

Taking the Bite out of Biting Questions

One of our clients called me out to float their horse's teeth. My exam of their horse's mouth showed that the horse did need its teeth floated. They had observed that the horse was starting to fight the same bit that it had been using for a long time. They had tried changing to a few other bits and decided there was a dentistry problem. They were right. Then, the question I hear seven days a week came up. "What is the best bit to use in a horse?" After nineteen years I went on auto pilot and started in; "What do you use the horse for?" "How old and experienced is the rider?" "Do you need a lot of pressure on the bit?" "Plastic develops uncomfortable divots, they don't like the taste of aluminum and it dries out their mouth," Etc...

Like the inspiration for most of my articles, someone asked a question on a farm far enough away from the hospital to give me time to think about it on the drive back.

In college I would write all my key points on recipe cards then lay them out on a table and organize the paper into some sort of logical progression and I made sure I substantiated each point adequately. It didn't take me long to realize that when it comes to choosing a bit for the horse, I could not afford that many recipe cards! But I want to answer the question because it makes a difference for my horses. Therefore, I am going to ask for your indulgence in staying with me, as we start a fairly lengthy journey into understanding the use of a bit in the horse. I intend and welcome input from trainers on this article, as I believe constructive discourse is in the best interest of all. If you stay with me through these next few articles, and do not feel you learned something about your horse, stop by the hospital and I will buy you a cup of coffee.

When a horse is relaxed in the jaw he will respond to the rider.

When the horse trusts the rider he will relax. This doesn't mean the horse and rider has been to Hell's Canyon and back. It means the rider has managed to not make the horse anxious. Always remember that the horse is a prey species. It is their nature to be cautious and notice irregularities. Nature has also hardwired them to remember negative experiences. Think about it: How many times do you want to eat a noxious plant or survive a snake bite? If you are a horse you had better remember bad experiences.

If you are a trainer and someone brings you a horse they just had a wreck on, you need to find a way around that horse's aversion, or clear your schedule for the next month!

I intend to cover the basics in these next few articles. We will discuss resistance, pressure, materials bits are made from, dentistry, and observing if a horse is having a problem with the bit.

Are you still with me?

When the horse is relaxed the "window of learning" is open. When the horse is tight in the mouth, tossing his head, nodding, chewing the bit, tight in the pole and neck, they are not listening to you. If you apply enough pain to the horse they will yield and move away from the pain, or run away with you sputtering on their back. Either way they are not learning a good thing!

Your horse should "purchase" the bit. Sorry Paris, I don't mean give them a credit card. The horse should lick the bit and take it in to the mouth. That is "purchasing the bit". OK, time for fun. Let's make half the readers send me mail. I put caramel, honey, or rub an apple slice on the bit when I first introduce it to the horse. Definitely this is not a key point, just a "Dr. J. thing".

When the jaw is relaxed the body can give. You as a rider can feel the suppleness of the horse under you. You can feel their body bend, their ears are up, and they look at things. New term, "watching", is when you can see the



the cat was still alive here and trying to fight back

white around your horse's eyes. Here they are on high alert and just watching for that mountain lion to jump out at them. Then, BOO, there he is! Nope..., car. Nope..., bird. Nope..., deer. Nope..., bush. Nope..., rider's hat. Nope..., horse's shadow. Get the picture? Next term, "looking" is when they actually look at things and think about them. This is the horse that will consider crossing that bridge or stream, and the neighbor's cat isn't actually a mountain lion.

In the relaxed jaw, the bit sits on the corner of the lips. At twelve pounds of pressure the bit is sitting against the #106 and #206 premolars, or Shame-on-you, wolf teeth. Next term, "Dr. J. Thing": this denotes it is not a medical fact, just my personal opinion.

There are three layers to the pressure from the bit.

The first is self- carriage where the bit is in the corner of the mouth and held by the lips.

The second layer is tongue where the bit is pressing on the tongue. The third is the bars, where the bit is against the lower gum tissue and premolars. We aren't going to talk about wolf teeth because they should have already been pulled. Otherwise you have a bit problem and should switch to a hackamore. Trainers know that at level three pressure the horse shifts 30% more weight to the front end putting it off balance and more likely to fall in a challenging situation. The brain signals the release of adrenaline-like stimulants into the blood stream and the horse is ready to explode when that mountain lion jumps at them! BOOM! "Nope, ah not sure what that was, didn't take time to 'look' at it, but it didn't get me. Wonder where that rider went? It probably got him, poor thing, I liked that rider."



I should also mention the palate. This is the bony roof of the mouth.

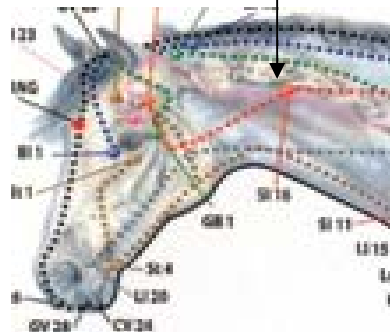
Ported bits utilize the sensitivity of the palate to encourage the horse to break at the poll. The bit space in the horse's mouth is determined by the thickness of the tongue and the height of the palate. The average palate height is two inches. Port height is determined by your horse's palate height. A low port offers relief on the tongue with out palate pressure. I do not consider a ported bit a more severe bit, but it is often utilized as a correction bit because it utilizes pressure on a different spot for the horse that has developed resistance.

The chin is affected by the curb strap or chain. The chin strap or chain is attached to both sides of the bit at the purchase and exerts pressure into the curb groove.

The poll is the area above the second cervical vertebra at the top of the neck and receives downward pressure from the bit through the headstall. The poll of the horse is the second neck vertebra or C2. It is at the poll that you want your horse to flex or break. It should be the highest point on the horse. We want him to relax his head into a 90 degree angle to the ground.

When the horse gives to the bit beta endorphins calm the horse and he relaxes. You as a rider see him lick the bit, and break in the poll. The nose comes down and you feel him relax in the shoulder. The "window of learning" is open, and the two

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The horse will tighten to protect his mouth from too much bit. When you feel the horse pull on the reins he is tight in the poll. You will feel his back tighten. The horse feels stiff. So think about this. When the shoulder moves forward and the neck is extended, the horse pulls against the reins. you pick up the bit at that point you are creating tension. Pick up the bit when the shoulder is coming back. Practice this with a friend. Stand behind them and place your hands on their shoulder and pull when they shrug back and push when they pull forward. The bit is like a turn signal, DON'T LEAVE IT ON ALL THE TIME!

Enjoy your horse
Dr. Johnson