

A BIT UNCOMFORTABLE

A BIT FOR HORSE AND RIDER

Bits and Bitting - Part 3 by Anita Marchesani



THE SELECTION OF A BIT FOR THE HORSE SHOULD ULTIMATELY ADDRESS TWO MAIN CONSIDERATIONS: THE COMFORT OF THE HORSE AND THE SAFETY OF THE RIDER.

After considering a horse's comfort needs and the rider's requirements in regards to communication and control, as well as the requirements of the chosen discipline (in regards to rules, aesthetics etc) then more often than not riders will find there is a short list of bits that may be suitable, rather than a large variety to choose from.

Different bitting choices and options below, illustrate how the discipline or sport, the horse's behaviour and the rider's experience will lead the rider to select a certain bit to try.

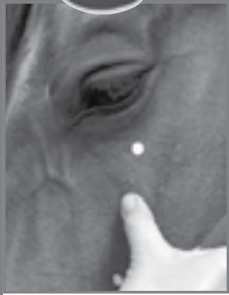
A horse that is strong in cross country, is very heavy in front and the rider can't pull it up, even in a four ring gag (Dutch gag).

The Dutch gag is one of the most over used bits on the circuit. It is a powerful method of control that is often underestimated. A lot of riders choose a Dutch gag, as the first progression from a snaffle, if control becomes a problem when jumping. It certainly will assist with brakes, but it has its downsides as well.

Firstly, people often think that being called a 'gag' this bit will help with leaning, heavy horses. The Dutch gag encourages the horse to be more round, lower with the head and can in fact lead to a very over bent horse. It does this through the leverage of the rings below the mouthpiece and the pressure applied to the tongue, as the mouthpiece rolls on the larger ring, and secondly the poll. The Dutch gag ridden on the 3rd ring, or a three ring gag, is strong; when riding on the 4th ring the leverage is very powerful. It is for this reason that the Dutch gag should ideally be ridden with two reins - one on the snaffle and one on the leverage. This allows the rider to use the snaffle mainly, and employ the leverage rein when needed, giving the horse a break from constant pressure across the lower jaw and tongue while preventing further resistance. Secondly, and particularly when employing only one rein, the Dutch gag is not a great option for steering, as the loose ring coupled with the extended rings leads to very fuzzy aids and can result in unnecessary run outs.

This is, however, a useful bit for excitable horses that tend to carry their head too high and in an inverted frame, as it assists with outline and dropping the nose. For a horse that already travels low and heavy in front, it is recipe for disaster - there is not much fun in riding at a big fence with nothing in front of the rider! If a martingale is to be used as well as a Dutch gag, it should only be applied to the snaffle reins, and never to the bottom 'leverage' rein. Pelham roundings (leather strap that attaches to both curb and snaffle rings on the same side of the bit so a single rein can be attached to the loop formed) can be used as a compromise where the rider is not confident with two reins.

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This Cheltenham Gag is an Eggbutt cheek running gag, which has been used with a Mexican Grackle noseband (or a high grackle, as there is an English style of this one that sits lower). The Mexican grackle is used to help prevent the horse crossing its jaw to avoid the bit, and is useful to use with bits where a cavesson/ hanovarian may get in the way, for example to avoid a curb chain on a pelham and to prevent the noseband inhibiting the movement of the bit with gags. It is also called Figure 8, but this is the 'slang' term.

Right: The Dutch gag encourages the horse to be more round, lower with the head and can lead to a very over bent horse. Ideally it should be ridden with two reins - one on the snaffle and one on the leverage.



A more useful bit for a horse that is a strong puller and heavy in front is the running gag. It is available with a variety of cheeks, including the Balding (loose ring), Cheltenham (eggbutt) and Nelson (full cheek) gag. A running gag works largely on the corners of the horse's mouth, exaggerating the action of the simple snaffle, and asks for a head lifting action. Ideally it can be ridden with two reins - one on the snaffle, one on the gag straps - and should be used by a rider with an independent seat and good hands. A stopper on the cheek pieces is a useful addition to prevent the bit sliding too high in the mouth and potentially trapping the cheeks between bit and teeth.

Should a Tom Thumb or Full Cheek be tried when a four year old horse gapes its mouth and is hard to turn?

Horses, like babies, teethe for up to five years, so their gums can be sore and tender to touch. It is often at this stage that a dental check will identify wolf teeth that need to be removed and other problems relating to teeth that require correcting. Using a full cheek or Tom Thumb bit, which are both very popular for young horses, can exacerbate any mouthing problems further, as the extended cheeks of this style can bump into and interfere with sore gums and erupting teeth and lead to head tossing and the like.

The use of keepers on an FM bit to keep the bit stiller could help solve this problem. A dee-cheek or eggbutt snaffle may be a kinder option while still assisting with turning aids on a green horse. Another alternative it to use a noseband such as a drop. The drop noseband is terribly out of fashion, which is a shame as when it is well made and correctly fitted it is the best for the job of supporting the jaw.

The horse goes well in a Pelham, but should two reins or roundings be used?

A Pelham is an interesting bit and is essentially a combination of the bridoon-weymouth double bridle set in one. It suits show horses with short mouths that cannot take the two bits of a double bridle, as well as exuberant jumpers. A leverage bit, it asks for head lowering and retraction of the nose through flexion at the poll.

Continued

A Bit Uncomfortable continued...

For showing, if the look of a double is preferred, then a rugby or show Pelham, which features a loose top ring that gives the appearance of a bridoon bit, can be used. In a normal, straight bar or ported mouth Pelham the top ring is fixed to the shanks so really it cannot be used completely independently of the curb rein. The large majority of riders who use this bit for jumping find that using roundings offers the same amount of control as using two reins. A straight bar or ported Pelham should be fitted quite snug to the lips to prevent side-to-side movement of the bit.

The jointed Pelham reduces the effect of the curb, due to the axis on which the bit rotates and moves as the bit bends across the jaw. A bendy, rubber Pelham can be the solution for a horse that fixes its jaw and leans, but otherwise goes very well in this type of bit.

The off the track Thoroughbred that flips its head and gets its tongue over the bit.

It is thought that horses start the habit of putting their tongue over the bit for one of two reasons - to protect the palate from injury from a bit that impacts the palate or to avoid any pressure on the tongue. It is hard to break a horse of this habit if it is well established, as it becomes a habitual behavior, so even when the stimulus is removed the habit still remains. Patience in investigating the underlying cause is needed.

Trying the horse in a straight bar snaffle, perhaps an eggbutt cheek to avoid all unnecessary bit movement, will generally give the rider some idea as to whether the horse is avoiding pressure on the palate or tongue, though it may take some weeks to be sure. A straight bar snaffle avoids all palate interaction and rests almost entirely on the tongue, which also has the advantage of taking any pressure off the bars. Horses that have repeatedly been ridden with their tongue over the bit can develop bone spurs on the bars from trauma to this area.

If the horse improves in the straight bar, the rider can either keep it in this bit or try a French or lozenge style snaffle, such as a Sprenger KK or Neue Schule Tranz, as these bits are designed to interact on the tongue and avoid the palate. If, on the other hand, the horse deteriorates in the straight bar, a bit to avoid tongue pressure should be sought, though in Thoroughbreds the bars are often very finely covered so ported bits that rest largely on the bars can cause more problems and discomfort. A well fitting FM single link bit with keepers may suit in this case, or a Myler may be worth trying. Horses either love or hate Mylers - there does not seem to be much in-between - but when horses like them, they are very effective and kind bits.



Photo by Liz Tolarzo



Photo by Anita Marchesani

Above: *Need caption for this bit please*

Above right: Pelham roundings (leather strap attached to both curb and snaffle rings on the same side of the bit so a single rein can be used) can be a compromise where the rider is not confident with two reins.

Below: The drop noseband is terribly out of fashion, which is a shame as when it is well made and correctly fitted it is the best for the job of supporting the jaw.

Bottom: The Kyneton noseband is rarely seen but is very effective on strong pullers with sensitive mouths. It transfers some of the rein pressure to the nose while saving the mouth and can work exceptionally well with a straight bar, happy mouth style bit.



Photo by Anita Marchesani

What cheekpieces should a pony's snaffle have for a young girl to learn to ride in?

Loose ring snaffles give the bit more movement and play in the mouth. If the bit is too light though, they can lead to fuzzy and delayed rein aids. Some horses dislike the jingling of a loose ring- even more so if the bit is attached to the bridle with metal clips rather than leather hookstuds!

The eggbutt or dee ring snaffle provides a fix cheek for the mouthpiece to sit in, helping to keep the bit stiller in the mouth, promoting a more consistent contact while at the same time preventing rubs that may be caused by the combination of a loose ring and bulgy lips or cheeks. The eggbutt or dee-ring is also of benefit to riders - young or old - with unsteady hands. The fixed cheek styles can also assist with direct rein turning aids.

The Tom Thumb is a highly overused bit for ponies in Australia. Due to the fact that most bits of this type have a single link, the extended cheekpieces increase the nutcracker effect on the jaws and, contrary to popular thought, it is still possible for this bit to be pulled through the mouth. It is certainly no safer than a well fitting eggbutt, dee ring or even loose ring snaffle, particularly with a well fitting noseband also worn.

A very sensitive-in-the-mouth horse that is over exuberant when out jumping, 'jacks up' in a Pelham or gag, but the rider can't stop it in a snaffle.

The snaffle is a kind bit when used correctly. When pulled against constantly or sawed from side to side this bit is as harsh as any other. In a situation where the horse has a sensitive mouth but its enthusiasm when



Photo by Anita Marchesani

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competing means it is too strong to be safe, inevitably a pulling match ensues, which the horse will always win. Instinct takes over and the horse will push into the discomfort and pain.

If a stronger bit causes the horse to back off or 'jack up', perhaps a softer option would be more effective. The Kyneton noseband is rarely seen but is very effective on strong pullers with sensitive mouths. It transfers some of the rein pressure to the nose while saving the mouth and can work exceptionally well with a straight bar, happy mouth style bit. Care must be taken though when fitting the Kyneton with a jointed snaffle, that the bit is not lifted too high in the mouth by the noseband and the joint inverted by mistake.



Working on similar principle to this is the Myler Combination bits. By spreading the rein pressure across the nose, mouth, poll and chin the rider can be softer on the mouth and ride with more control and finesse. However, if the horse objects to a curb, this bit is not a suitable option.

The PeeWee is seeing some popularity with eventers and jumpers. It seems to work with strong horses, not because the mouthpiece is so fine as to cause pain, but because the horse is comfortable. It was the only solution, when combined with a drop noseband, for a very strong eventer with lower jaw problems, after everything from Pelhams, gags, Mikmars, Elevators etc were tried and only resulting in the horse getting stronger.

Ultimately, finding the right bit for a rider and horse will come down to trial and error, as every horse is a unique individual,

The ultimate choice will come down to trial and error but the bit selected should take into account rider safety and horse comfort .

and every rider rides uniquely as well. What works well on one show pony or off the track Thoroughbred, won't necessarily work well for the next, even with very similar mouth conformation and personalities. Give the horse three to four weeks in a new bit before making a conclusion, as old habits may need to be broken, even if the discomfort is no longer there.

Remember, choosing a bit ultimately takes into consideration rider safety and the horse's comfort. Don't be put off by choosing a 'harsher' bit - using softer aids and less pulling in a strong bit is kinder and safer than a rider hanging on the end of a snaffle while being carted around by an unhappy horse! Where possible, make bit choices with the assistance of a knowledgeable and experienced coach or mentor to aid both horse and rider on their journey. 🐾

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 biting 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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