

Bits & Bitting

Part II
CONSIDERING THE HORSE FIRST

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BELLA EQUESTRIAN

TAKING THE MYSTERY OUT OF SELECTING THE BIT TO BEST SUIT HORSE AND RIDER.

In part one (February/March 2010), the evolution of the modern bit and the four main categories of biting types was discussed. Part two (April/May) takes the mystery out of selecting the bit, and the final section of this series of three articles (June/July 2010) will examine specific bit styles, their actions, uses, misuses and benefits.

Despite an increase in interest in natural horsemanship and bitless riding, the majority of riders today still use a bit of some kind in their every day riding - be it schooling, trail riding, jumping, even when lunging.

Riders often have an ever-expanding selection of bits hanging in their tack room as they try the various types in an endeavour to find the bit that best suits the current level of education of both them and their horse. As a horse's training increases, it matures, changes riding disciplines or even riders then often a change in bit is considered, but what strategies can be used to find the most suitable bit?

Dr Hilary Clayton, a researcher in Equine Sport Sciences in the US, has specialised in studying biting over the past 20 years and asserts that "finding the right bit is more a matter of trial and error than a scientific process." But there are ways to make the trial and error process a little easier and simpler. Hilary Vernon, a bit designer for Abbey Bits in the UK has documented a simple 'Pre-Bitting Checklist' that any rider can apply to their horse and their situation for a more considered approach to making biting choices.

PRE-BITTING CHECKLIST

Is the horse completely comfortable in the mouth?

In other words, has the dentist been out recently? It is of vital importance that a horse's teeth are checked regularly every six to twelve months, depending on the age of the horse, by the vet or a qualified equine dentist. Any teeth growing unevenly can not only affect the comfort of the horse in regards to the bridle fit and the bit, but also how well it chews and digests its food. If a horse has been checked and treated where appropriate, the rider knows they are then starting with a clean slate in that area.

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Does the saddle fit?

If the saddle is an incorrect gullet size or just a poor fit and the horse subsequently has a sore back, its performance issues may not be bit related, but pain related. It is important to rule this out with a qualified saddle fitter, particularly before looking at choosing a more severe bit.

Is the diet correct?

When a horse is overly hot and spooky for the work it performs, it may not be a control issue at all, rather an issue of diet. A gradual change to a lower carbohydrate and protein diet might bring about a more amenable horse.

Is there sufficient exercise?

Ridden exercise, turnout, lunging and free schooling, as well as enough stimulation during the day, are all very important aspects for the general wellbeing and behaviour of a horse. Simply increasing the amount of exercise available, perhaps by increased turnout times or using a larger paddock, can change a horse's attitude to life in general.

Are work expectations realistic?

There is not a type of bit anywhere in the world that will magically create the correct head carriage or improve the way of going if the horse does not have the right development of muscles required for the job. Time, patience and careful schooling are required to bring on a young or green horse. Similarly, an older horse coming back into work after a long break should not be rushed into a frame.

Does the temperament suit the work?

Sometimes this is the hardest question; but, if a rider is set on one particular equine discipline they must be realistic. No amount of feed, training or bitting can change a horse's personality or give talent to a talent-less horse.

Is the horse fit enough?

Resistances from not being fit enough manifest themselves in a variety of ways. A hot horse can become very agitated and



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'flee' from hard work when uncomfortable and tired. A quieter horse may be heavy in the hand or snatch at the bit. Choosing a stronger bit in this instance will only make the situation worse.

Does the bit have the right mouthpiece and cheek pieces for the horse's mouth?

The conformation of the horse's mouth varies dramatically from breed to breed, and from individual to individual. A rider's favourite snaffle may suit one horse, but be the wrong fit and style for the next horse. Treat all horses as individuals and take the time to study their mouths.

Does the horse have an easy conformation to bit?

General conformation of the head, jaws, neck and back has a great deal to do with how the horse will accept the bit. For example, a short neck with thick jowl will make it hard for the horse to flex correctly, no matter what bit is used. Poor carriage due to a long or weak back will need more strengthening and ground work, rather than being solved by a new bit.

Is the bit causing discomfort or pain?

Any horse will resist the bit if it fits incorrectly. An open mouth, tongue over the bit, tongue out the side, head tossing, leaning, snatching, an overly frothy saliva or a dry mouth are all signs of discomfort. A great deal of damage can be done to the



The mouth of this large Cleveland Bay is very typical of the larger Warmblood types. The lips are quite fleshy, tongue is large - clearly bulging out between the teeth - the male tusks are visible, and the horse has a short mouth and relatively low palate. It will need a bit with a thinner mouthpiece, perhaps with eggbutt cheeks to prevent any chance of rubbing and chaffing the lips.



The fine skinned, thinner lipped Thoroughbred mare has a much thinner tongue, the palate is higher and generally there appears to be more room in the mouth. Thoroughbreds are usually quite easy to bit for this reason, though as they are very sensitive on the bars due to the fine skin, a bit with a wider weight bearing surface is a kinder option. However, the once popular, very fat, hollow mouth snaffle is taking this to an unnecessary extreme. This horse uses a 5" bit - the 'Horse' sizes measuring at 5.5" would be far too large.

mouth by a poorly fitting or inconsiderately used bit. For example, damage to the bars can cause splints to form - this is something to be wary of when re schooling a horse with a previous habit of taking the tongue over the bit.

Has the horse been mouthed properly?
This is particularly important if the horse is young or recently broken in. If unsure, consult a respected horse educator, but remember that not all horse breakers are

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Above: Mouth - a stylized illustration of a cross section of the horse's mouth and jaw, showing tongue (pink), lips, bars and upper palate. The tongue will usually fill the space under the palate completely.

Snaffle: showing the 'nutcracker effect' with the bit shortening in the mouth (arrows) to squeeze the lower jaw and lips, with pressure on the bars and upper palate.

Mullen: the Mullen Mouth snaffle avoids all contact with the palate and depending on the thickness of the tongue, also avoids pressure on the bars with the weight of the mouthpiece taken entirely on the tongue. However, pinching of a very large tongue between the bit and the bars of the mouth can occur.

Lozenge: showing a well-fitting lozenge style snaffle with even pressure across tongue and bars avoiding the palate. French snaffle styles with wider central plates can result in the joins resting on the bars themselves causing increased pressure.

Weymouth: - depending on the port in a curb bit, pressure will vary from being entirely on the tongue, evenly across bars and tongue and with high, narrow ports also on the upper palate.

The Bit in the Horse's Mouth

Bits and Bitting continued...

experienced in the discipline a rider may wish to follow with their horse.

Has the rider enough experience and ability to achieve their goals?

A good bit can never replace bad riding, pure and simple. Often when riders are looking to bit up for control it is an issue of lack of training and miscommunication rather than a biting one. Every rider of every age and ability can benefit from regular lessons from a respected and qualified coach.

Has enough time been allowed?

Patience is required with all things to do with horses, and bitting is no different. Particularly with a new horse, riders may find themselves in control in the school in a simple snaffle, then 'carted' when riding out or at a competition. A quick decision to change the bit may be unnecessary when simply more training, schooling out of competition and better knowledge of the horse is all that is required.

MOUTH CONFORMATION

The next step is to consider the mouth conformation of the individual horse. An equine dentist can help with this, but riders can acquire a very good idea simply by having a look in the horse's mouth themselves. The size of a horse's mouth

does not always correspond to the size of the horse, as some very large horses can have a short, narrow mouth and small ponies can have a broad mouth. It is therefore very frustrating to still see bits labelled as 'Pony' 'Cob' and 'Horse' at saddlaries, as this can be very misleading for those purchasing a bit. A large section of riders are using a bit that is too big, which therefore reduces the effectiveness of the bit or worse, causes it to be uncomfortable. A bit that is too wide will have excessive side-to-side movement in the mouth, which creates uneven pressures. Myler bits are particularly prone to this because their sizing comes up quite large.

ASSESSING MOUTH CONFORMATION

With the horse in a head collar take a close look at its mouth. Are the lips thin, or quite fleshy? Does the horse have a long or short mouth? A long mouth can be deceiving, and if the rule of two wrinkles is followed when fitting the bit, this can actually place the bit quite high near the teeth on a horse with a longer than normal mouth. Placing the bit so it sits with one or no wrinkles may be the solution and though it will appear incorrect when viewed from the outside, places the bit correctly inside the mouth.

There is surprisingly very little room for anything in most horse's mouths, and this

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Above: A short mouth.

Below: A long mouth.



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Bits and Bitting continued...

find pic or take one with bit fitting well and the two wrinkles



is evident when its lips are parted on the side and the inside of the mouth cavity examined!

FINDING THE RIGHT BIT SIZE

The old rule of allowing for 1cm or a finger's width on either side of the bits between the lips and rings still holds true for single jointed bits. This is because as a contact is taken up, these bits shorten in the mouth and will sit closer to the lips, squeezing the lower jaw. The mullen mouth snaffle, Weymouth, straight bar Pelham etc needs to sit flush with the side of the mouth to prevent excessive side to side movement of the bit. Any bit with a double join - Mylers, French, lozenge style - should fit fairly snugg as well. With these bits the lips at rest should be sitting just next to the bit ring holes or against an eggbutt or D ring. This type of bit does not shorten with a contact - it instead moves away from the lips so any possibility of pinching is removed. A BitFit Measure can be purchased and is invaluable to have on hand, particularly for riders with multiple horses, to ensure the correct sizing.

If all the points relating to bitting a horse have been carefully and thoughtfully considered then riders will be well underway to improving their knowledge of bitting and understanding a horse's behaviour under saddle. If a problem arises that is possibly bit related then approach a riding coach for advice, or a friend whose opinions is held in high regard. But it should always be remembered, that a rider will know their horse best, so ultimately the bitting choice and the horse's comfort is their responsibility. If a bit change is needed, consider the horse's requirements and experiment with styles that meet those requirements, while remembering that the aim is for improved communication with minimum pressure or discomfort to the horse.

About The Author

Anita Marchesani is the founder and operator of Bit Bank Australia and Bella Equestrian, and is an advocate for a holistic approach to bitting the horse. Her equestrian experience is largely in the field of eventing.

For more information visit the web site:
www.bellaequestrian.com.au

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