



photos by Liz Tollarzo

TRANSITIONING to the Double Bridle

PART 2

THE RIDER'S RESPONSIBILITY

by Anita Marchesani, Bit Bank Australia

Once the horse and rider have established correct connection in the snaffle, and their education is sufficiently advanced and consolidated, the transition to the double bridle can be considered.

The most important truth for the rider to remember is that the use of the double will not create impulsion or collection, it will simply confirm what has already been established in the snaffle, whether that be good or bad. So, if the horse is lacking impulsion and is disconnected, it will most likely back off from the double bridle and develop resistance to moving forward. Should the horse be correctly working through and over the back from behind with a good stable contact in the hand, however, the transition to the double should confirm this.

The term 'connection' is one that Australian Dressage Team rider and coach Brett Parbery uses heavily, and is perhaps a better term to use than the somewhat over-worked and misunderstood 'working in a frame'. Connection is the creation of impulsion from the hind end of the horse, using the driving aids from the rider's leg aid, which is contained or released by the restraining aids of the seat and hand, developing forward motion. The rider will feel the horse's back lift (sometimes described as a feeling of a 'widening' under the seat bones) as the hind legs engage more underneath, which then creates the rounded outline that is both strong and correct. When this occurs the horse is said to be 'between the leg and hand', and connected. Importantly, the rounded outline is not created by the hands, but through this correct connection and circle of energy.

International dressage judge and coach Uwe Spelen states that before considering transitioning to the double the horse must be able to be ridden in a proper connection at all times in the snaffle bridle. The rider must have a true 'independent seat'. "The rider must not be dependant in any way on the hands for balance or support. The combination must also be secure in the contact through various movements in training and in competition, so the horse is consolidated in the proper connection, and working through and over the back from the hind legs to the bridle."

Some riders use the horse's age as a general guide as to when the transition to the double should occur, and certainly it is more common for this to be used as a guide in showing circles where it is very usual for the horse to be in a snaffle for their newcomers year, and then in the double the following season.

Helen Heagney is both a national show judge and a dressage judge and, in her opinion, it also depends on how well the horse has been established in his training. She agrees with Uwe Spelen's comments above, stating "The double bridle should not be introduced until the horse accepts the contact of a snaffle without leaning, dropping back behind the contact or showing any tongue problems.



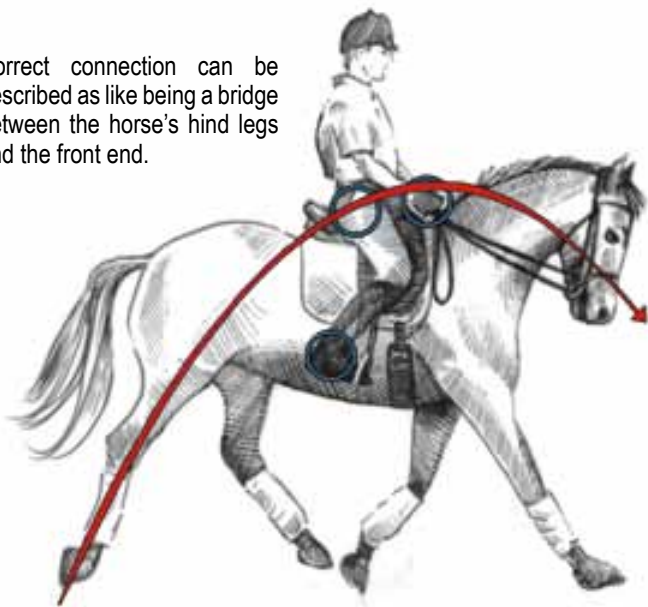


HOLDING DOUBLE REINS: Just two of the possible methods to hold double reins. Riders should experiment with their coach to see what works best for them and their horse.

Method 1: Snaffle rein under finger three. Curb rein under finger two. Both reins held by the thumb. The end of the reins fall on the off or right side of the horse.

Method 2: Snaffle rein under finger four. Curb rein under finger two. Both reins held by thumb

Correct connection can be described as like being a bridge between the horse's hind legs and the front end.



"As far as showing is concerned, very few judges would penalise a beautiful horse or pony, which goes well, if they are wearing a snaffle in an open class. Maybe in a State Title or Royal Show you would hope that they had graduated to the double, but in my opinion if the horse were superior the choice of bit would not worry me."

In Dressage, Uwe Spelen recommends introducing the double bridle only when required in the rules - that is, for Advanced and above.

Classical dressage rider and trainer Manolo Mendez will introduce the double to a horse when he has a consistent and even contact, can happily and easily perform all the lateral movements with "fluidity and even tempi, and with ease in the snaffle bridle". Regardless of whether the horse is competing in a double or snaffle, Manolo will always introduce a new movement in a snaffle, rather than a double, and will train regularly in the snaffle, schooling in the double only on rare occasions.

It would be a mistake to use the double bridle as a tool to try and fix or correct any problems being faced in the snaffle, as often this will only exacerbate the problem, or create further problems down the track. As with most things to do with horses, patience and establishing correct foundations through training is the key.

THE FIRST RIDE

It is important that the double bridle has been fitted to the horse prior to the first ride in it. As discussed in part 1 of this series, time should be taken to ensure the bridle and bits are sitting correctly on the horse, with everything lying in the right place and sitting comfortably. The rider can practise putting the bridle on a few times in the week prior to the first ride so they are familiar with all the parts and fitting, and tacking up becomes smooth and easy.

Often riders will lunge their horse when using a new piece of equipment for the first time. This is not recommended with the double bridle, due to the potential sharpness of the two bits, as well as the dangers of the loose chain, the extra reins etc - exactly the same reasons why a horse wearing a double should not be left unattended. If the horse is well behaved enough to take out, a quiet hack out in the double is a pleasant way to introduce this new piece of equipment in a low stress training session. Ride mainly on the bridoon, taking the curb rein with a slight loop and perhaps try engaging a light contact on the curb on the return journey when the horse is relaxed and settled.

Both Uwe Spelen and Helen Heagney recommend that the horse's first schooling in the double should begin with working as usual in the snaffle, swapping to the double bridle at the end of the session. Use the double for the cool down work, with a good walk, a stretchy trot and perhaps a short canter. This first session should be no more than 10 minutes long, and with the horse already warmed up and through into the hand from the work in the snaffle, the short ride in the double should be trouble free.

Keep a light loop in the curb rein for the first ride, though don't throw the curb rein away altogether as it is important to support the shank to prevent the bit and the curb chain jiggling around in an uncomfortable and distracting manner. Should the rider be fortunate to have mirrors on the training arena, constant checking visually can be useful until they develop a good feel for the contact on both reins. It is very easy for the rider to mistakenly have too tight a contact on the curb rein, and lose the contact on the bridoon.

Should the curb shank appear to be rotated past the desired 45 degree angle to the lip line, the curb chain is either adjusted too loose to allow this, shifting the port to press down on the tongue or a great deal of force is being applied by the rider through the curb bit and chain. Both of these situations are undesirable and incorrect. Unfortunately, it is quite common to see curb shanks parallel to the ground, even at the recent Olympic games. *Cont...*

Transition to the Double continued...

TROUBLE SHOOTING

A very common mistake to make is to move into the double bridle and immediately begin to train for the next level up, asking harder movements of the horse than have been previously trained in the snaffle. This can create problems, as the horse starts to associate the double with 'hard work', or the increased workload creates stress and tension, causing the horse to back off from the contact.

Alternating the training days between the snaffle and the double, as Manolo Mendez suggests, is a good way to help the horse adjust to the new biting arrangement without creating a negative association. Take the horse back a level when working in the double, and school the new movements in a snaffle first to keep the horse thinking forward and connected. Manolo does not ever keep his horses in a double bridle once he has made the transition, as he believes it can create a horse that is dull in the mouth.

Brett Parbery also puts the horse back into the snaffle bridle should he encounter any issues with having the horse properly through, rather than battle on in the double.

Helen Heagney simply says that she would not introduce the double until she is "absolutely confident that there will be no problem... if there is any doubt that the horse is not sufficiently in front of the leg to (settle into) the new feel of the bit, then the horse is not ready."

Human beings tend to perform 75-80% of daily tasks using the hands, however when riding this natural tendency needs to be changed – the rider should try to use the hands less than 20% of the time, communicating with the horse through the legs, seat and weight for the other 80%. Using the hands and the double bridle for more than 20% of the aids is like "holding our foot on the brake" as Uwe Spenlen says. "The curb is the dot on the letter 'i', it is there to define and refine the rein aids".

School the new movements in a snaffle first to keep the horse thinking forward and connected

It is of vital importance to always remember that the double bridle will only confirm what the rider has in the snaffle, it will never create collection, impulsion or refinement in itself.

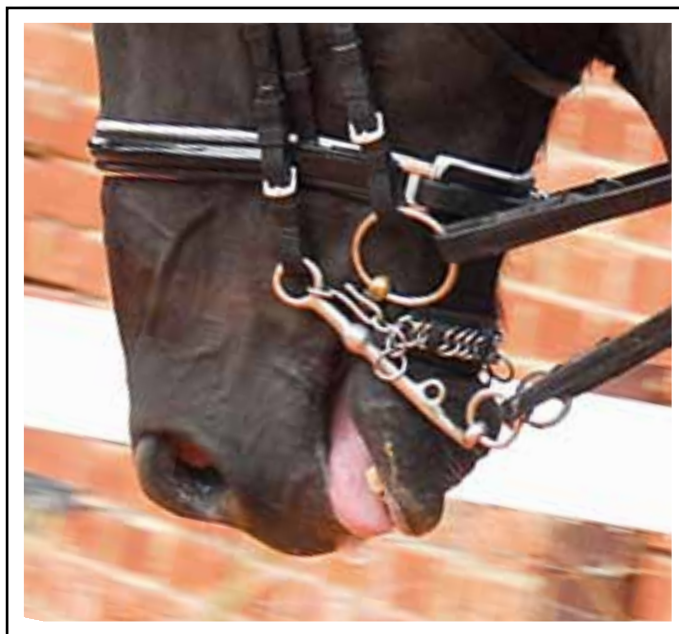
In regards to the choice of the bits themselves, there is a large variety of shapes and sizes available to suit the differences in mouth conformation of the various horses.

Uwe Spenlen states that "Ten different horses will have ten different mouths and ten different tongues. The bits need to be selected accordingly and often this is a case of trial and error to find with which combination the horse is most comfortable. One must listen to the horse's reactions."

Helen Heagney generally prefers a light weight set over the heavier traditional German styles for her Thoroughbred horses, to promote more mouthing and relaxed acceptance. In comparison, a lot of horses go better in the heavier, more solid styles. It is a matter of experimenting to see what suits both the horse and rider best.

RESISTANCES

Some of the most common and easily spotted resistances encountered in the double are related to tongue issues - either the tongue hanging out the side of the mouth, or drawing back behind



What are called tongue evasions are signs of the horse trying to relieve the pressure of the double bits, sometimes caused by ill fitting bits but more commonly by pressure from the rider. The horse should still be able to comfortably move its tongue and chew lightly on the bits, and the noseband should not be tightly cranked to force the mouth closed in an attempt to hide the problem.

the bit. Both reactions are in response to too much pressure on the tongue, often caused by the rider or sometimes due to a port shape that is unsuited to the horse.

For the horse that has a very fat tongue, a wide, deep port will give some relief, whereas this type of bit on a thin-tongued horse will apply excessive pressure direct to the bars of the mouth. Often changing to a thinner style bridoon and/ or Weymouth can help relieve some of the pressure due to over-crowding in the mouth. Both Sprenger and Neue Schule make a wide variety of both bridoons and weymouths in different weights, shapes and sizes. Again, a little experimentation may be needed to see what the horse is happiest in, as well as visually checking the fit of the bits in the mouth when unmounted.

Riders should not expect to be in the same double combination for the whole of their future riding career. Brett Parbery suggests that double combinations may be changed up to five times as the horse and rider progress in their training and move through the grades, and as the biting requirements of both horse and rider change.

THE RIDER'S RESPONSIBILITY

"When all goes well the rider deserves credit. When there are problems, the rider must bear responsibility" (Mike Matthew, US Dressage Judge).

Of course, before looking to a change in tack or bits when addressing any issues that may present themselves, it is more prudent to first look to the rider. Riders must be balanced, skilled and advanced in their own education before making the transition to the double, and must certainly have a true independent seat.

Making the transition to the double under the supervision of a respected coach and trainer will give the rider the necessary eyes on the ground, and can help trouble-shoot issues being created by the rider, rather than placing the blame on the tack or the horse.

There is a danger in introducing the double to any horse that is not physically strong or supple enough to perform the collection and powerful movement required at the higher levels in dressage or showing, to be correctly moving from the hindquarters through a round and soft back.

The leverage available to the rider through the curb bit can be quite powerful, and it can force the horse into an 'outline' or into collection that it is not physically prepared to perform in correct engagement. This outline is then false, and is often spotted by educated spectators of both dressage and showing, even at large international events. This creates a false sense of 'lightness' for the rider, who may then develop a reliance on the curb rein.

It is true that the double bridle has its detractors, and there is a push to allow the use of snaffle bridles at the higher levels of dressage competition, rather than compulsory use of the double. Every horse lover has at some stage seen the double used incorrectly and forcefully - the force involved in pulling a horse into Rolkur as an example, is not what the double bridle is intended for. But then, most have also seen the same misuse of a simple snaffle.

Ideally, the double bridle is a case of where 'less is more' - with lighter, more precise and almost invisible aids being communicated between horse and rider.

It is not the bits themselves that create the 'finished horse', the collection or the powerful movement, but proper training and correct riding. As with any biting arrangement, it is not the bits that cause pain and discomfort, it is always the hands that use them.

About The Author

ANITA MARCHESANI

The founder and biting expert of Bit Bank Australia. This series of two articles are excerpts from her 30 page guide 'Introducing the Double Bridle'.

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