



Gaited Horsemanship



with

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About Bits

By: Larry Whitesell

It is unbelievable how many different bits have been developed and are now available for your purchase. In fact there's an entire industry that has been created around them. Each bit touts some level of performance it will enable or some behavior it will change or correct. Think about this for awhile though; why are there so many different bits? The bottom line is this, the more places the bit creates pressure and the more moveable parts it has, the more confusing the bit will be to your horse. I've been working with gaited horses for 30 years now so I've seen things come and go. The new fad is a combination bit that puts pressure down on the pole, puts pressure back on the nose, puts pressure up under the chin and we've not even talked about what it does inside the mouth yet. If the horse were to move off pressure as we teach, where is he to go? I want to be a horse trainer, not a mechanic. I don't expect bits to do my job for me. The more simple the tool the clearer it is for the horse, the easier it is for me to teach and train the horse.

I am not sure why people get so passionate about what bit to use. We do clinics across the country and I constantly get questions about what bit should I use? I do almost all my training with a snaffle (broken mouthpiece, no shanks) bit because it is a lateral tool. I also have a Monty Foreman shank bit. I can train any horse to any level in them. It is not really whether one is more or less severe, but how I use it and how quiet my hands are to the horse. The bit is nothing more than a preparatory cue. If your bit does anything more then let your horse know what you are going to do, then you are misusing it.

In his book, *Exploring Dressage Techniques*, Paul Belasik says: *"If you handle resistance with force, you don't need technique. You need bigger muscles. If you want to handle resistance in other ways, it is going to be directly related to: the level of your skill, the quality of your horsemanship and your knowledge of the different options."*

Some people see a shank bit as abusive. Others say a snaffle is a nut cracker. Neither is true if used properly. They say guns don't kill people, people do. The same can be said of bits hurting horses.

I always laugh about the idea of snaffle bit being a nutcracker. It is true if you take a broken

snaffle bit and fold it over your arm it might pinch if you pull down hard. But think about this for awhile. If a snaffle bit could fold up enough to pinch your horse's tongue or jam up to touch the roof of your horse's mouth where would you have to be applying pressure or riding from? I would say that you'd probably have to be riding from underneath your horse's head pulling with both hands and have already broken your horse's jaw to accomplish this. It might just be me but that's not where I prefer to ride. Therefore, next time someone tells you a snaffle bit is a nutcracker you can assume that they have essentially told you they don't know how to use one or how it works.

We all say that we must train a young horse on two sides. We train the right and left side. A lateral tool such as a snaffle or side pull allows this to happen. A shank bit is a vertical tool so the horse must be very supple with good lateral flexion and at least an understanding of vertical flexion before using one. Once the horse understands how to flex longitudinally through his neck and body, there is nothing wrong with riding him in a shank bit. If a horse understands how to turn off your seat and legs and get in a lateral frame, then a shank bit is easy for the horse.

If, however, you think a bit will collect your horse you will run into problems. A bit is to help you do a job, not do your job for you. If a horse is not taught lateral and longitudinal flexion before being introduced to a shank, he will contract his neck. It will make him lock in the occipital joint that connects the skull and atlas vertebrae. Once this happens he locks his jaw and will not use his back correctly. This causes many gaited horses to pace. These horses will become inverted or hollow causing resistances. The shank bit when used incorrectly does a wonderful job of covering up holes in your horse's training.

Many horses that run through the bridle, are buddy sour, spook, rear, are dull or have many other emotional insecurities have become blocked in one or more joints or vertebrae. When horses develop these defenses that we see as bad behavior, they are usually a result of emotional issues that are brought on by physical issues.

If muscles become tense then the joints that they move don't work properly. When joints don't work, movement is affected which will affect the horse's balance. When you take balance from a horse then all these emotional problems start popping up. So, to restore sanity we have to restore balance. To restore balance we have to relax the horse so muscles can allow the joints to restore movement. It's really quite simple equine biomechanics.

Rehabilitation is easiest to accomplish in a snaffle. When used correctly you can lengthen the muscles again with lateral movements and allow the blocked vertebrae to free up. A shank bit (vertical tool) does not allow this to happen. The problem is, the more some riders have trouble with control, the more they feel the need to use a bigger piece of equipment. The rider never really solves the problem for the horse. Instead they use intimidation through their equipment and because they see a temporary change they think they solved the problem. They may, for example, slow down a rushing horse for awhile but the horse lives with the stress created in his joints by the contraction of his muscles. He may start spooking or become buddy sour or several other common resistances. These riders go to all extremes to fix what they see as their problem.

It would be great if riders would worry less about how they are going to change their horse to benefit themselves and worry more about why the horse is defending himself in the first place. If we took the time to solve his issues he might consider giving us a more enjoyable ride.

My suggestion: Instead of spending time trying to figure out which bit to use, spend time learning technique. I know it takes more time, but maybe your horse is worth it? Maybe he even deserves it! For a change let's put his needs ahead of our wants. If we take care of his body we won't spend so much time fixing the emotional problems that arise from tense muscles and braces.

If these concepts make sense but you still have questions, come to one of our clinics. It is hard to explain all of these concepts without showing you. We spend time at our five and three day clinics talking about bits, what the differences are between them, how they communicate with your horse and why you would use one or the other.

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