

## A Bit of a Problem

In order to know if you have a problem with the bit you need to be able to recognize it. Resistance from the horse can include an open mouth, chomping at the bit, pushing their weight to the front end, grabbing the reins, driving the nose to the ground, hiding from the bit holding the head behind a vertical line from the poll to the ground, dropping the shoulders, and, most commonly, stiffness. Extending the neck and raising the head pointing the nose forward and tensing should be a red light that the horse is considering bolting. Resistance reduces your communication to the horse.

So let us finish this four month discussion of bits by understanding resistance and how to resolve it. No lack of ambition in that sentence is there? To do this, we need the next definition. This is the most important one, so I saved it for those of you that read all four articles.

Let us make it our goal to use the definition of “The broke horse” as a horse that will do what the rider asks willingly and relaxed. The horse will go wherever you direct them and will always try. The horse has enough confidence in the rider to trust that they will not be put into a situation that will hurt them and that the rider will lead them through it. It is a rewarding experience to have your horse follow your steps through deep snow, across ice, or down a wet rocky trail.



It is a very fulfilling feeling to drop the reins and let your horse pick their way across the stones of a rushing mountain river. Remember, the horse needs their tongue relaxed to relax the muscles in the lower neck and have maximum balance and proprioception. In those situations you are depending on each other. If you are a rider prone to panic, and cling to the reins, use a bit with tongue relief.

I want to start with “Hiding behind the bit”. Here, the horse breaks at the poll and tucks his chin towards his chest. The horse does this to relieve pressure from the bit. Now, his center of gravity moves forward and pushes his weight onto his front end. This horse is stiff, heavy through the shoulder, and hindered in stopping, turning, transitions, and jumping.

Try a mouthpiece with some tongue relief.

Next let's look at “Driving with the nose”. Here, the horse is resisting by flipping its head back and snatching the reins from your hands, or jerking you forward over the withers. The horse is trying to come over the bit's pressure points. Instead of giving to the bit he is building up his own pressure against it by keeping his head out of position. The horse is stiff in the poll, bracing his lower neck, and working off his front end. You will have difficulty in collection, bending, turning, transitions, and stopping. Inversion problems can turn into pulling matches between horse and rider. Besides causing you very stiff shoulders, if you continue this long enough, the horse builds lower neck muscles and doesn't relax in the poll.

Try a snaffle with some tongue pressure.

Let's move along to “Running through the bit and not stopping”. Here the horse is going forward into pressure from the bit. He is building his own pressure against the bit. I would look for burrs, pinching, previous injuries, and dental problems. Try a bit with tongue, bar, and palate pressure. I would explore a shank bit to give me more leverage with out changing my balance. There are bits that will collapse in on the bars and release when the horse breaks at the poll.

Dropping the shoulder can feel like the horse is leaning into his leading front leg. Here his center of gravity is tipping from his hindquarters to that leg and he may have a short choppy stride.



A bit with independent movement allows you to put pressure on that side and lift that shoulder or bend the horse around that leg.

Horses with their mouth open, chomping on the bit or the air, are resisting the bit. The bit may not be sized properly for that horse's mouth. The bit may not be allowing enough tongue relief and swallowing. The bit may be putting pressure on a painful area of the mouth. If your horse is fussing with the bit he is not focusing on his work. Have your vet check the mouth.

A curved mouthpiece that curves forward can relieve the tongue and allow swallowing.

If you are getting resistance check each aspect of the bit to identify what is in need of change. The mouthpiece should have about 1/8 to 1/4 inch of space on each side outside

of the lips. Again, I like a full taper and a ball to keep from pinching. That is a Dr. J. thing. Don't fall victim to expecting every cause of resistance to be caused by the bit. Ask the fundamental questions first: "Is the horse lame?" "Does the saddle fit?" "Has the horse had a dental exam by a veterinarian?" I am sorry, but the neighbor with a flashlight does not cut it. "Does he have injury or pain in the mouth?" "Does the bit fit the horse?" The average mouthpiece is 7/16 of an inch in diameter. Does this fit the bars of your horse? Are the feet trimmed properly? Is there too much hardware vibrating on the headstall and bit?

Then face the tough questions:

Are you pushing the horse too fast?

Is the horse sore?

Are you out of balance?

Are you picking up the reins at the wrong time?

Are you hanging on the reins or balancing on the reins?

What are you doing with your legs? Don't forget a horse feels leg pressure.

Are their divots or burs on the bit?

Be patient. A new horse needs to be evaluated. Has he learned to round up his back and engage his hindquarters? Does he know his basic gates, transitions, and obedience? Is he broke in the poll? Does he bend through his body? Is the horse relaxed in the bridle?

Be honest with your self. This will serve you well in choosing the proper bit. Watch yourself as much as the horse. Pick the proper bit for the way you ride and how you pick up the reins. Become comfortable with the trails you ride. Mountain biking is a good confidence builder. If you trust yourself, the horse will sense that confidence and trust you as well. If the horse panics, you won't, and you can keep control of the situation and of the other riders with you if needed.

Some of the oldest metal bits from the Ukraine area date back to 1500 B.C. The Mongolians used bits of twisted rawhide and two stag horn pieces.

Fortunately not all of you have a problem with your bit selection. Please don't go out and create one by fooling around with a bit that works for you on your horse. For Bison a level three bit made of sweet iron with copper inlays and solid full taper mouthpiece with a wide 1 inch port for tongue relief and a D ring with a slot on top for the curb strap and headstall to keep the bit upright and allow me to ride one handed, and a slot on the bottom for my reins may be my end point. But I won't know this for quite awhile. The key points of this article are to identify if you have resistance from your horse. Identify if your horse has a mouth problem. Identify what type of rider you are. Seek advice and make the proper choice in a bit.

You know those stickers that say "No user serviceable parts inside." As a veterinarian I think horses should have one of those before they go to a new owner. I have been 'practicing' veterinary medicine for 19 years and I love

horses, but I have also spit dirt. Please seek advice before running at your horse with these articles in your hand, or at least make sure the horse read them too! Remember, experience is another word for having survived to share with others.

Enjoy your horse  
Dr. Johnson

