An Aunt and Uncle both needed a set of dentures. They decided to get one set and share. The Aunt had no problems eating, but my Uncle was always complaining. I think the same goes with the concept one bit fits all horses. Consider the teeth of the horse and the bit carefully.. Also do not forget about your legs, seat and hands as a potential problem.

Jellico Morning Belle aka Glory Bee - Glenn and Sandra Allen

Gaited Morgan Horse Magazine update

Photo: Erica Larson, News Editor

the HORSE
YOUR GUIDE TO EQUINE HEALTH CARE

Bitting Problems and Your Horse

By Tracy Gantz • Dec 03, 2012 • Article #30981

Evaluate dental health and bit suitability to determine if this piece of equipment could be causing training issues.

Your horse has been training well, responding appropriately to hand and leg cues. But one morning he starts tossing his head and leaning on one rein, and you're at a loss as to why.

Meanwhile, another rider in your barn saddles up the horse she just purchased. The horse performed perfectly when she tried him out, but now he isn't nearly as responsive.

Both cases could have several causes, but one thing owners must not overlook is the possibility of ill bit fit coupled with dental problems. If a horse's teeth are bothering him, any bit could feel uncomfortable or painful. Or if the bit doesn't fit or isn't the proper selection for your particular horse, your time in the saddle won't be as enjoyable or productive.

How can you tell whether your horse's performance problem stems from his bit? Mary S. Delorey, DVM, an equine dental practitioner in Washington state, and California-based trainers Jamie Cuzick and Dory Breneman discuss how to determine when bitting and dental issues could be at the root of your equine training dilemma.

Check the Teeth

A regular check of your horse's teeth will help you avoid many issues that can affect how your horse responds to the bit. Delorey also recommends a dental evaluation as part of any

prepurchase exam. That way, a prospective owner knows the kind of dental work the horse has had and whether he might need any special care.

Delorey runs Northwest Equine Dentistry Inc. and treats horses from all disciplines. She routinely performs what she terms enamel point reduction and occlusal adjustments, which can prevent many problems--and not just with the bit.

"Probably the most common bitting problem horses encounter is due to uncomfortably sharp enamel points that develop on the outside edges of the upper cheek teeth and the inside edges of the lower cheek teeth," says Delorey. "The bit or other parts of the bridle can pinch sensitive soft tissue between the bit and these sharp edges. Smoothing these sharp enamel points on a regular basis can help to keep horses happy in their tack."

Malocclusions, characterized by the upper and lower teeth contacting incorrectly, can cause bit discomfort as well. "Cheek teeth and incisor malocclusions can prevent proper motion of the horse's jaw during work," says Delorey, "and negatively impact the horse's ability to collect or work optimally in the bridle."

Delorey, like many equine dental practitioners, removes wolf teeth if a horse has them. These teeth, present in about 50% of horses, sit in front of the cheek teeth and, in some instances, can interfere with the bit.

Diseased teeth and periodontal disease (that of tooth-supporting structures) can also cause bit problems. Delorey says regular dental checkups can allow an equine dental practitioner to catch these things early, before they become serious.

Sudden behavioral changes, such as tossing the head or leaning on one rein, might signal a potential dental problem, Delorey says. But you might see other signs unrelated to your riding. For instance, Cuzick checks a horse's feed tub regularly, looking for food scattered around the bin, which could indicate the horse isn't chewing efficiently.

"If they don't have a smooth plane with their teeth, they're not breaking their food down," Cuzick says. "Maybe you can't keep weight on the horse--it could be a sign that he has a dental problem."

Cuzick first rode horses on Western ranches and at rodeos with cousin Gary Leffew, a world champion bull rider. Cuzick also rode as a jockey and has worked as an extra and rider for movies and TV shows, and he now trains all types of horses. Earlier this year,

Cuzick retrained many of the racehorses used in the television series *Luck* for other careers that included English and Western disciplines.

Bit Horses Individually

A bit that works for one horse might be ineffective for another, even within the same discipline. Cuzick considers the individual as well as the discipline when choosing the appropriate bit. With the *Luck* horses, for instance, he needed to teach racehorses how to back out of the bit and accept rein pressure.

"Racehorses run into the bit (lean into the pressure of a rider's hand)," Cusick says. "Now we want to get those horses to relax and come out of the bit."

Horses respond to pressure in their mouth, and bits can apply that pressure in different areas--the bars of their mouth, which are the gaps between the incisors and molars, the tongue, and even the roof of the mouth. Every horse has different sensitivities in each of those areas.

For example, in retraining a racehorse Cuzick might try a light curb bit with a shank, which

uses a lever action to apply pressure to the roof of the mouth, instead of the racing snaffle bit, which puts direct pressure on the tongue and bars. Because the horse now feels pressure in a different spot, he might not respond as he typically would by grabbing the bit. Then Cuzick can start teaching the horse to drop his head and collect himself.

"Some horses are a lot more forward than others," says Cuzick. "When I apply pressure with a curb, it backs them out of the bit. The minute they back out, I release the pressure right away. Now all of a sudden the light starts going on--when I touch them lightly and release it, they are no longer up into the bit."

Cuzick uses exercises such as circles, starts, and stops to teach horses to back out of the bit. As they respond better to his seat and hands, he might transition to a less severe bit.

Many trainers start young horses in a thick snaffle, which generally is easy on the mouth. But not every horse responds to a bit the same way.

"Choosing a specific bit for a specific horse is part science and a large part art," says Delorey. "A veterinarian, during an oral exam, can make recommendations about how to accommodate things like a low palate or a very large tongue or a horse that has excessive loose soft tissue. But the bottom line is that each horse is an individual and may not respond the way we think he should to a given bit choice."

Breneman trains dressage horses and riders at Rancho Tujunga, but she comes from a background working with gaited horses, Morgans, and driving horses. Before choosing a bit for a horse, she works the youngster in driving reins on the ground.

"You have to teach a young horse manners and submission before you ever think about what type of bit he should wear," she says.

Breneman also doesn't rush the process of introducing the horse to wearing a bit. One tactic she employs is having the horse wear the bit and bridle in the stall regularly to get used to it.

A hores's conformation and size play an important role in what bit you'll choose. Bits come in different widths and lengths, most commonly 5 or 5½ inches long. Breneman explains how an Arabian or Quarter Horse type whose muzzle fits neatly into one hand needs a narrower bit than a Warmblood, whose muzzle might not fit into two hands cupped together. If a bit is too tight, the pressure on the sides of the mouth will be too severe. Too loose, and the bit can swivel in the mouth, clanging on teeth and being ineffective.

Bitless Bridles

Though the vast majority of riders and disciplines use bits for guiding a horse, in some cases bitless options could be the answer. The most common bitless bridle is the hackamore, which typically works via pressure on the noseband. However, some bitless bridles are structured to apply pressure in other areas, such as the poll or jaw.

"Sometimes a horse focuses everything on pushing against the bit," says California trainer Jamie Cuzick. "If you take the bit completely out of their mouth, now they pull in on the poll and down on their nose. Some will respond to that better."

In a 2009 study of four horses, published in the *Equine Veterinary Journal*, for instance, all horses exhibited improved behavior while wearing a bitless bridle versus a jointed snaffle.

Improper bit use or a bridle accident can damage the horse's bars (the space between the horse's incisors and cheek teeth), lip, or tongue, perhaps causing bone spurs or lacerations, says Washington-based equine dental practitioner Mary S. Delorey, DVM. Surgery might be needed to remove bone spurs. These types of cases might warrant using a bitless bridle.

"Remember that the use of bitless headgear does not eliminate the need for thorough dental

exams and comprehensive care," says Delorey. "The biomechanics of proper movement can hinge on a healthy, properly functioning mouth and are just as critical sans bit."

--*Tracy Gantz*

Other considerations include bit material, such as copper, which encourages the horse to salivate.

"You want the horse to be happy with the bit, and copper has a sweet taste," says Cuzick. "When they're salivating, that keeps their mouth moist. That way you aren't pulling on the bit in a dry mouth, which can be uncomfortable for them. I might use a bit with a copper roller (mouthpiece) to give them something to play with."
Delorey also encounters horses that wear away part of their first cheek teeth by taking the bit between their teeth and chewing on it aggressively.

"I think this is usually an expression of stress or discomfort from the horse," she says. "I usually show the rider or trainer the abnormal wear to the teeth and suggest making some changes, either to the bit or the riding. I take photos and measurements to monitor the progression in the future."

Maybe It's the Rider

Many bitting problems don't result from the bit itself, but with the rider's hands and seat. A bit that looks severe might actually be easier on a horse's mouth when used by a rider who understands its mechanics.

"I think most bits, properly used for the purpose intended and most importantly in soft, quiet hands, which are an extension of the rider's seat and legs, are safe for the horse," says Delorey. "The rider's seat is the most important part of this equation. Effective communication with the horse comes from the foundation of seat and legs. No bit can replace that, nor should it."

Breneman often outfits the same horse in a different bit based on whether she's riding and training him or whether she is training the rider.

"It depends on (the person's) riding ability, how they use their hands, the tension in their forearm, and where they are in their skill level," says Breneman. "While it depends on the horse, usually I will use a softer bit for an amateur, something with less of an edge to it."

Less-experienced riders might not be able to keep their hands quiet enough to use a stronger bit properly. Maybe they don't release the pressure when the horse responds, causing the horse to toss his head and appear to fight the bit. This isn't a bitting problem--it's a riding problem.

Advanced dressage horses typically work in a double bridle, with both a snaffle and curb bit. Breneman doesn't let her students ride in a double bridle until they have demonstrated enough skill with their seat, position, and body mechanics in a snaffle bridle.

"Any bit carelessly used can cause pain or damage," says Delorey. "Conversely, any bit, properly used, can be a gentle and effective training aid."

Recent Research

With increased awareness of equine welfare and equitation science, more researchers are evaluating just how bits affect horses' mouths. W. Robert Cook, FRCVS, PhD, completed a study recently looking at evidence of bit-related damage in 66 domestic horse skulls and 12 wild horse skulls. He determined 88% of the domestic skulls showed evidence of either bone or dental damage in the structure near **where the bit contacts the skull**.

Similarly, Hilary M. Clayton, BVMS, PhD, Dipl. ACVSMR, MRCVS, Mary Anne McPhail Dressage Chair in Equine Sports Medicine at Michigan State University, has evaluated the

position of the bit in a horse's mouth with and without rein tension. Essentially, Clayton suggested that riders should try to avoid putting pressure on the hard tissues (like the palate and the jaw bones) and keep the **pressure primarily on the tongue**.

Consensus among researchers, however, seems to be that riders should choose bits or bitless bridles carefully as suited to their individual horses.

Take-Home Message

If a horse isn't responding properly to his bit, work with a veterinarian and trainer to ensure his teeth aren't bothering him or interfering with the bit. A regular dental exam and enamel point reduction can keep the points smooth, enabling the bit to work efficiently.

Take a horse's conformation, mouth size, and mouth sensitivities into consideration when choosing the proper bit. Some horses respond better to direct pressure on the bars and tongue, while others do better when the pressure is applied to the roof of the mouth. Quiet hands coupled with good use of seat and legs yield the best response, no matter what type of bit is used.