BITS 101

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When selecting a bit, one must first understand the principles of how a bit works and the pressure points on the horse that can be affected by a bit. Once one understands this information, it should become clearer as to whether a snaffle or a leverage (curb) bit should be selected or one of the many combination types of headgear that is available. Also, there is the hackamore, which may be a true hackamore (bosal) or a mechanical hackamore. It is generally considered that a hackamore does not have a mouthpiece. There are many pieces of headgear that combine a mouthpiece with a mechanical hackamore and there are several options that combine a snaffle bit with a piece over the nose that does not incorporate leverage. In a training situation or for pleasure riding, the selection really doesn't need to consider anything other than what is best for the horse and/or rider. There are, however, some regulations enforced by various breed and/or horse show associations that might restrict what bit may be used. Additionally, tradition may play a role in the selection of a bit. Unfortunately, many times this may result in a horse being bitted with a bit that is not the best choice either for the horse and/or rider.

The points on a horse's head that can be affected by a bit or some type of headgear include the tongue, bars, cheeks, lips, palate, nose, curb area, and poll. Some pieces of headgear may be able to affect nearly all of these points and some may only affect two or three of these points. Snaffle bits, which are direct pull bits, obviously

cannot put pressure on all these points nor can bitless hackamores. Combination types of headgear can put pressure on the most points at one time.

There is a common misconception in the industry that a snaffle bit is one that has a broken mouthpiece; that is, the mouthpiece is comprised of at least two pieces. This is wrong even though it is propagated by many catalogs, books, and "experts." A snaffle may have a solid mouthpiece, a two piece mouthpiece, a three piece mouthpiece or multiple links such as a chain. The mouthpiece may or may not have a port. The key to identifying a snaffle is that it is a bit that operates off direct pull; there is no leverage involved. A curb or leverage bit is self explanatory-leverage is involved. Even if a curb is not used, there is still leverage on the poll of the horse. If a curb is used, then pressure is exerted on several points of the head.

If we assume that when selecting a bit the first consideration is to determine the type of bit (snaffle or leverage), then certainly the next criterion would be to select the desired mouthpiece. First, the mouthpiece needs to be the proper width to fit the horse. Standard bits are five inches wide and are the most common. Pony bits are generally four and one-half inches wide, and bits designed for Arabians are four and three quarters inches wide. For horses with wider mouths, bits are available in widths of five and one-half inches, six inches, and even wider for some draft horses. Bits wider than five inches may have to be special ordered and the availability of styles and mouthpiece designs may be limited in commercial production bits. To get what you want may require one to have a bit custom made by a bit maker. The same is true to some degree with the narrow bits, though there is a better selection in snaffle bits.

Once you have determined if you need a snaffle or curb bit and decided the appropriate width needed to fit your horse, the next step is to determine what you want

in terms of the mouthpiece. As previously stated, both a snaffle bit and curb bit may have either a broken or solid mouthpiece. Selection of the mouthpiece is where much of the confusion begins. This is due in part to the vast number of mouthpieces available, and secondly to the lack of understanding of the conformation of the mouth and how the mouthpieces fit and function in the mouth. You can have a mouthpiece that is mild in its action and pressure (a soft bit) or you can have one that is severe (a harsh/hard bit). Of course there are many gradations between the extremes. These moderate bits are probably the best choice for most people and horses. Harsher bits should be reserved for people who know how and when to use them and have the patience and touch to use them. Soft bits can also be problematic in that it is easy to teach a horse to pull against and evade them. This is certainly not desirable, though many people make this mistake trying to be kind to their horse. A second problem associated with soft bits, which are usually large in diameter, is that many young horses simply do not have enough room in their mouth to comfortably carry the bit. This also can lead to annoying habits.

If you want a snaffle bit, then the next consideration is the design of the rings. Snaffle bits typically are available in O-ring, D-ring, egg butt, and full cheek configurations. The rings can vary in size from two and one-half inches in diameter to four inches, with three inches being fairly standard. O-ring and egg butt bits are probably the most popular styles. Full cheek bits are also popular, but should always be used with bit keepers for safety concerns for both the horse and rider.

Selecting a curb bit is similar to selecting a snaffle bit. The main difference is that once you have determined the desired mouthpiece and the appropriate width, the next determinant is whether you want a solid cheek or a swivel cheek. You will need to

select the length and shape of the shank. Shanks are available in several styles. They may be straight, have a gentle sweep (C bit), an acute sweep (grazing bit) or of a variety of patterns (S shank, 7 shank, cavalry shank). Also, you will need to determine the length of shank you want. The average shank length is six to seven inches, but may vary from approximately four inches to eight plus inches. It is important to understand certain principles about leverage bits. A straight shank, in comparison to a curved shank, is quicker acting. A longer shank produces more leverage than a shorter shank. Bits that have broken mouthpieces and/or swivel cheeks are slower acting and provide the horse with what essentially amounts to a preparatory signal.

I must couch the previous text by saying there are always exceptions and modifiers to most rules. Not every bit fits neatly into a category, especially if we are trying to put everything into either a snaffle or traditional curb bit classification. Neither is it possible to easily classify bits as either english or western. There are examples like the Kimberwick, Pelham, Gag and Elevator bits that are really combination bits. There is a very large group of bits used primarily by the speed events and rodeo disciplines. These bits are also a form of combination bits. Many of these bits utilize a modified gag action and many of them also function like a mechanical hackamore. These bits and mechanical hackamores continue to gain acceptance in the jumper ring as well as with many of the gaited horses.

Regardless of the bit selected, what generally makes it good or bad are the hands using it. You must have confidence in the bit you select; otherwise you will not be happy with the results attained. In most instances, the problems perceived as resulting from not having the correct bit are in reality training problems.