemanship. First, it wont do the horse justice...second, it will most probably endanger you and get you hurt....third, I just don’t work like that.

So how far back down the line do we have to go to get control of the horse's mind and feet? Well, all the way back to square one if need be. It doesn't matter if the horse is weanling or if the horse is a 20 year old senior. To gain control of the horse we have to go back to the place where we lost control to begin with...at the beginning.

Remember, just like a horse's body needs training for a particular task, so does his mind and emotions.

We control the body by controlling the feet....and we control the feet by controlling the mind and emotions.

Too often I see people trying to hold back a 1000 pound horse by pulling back with all their might and yet the horse continues to buck, or run off. They are still trying to control the physical component of the horse. Part of the reason is that they don't understand where their hole is in the horse's training (and the rider's as well). They also see the reins as something connected to the face. When I am riding a horse in a clinic, any horse, rarely do I use a bit regardless of whose horse it is. When I trail ride I never use a bit. Usually we will run into other riders along the trail and inevitably someone will ask why I am riding without a bit and how do I go about stopping my horse or turn his nose in the direction that I want to go. Again, they still believe that reins and bits control horses.

Let me take a moment and explain something here.....

Even when you use a bit....any bit....the reins ARE NOT connected to the face...the reins are "attached" to the horse's face, but they are "connected" to the horse's feet. All four feet to be exact. But this is a difficult concept for some people to understand.

Instead of thinking horizontally, that the reins are connected from your hands straight out horizontally and connected to the face...begin to think VERTICALLY...that the reins are actually connected from your hands straight down to the horse's feet like a puppet master working a marionette. How's that for visualization? Does that paint a picture of what I am trying to convey?

Ray Hunt did a wonderful job of demonstrating this concept during the Tom Dorrance Benefit in Fort Worth...He was speaking on horsemanship and was riding this mare who was getting a little busy with her feet. He not only thoroughly explained the concept but proved it as well...for all to see. What a great way to see this first hand...to watch the master, himself, teach this concept.

Let's get back to the main point of this article.....

So control begins with mental and emotional control.....so how do we achieve that? How do we get it?

Well...to give you a step-by-step method would take volumes for me to detail out here....but let's start with this.....being uncontrollable is a problem....and all problems fall into one of, or a combination of, four categories.....these are:

## **SELF PRESERVATION**

Trust – Respect - Communication

Notice that I put Self Preservation above all else and in bold block letters. That is because nature put it above all else in the horse's DNA. There is nothing that we can do to change that fact. When a horse becomes confused, frightened, excited, threatened, etc., he automatically switches from being left brained to right brained and Self Preservation kicks in. The need for fight or flight comes from his right brain. Logic goes right out the window when the switching of brain sides occurs. This is who he is as a prey animal and his very existence relies on Self Preservation being the number one thing in his life.

The first responsibility that falls on the human is Trust . It is the essential building block that all horse/human relationships, and partnerships, are built upon. Before anything else, a horse must first have to trust you to truly give of himself and ignore his instinctual Self Preservation .

The second responsibility that a human has to shoulder is earning

Respect. Now there are a lot of similarities between Trust and Respect when dealing with a horse. The two almost have to go hand in hand. If you stop and think about it, you really can't have Trust without having Respect . They each are byproducts of one another. First a horse has to learn to Trust you. You earn the Trust by teaching him that, as his leader, you will not lead him into harm nor abuse him. His best care is in your hands. With this, he learns to Respect you. The more he Respects you, the more he will Trust you...and the more he Trusts you, the more he will Respect you. It takes TIME (training principle #1) to earn and create a relationship built on Trust and Respect...however...it literally only takes about 2 seconds to completely destroy the Trust and Respect and thereby destroying the relationship.

The last responsibility that humans must shoulder is Communication . I find that in most cases, problems occur when there is a break down in Communication between horse and human. I will tell you in plain English right now that when it comes to miscommunication it is always the human's fault. We tend to be rather ego-centric and almost demand that every being understand our spoken language, intent, body language, thoughts, emotions, etc. Somehow we expect all to conform to human way of understanding. But horses don't think like we do. It is we humans who need to change our thought processes in order to better Communicate with horses.

I have people tell me that their horses are tossing their heads, or being cinchy when they have always acted normal during saddling. They will explain how their horses are now playing hard to catch in the pasture and are constantly wringing their tails and pinning their ears. They immediately revert to using force or mechanical devices to correct problem. Again, they are attempting to stop the symptoms instead of curing the cause. All these little signals that the horse is giving us are signals. It is his way of talking. This is what his language is based on and we just sit back and simply ignore the conversations. Or we want to ask our horse to slow down so we pull back on both reins. Then later we want a transition of gait or leads and we pull back with both reins. When we want the

horse to back, we pull back with both reins. If we feel we are losing our balance we tend to pull back with both reins and use them to balance ourselves. Through all of this we expect the horse to understand our intent yet the signal that we are giving them is exactly the same and very confusing. Once again, it is the human at fault in the miscommunication.

So what we would like to do is invert that formula to look more like this:

## **TRUST – RESPECT – COMMUNICATION**

Self Preservation

Once we can invert the formula so that the horse's need for Self Preservation is reduced, we then can begin establishing a partnership in which the horse will look to us as their leader...and this will give us control long before we ever put a bit in that horse's mouth.

In fact, in my Less IS More Philosophy, all early training should be done without a bit....in other words, I try to achieve vertical flexion, lateral flexion, backing, walk, trot, canter, stopping, side-passing, disengaging hindquarters, moving the forehand, lowering the head, etc....all in a halter long before biting a horse. Why? To preserve the horse's mouth and to preserve the horse's "try".

Once we achieve these tasks and the horse is light and supple, then it is just a matter of adding the snaffle bit and REFINING the communication and REFINING my other aids.

See, as I alluded to before....control of a thousand pound animal comes from riding and controlling the mind and feet. I know that for some of you that is a hard concept to grasp. Why? Because you have always been taught to physically control a horse through physical means. This has been ingrained into your thinking whether you realize it or not. And it's probably not even your fault that you think this way. In your mind, the bigger bit theory is the accepted norm. Well, no longer. It's time to start doing some research and

start raising your own level of horsemanship up to meet your horse's needs.

Have you ever seen, either in person or on video, some of Pat and Linda Parelli's students? Now I am not advocating their program here...I am just pointing out that if you had seen their students, you would see riders going about walking, trotting, cantering, jumping and just all around playing with their horses...and doing it all bareback and in a rope halter...or bareback and bridle-less!!! Those horses turn when they are supposed to turn, stop when they are asked to stop and back up when they are asked to back up.

What you won't see are leverage bits or mechanical hackamores of any kind on any horse. WHY?!!! Forget the hype, forget what you hear and what you may, or may not, like about Pat and his program....have you ever asked yourself how do these riders maintain control of their horses? They are all just playing around having fun in absolute control. Take a look at the horses...you won't see pinned ears, stressed bodies, wide eyes or wringing tails....even the horses look like they are having fun!!!

They have achieved this by inverting the formula so that there is trust before respect and that trust and respect comes through great communication....and the investment of TIME (the number one training principle and tool in horsemanship).

Look at pictures of our Granddaughter Janessa....you can see pics of her at age 3, 4 and now at age 5 and see her riding her horse bareback and in a halter.

### **Trust. Respect. Communication.**

Again, forget the hype and forget the egos and just look at the horses and the mental and emotional control (that's all that matters anyway)

Horses don't lie, my friends....in fact, horses never lie...

So whether you have a horse that runs through the bit and cannot be stopped, or you have a horse that you can ride bareback and bridle-less...

they are living proof that...

## **BITS DO NOT CONTROL HORSES!!!**



**Vaquero aficionados state that your horse isn't "finished" unless they are straight up in the bridle wearing bits like these...**

**Do you agree?**



Truly, if horses never lie,  
then this is proof that...

Bits **DO NOT** control horses !!!