

BITS FOR GAITED HORSES

by Lee Ziegler 1997

Gaited horse people are often guilty of what I like to call "bit inflation". They start young horses with fairly severe bits and quickly work up to very severe ones as the horses' training progresses. This leaves most gaited horses with either hard or overly sensitive mouths; ignorant mouths that are unresponsive to the subtle bit cues that are the basis of good horsemanship. Why does this happen? I think that there are several reasons, some better than others, none very good.

1. *Tradition:* "Everybody" has always used this bit. No one knows why, it is just what they use. Perhaps sometime in the misty past a rule was adopted by a show committee that said that all X breed of horse would be shown in a particular bit. Everyone follows the rule even for horses that are not shown.

2. *Fashion:* Joe Famous Trainer won Y show using this bit on his horses, so it must be the best bit to use on all horses of that breed.

3. *Fear:* Since the myth holds that the more severe the bit the better control you have over your horse, just in case he might try to run off with you, you need a particular severe bit to stop him. (This is probably the worst reason to use a severe bit, since often the pain it causes makes the horse even more uncontrollable.)

4. *Laziness:* With X bit you don't have to pull so hard on the reins to get your horse to stop or to travel with a tucked nose. Of course his gait may not be so great, but, hey, that's what your shoer is for.

COMMON BITS AND HOW THEY WORK

What bit should you use on your horse? Assuming you can ride and know how to use your hands effectively, use what works for his level of training and his particular gait/body problems. Different bits are designed to do different things. The three main types you will see used on gaited horses are the snaffle, curb and gag.

1. **SNAFFLE:** A snaffle is a bit without shanks that works on the lips, tongue and bars of the horse's mouth with only as much pressure as you, the rider, directly put on it through your contact (pull, to be crude) on the reins. It may have a jointed or a bar mouthpiece.

2. **CURB:** A curb is a bit with shanks and a chain or strap under the jaw that acts as a fulcrum for the lever action of the bit in the horse's mouth. It puts pressure on the bars, tongue and jaw, the amount depending on the design of the bit (longer shank -- more pressure on jaw, higher port -- more pressure on roof of mouth) and the amount of contact you keep with the reins. It raises a horse's head and neck and can make him tuck his nose. Used poorly on a horse that has not learned how to give to a bit, it will cause "stargazing" or a high head and stretched out nose. A

curb bit can be very painful to a horse; a light pull on the reins with a long shanked curb is much more severe than a heavy pull on the reins with a snaffle.

3. **GAG:** A gag bit is not a snaffle even though it has no shanks and may have a jointed mouthpiece. It works on the lips by pulling up in the horse's mouth. A gag with shanks works as a curb as well as a gag, pulling up on the lips and putting pressure on the jaw and bars. Gags all work to raise a horse's head and often hollow his neck and back. Good classical horsemanship rejects the use of gag bits. I don't like them much, either.

DIFFERENT BITS FOR DIFFERENT TRAINING LEVELS

THE YOUNG HORSE: Horses aren't born knowing about bits; they must be taught to respond to bit pressure, and to translate tugs given through the reins as requests to turn, stop, back, hold their heads in a particular way, or stretch and bend their necks. The easiest way to teach a horse these responses is through the direct pressure of a true snaffle bit. Not only will this bit cause the least amount of pain to the horse as he is learning, it will be the least likely to confuse him by giving overly complex signals. A simple jointed or bar snaffle with an eggbutt, full cheek or D ring design is the only bit you should consider using on a young horse of any breed. Forget the curb bits, they will hurt and confuse a horse and he will eventually respond to one either by tucking his head behind the action of the bit and ignoring it or "cold jawing" it and requiring a longer shank or a twisted curb chain to obey. Forget the gags, too. They will usually teach a young horse to travel with his head and neck high and rigid, making it impossible for you to ask him to use his body to work in a particular gait. It is also very difficult to teach a horse lateral suppleness in a gag bit of any kind, which means that if you train him in one from the beginning he probably will turn like freight train. He won't back very well, either.

HORSES IN TRAINING: There is no reason you can't ride a horse in a snaffle all of his life. If you are sensible in the way you use it you will not "dull his mouth" so that you need a more severe bit for "control". What you may discover, however, is that the snaffle is not totally effective in teaching the horse to carry his head and neck where you want them in various gaits.

Snaffles tend to encourage a horse to travel with a low head and a stretched neck. This will help if you have a naturally high headed, hollow horse that you are trying to teach to travel with a lower head and a rounder position to get rid of a pace or improve a running walk or fox trot. It will not help if you are trying to raise the head of a very low headed, trotty horse. Although you can raise a horse's head and tuck his nose in a snaffle by raising your hands and putting pressure on the reins, it is usually easier to switch to a bit that is designed to do those things than to use so much energy making do with a snaffle. Some people will go to a gag or a curb for this, but since

I want my horses to be supple and versatile with light responsive mouths, this is where I part company with conventional "gaited" methods.

1. *Pelhams and double bridles:* I am a big fan of Pelham bits or double bridles for training gaited horses. A double bridle consists of a snaffle and a curb bit used simultaneously in the horse's mouth, with a set of reins to each. You can use the snaffle to lower the head and neck, or the curb to raise it and tuck the horse's nose. Pelham bits operate on the same principle, but consist of only one mouthpiece fitted with rings at the mouthpiece (snaffle effect) and at the

end of the shanks (curb effect). For a shallow-mouthed horse a Pelham is less irritating than a double bridle, although it is probably not as subtle in the bit signals it offers.

A Pelham or double bridle is useful for training and also as a transition between the training level snaffle and the show use of the curb alone. If you go from a snaffle to a double bridle or a Pelham, the horse is less likely to be confused by the new, different bit effects of the curb since you have the familiar snaffle to back up any new signals from the curb. You can teach the horse how you want him to respond to the curb instead of hoping he gets the message as you pull on his (until now) tender mouth.

2. *Curbs*: Why not go directly from the snaffle to the curb alone? This is the usual way of training even non-gaited horses, but the result is often a horse that is no longer obedient in a snaffle. If for some reason you want to reposition the head and neck of such a horse (say he develops a gait problem from traveling with a stiff neck and back) you can't "go back" to the snaffle to lower his neck and head because his mouth is too numb to respond to a bit used without leverage. If you transition through the Pelham or double bridle, you can educate the horse into the use of the curb while giving most cues with the snaffle. When his training is complete and he responds with little pressure on the curb, you can ride him in it alone, putting him "on parole" but keeping the snaffle in reserve for the times you need to remind him more strongly what you want him to do.

When he is ready to be ridden in the curb with no snaffle back up, you will find it easy to raise his neck and to tuck his nose, rounding his neck. You can ride the horse with nothing more than the weight of the reins and your little finger on the curb and get as good a response as you did with strong pressure in the snaffle. You can relax and keep him where you want him with the lightest of cues because he has developed a responsive, sensitive mouth before being put into the curb alone. If you find yourself riding with strong pressure on the curb reins to keep the horse in gear, you are probably well on your way to dulling his mouth, he needs better training and you need to learn how to use your hands more effectively. Conventional wisdom suggests that when this happens you need to go to longer shanks and a more severe mouthpiece to "put the horse back on the bit." I think you would be better off going back to double reins and making yourself ride with lighter pressure, using the snaffle more than the curb to help your horse regain the sensitivity of his mouth. A horse brought along and ridden this way will be as responsive to a low port curb with 5 inch shanks as one trained by other methods will be to a cathedral bit with 10 inch ones.

A curb bit used alone is a valuable tool for riding a trained horse. It is not a very good one for doing basic training in manners or gait. If you use it too soon or too harshly you will dull your horse's responses and waste his potential.

THE TRAINED HORSE: Once you have trained your horse to the point where he works easily on a very light rein in a curb, you can ride him exclusively in a curb if you want. I prefer to ride in a Pelham most of the time and to reserve the use of the curb alone for show -- mainly because I practice lateral exercises on horses whenever I ride and these are not designed to be done in a curb bit. I also prefer a Pelham for general trail riding just in case I happen to get into a situation where I need to remind the horse who is in charge and how I want him to behave. I would much

rather discipline a horse with a snaffle rein than hurt his mouth with a curb. You really can control a horse better with less bit.

WHAT BITS FOR GAITED HORSES?

A horse is still a horse, no matter what gaits he does. The principles of good horsemanship apply whether he trots, tols or fox trots. Use a snaffle for basic training, a curb for a finished horse, and a combination of the two to do ordinary riding or to do more advanced training. Use the least severe bit the horse responds to; analyze your horse's gait problems and use a bit that will help him use his body so that he can do the gait you want. And if anyone tells you to use a particular bit for your horse, ask them why and how it will work for what you are trying to do with him. In the end, you and your horse are the best judges of what bit to use.