

Breaking the Bit

It has been said that the horse is the most abused domestic animalⁱ. Having horses myself, I spend many of my weekends at the various state parks in my area that are designated for pleasure and trail riding. Each time I visit one of these parks, I am able to enjoy time spent with other horse enthusiasts like myself. Unfortunately, I am also met by the fact that many horse owners are uneducated as to the riding equipment they are using. This is especially true of bits. I frequently find that riders often use a certain bit only based on what they most frequently see others using or what a fellow rider recommends to them. They make their choice without ever considering their animal's individual needs. Just like we humans, every horse's mouth differs in structure and various degrees of sensitivity. And because their human riders cannot understand their silent suffering, these horses continue working in agony. That is, at least, until proper light can be shed on their plight.

Horses are prey animals, meaning they are experts when it comes to masking pain and discomfort. Predators are quick to pick up on the slightest sign of weakness, so effectively disguising pain is essential for a prey animal's survival. Due to this instinctive ability, excruciating pain may only elicit a glassy stare or a very faint change in the carriage of the horse's head. Only when the pain becomes unbearable will most horses become vocal or lash out in order to escape their anguish. Many horse owners fail to realize this, assuming that their horse will let them know when something hurts or is uncomfortable. The sad truth is that the majority of riders are actually causing permanent damage to the jawbones and sensitive gums of their equine companionsⁱⁱ. In one 2009 study, 66 skulls of domestic horses from various museum collections were studied and

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compared with 12 skulls from feral or Przewalski wild horses. 62% of the domestic skulls exhibited periostitis, an inflammation of tissue surrounding the bone that results in bone swelling and aching pain. 61% of the domestic skulls exhibited erosion of the lower premolar that would've been caused by chronic lesions resulting from ill-fitting bits. No such injuries were evident on *any* of the wild or feral horse skulls. Upon completely studying each of the 66 domestic horse skulls, it was determined that only 8% were free of bit induced injury. In my opinion, this figure is absolutely unacceptable. Yet the silent suffering of our equine partners will continue each and every day until something is done to bring this critical issue to attention.

The first step in developing a successful solution to any problem is to fully understand why the current method is not the best method. The horse's mouth has 2 types of teeth. The anterior incisors allow him to cut grass from the roots, and act as a mechanism of self defense. The posterior molars are used to grind food. Between these 2 sets of teeth, on either side of both the roof and floor of the mouth, is an approximately 3 inch span of smooth, toothless gums called the bar. This bar area is where the bit is placed in the horse's mouth. The bone which lies under the thin, fleshy gums of the bar is similar to the human shin bone in structure and sensitivity. Therefore, each time the rider gives a sharp tug on the reins, the sensation would be comparable to having a solid metal bar continually rapped against your shin bone. Imagine this repetitive discomfort against your shins for 1 to 2 hours at a time, and you will have an idea as to what a horse experiences while being ridden with a bit.

For horses with less sensitive mouths or horses that aren't as responsive to a

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smooth metal bit as the rider would like for them to be, there is a huge variety of more severe bit options. A twisted wire bit is composed of numerous very fine wire strands twisted into one thin, sharp wire. Used for a long enough period of time, these twisted wires often slice into the bars and cause some horses to spit blood (unfortunately, I have witnessed this a handful of times). Though never actually sold on the market, and rarely spoken about, I have personally talked to people who actually use 2 strands of barbed wire twisted together in place of a bit for “real stubborn ones”. Tragically, after reading several online chat forums and blogs, I realized that this hideous practice is not just limited to my area, but is used all across the U.S. The very thought of doing something like this to any living thing repulses me, as it should anyone who claims to have even the most miniscule sense of compassion.

The most obvious option when opposed to traditional bits is to use one of any of the common varieties of bridles which control without any part in the horse’s mouth, such as the hackamore. This is simple a bridle with a downward-facing U-shaped piece of heavy rawhide that lies over the bridge of the horse’s nose. Yet even this seemingly flawless design has some major, often unseen issues. The rawhide piece puts pressure directly on the nostrils, hindering breathing. Also, the pressure is focused on the fleshy, soft part of the face that is full of highly sensitive nerve endings. Therefore the hackamore is only another device that controls through pain.

Now that we understand the issues caused by current bits, bridles, and even seemingly kind hackamores, what options remain? We need to instead be asking ourselves “How can I cause my horse to trust me, depend on me, and desire to please

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me?” In my opinion, the equipment used to ride and control the horse is only the second, lesser part of the equation. First and foremost is the human-horse relationship. I do not believe there is a straight narrow path leading to the answer. There is no “secret” to understanding your horse, and no matter how much a person pays for a “*Natural Horsemanship*” DVD kit, they will never be able to carry on a 2-way conversation with a horse!

The first step in understanding the horse is to see things his way. If there is any statement I could choose to force into riders’ minds, it would be “Don’t ever punish the horse for being afraid!”. But what can you do to lessen his fears? The simplest way is to bond with him! There’s no shortcut to bonding with your horse. It can only be accomplished through relaxing free-time spent with him in an environment where he feels most at ease. Show him that you are part of his herd. Gradually, each time the 2 of you are faced with something intimidating, he will gradually become more and more likely to the rest of the herd’s (your) mood and stay calm.

Once a bond is developed, you will have confidence in each other and can begin experimenting to find what works best for communicating with your individual horse. Does he prefer a structured, secure saddle? Or does he seem more comfortable when you ride without a saddle? Some horses might actually be more nervous without a saddle, probably due to being able to feel the rider’s every move if he or she becomes off balance. Next, you need to find what best unites your commands with the horse’s actions. I’ve made many interesting discoveries with my own horse, Jasmine, by experimenting with homemade bridles. After buying several links of soft rope from our local farm store,

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I tied a number of bridles that would apply pressure in different ways and to different areas of Jasmine's head. I quickly found that she dislikes pressure focused on the pole area between her ears, but responds very well to a cross-under style. Very similar to the bitless bridle by Dr. Robert Cook, it evenly applies pressure around the entire head providing gentle, easily sensed cues.ⁱⁱⁱ I would encourage each rider to try many different methods, using what they have learned about their horse to guide their imagination. Some horses are very keen to learning voice cues, and there's a growing number of horse trainers who are adopting this seemingly magic form of communication.^{iv}

We believe the horse was domesticated in 3500 B.C.^v It amazes me that in the 21st century, 5,000 years later, we continue to employ the same stone-age methods of controlling horses via pain. We continue to declare our love for the horses, yet even those of us who call them our companions will continue to cause them to suffer until these issues are brought to light. It is essential that the figures and information regarding the pain we cause them are made known. Otherwise, riders will carry on their cruel ways, unaware of the pain they are responsible for.

ⁱ The Horse: The Most Abused Domestic Animal by Greta Bunting (1997)

ⁱⁱ Dixon, P. M., Tremaine, W. H., Pickles, K., Kuhns, L., Hawe, C., Mccann, J., Mcgorum, B. C., Railton, D. I. and Brammer, S. (2000), Equine dental disease Part 3: a long-term study of 400 cases: disorders of wear, traumatic damage and idiopathic fractures, tumours and miscellaneous disorders of the cheek teeth. *Equine Veterinary Journal*, 32: 9–18.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.bitlessbridle.com/>

^{iv} Stacy Westfall, Pat Parelli, Lizzy Traband, to name a few

^v "Earlier Date Suggested for Horse Domestication" New York Times article by John N. Wilford, March 5, 2005