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Principles of Western Bitting I

In part one of this two-part series, the author begins exploring the principles of bitting the western horse.

by Laura Harrison McBride

The first thing to know about western bitting is that there is no such thing as a western bit. "Western" bits came to the United States via Spain when the Spanish Conquistadors brought their horses to the New World in the 1500s. But the Spanish hadn't developed those bits, either. Spanish horsemanship bits, bridles and horse furnishings in general came to Spain from North Africa, with the Moors. The Moors overran Gibraltar in 711 A.D. and rapidly moved onto the Iberian Peninsula, as far north as the Pyrenees of southern France.

John Chaney, owner of and trainer at Against the Wind Ranch in Clarksburg, Maryland, is adamant that this Moorish-Spanish history is not merely interesting, but is the foundation of the best in western bitting practice today. He also makes the point that there are virtually "no distinguishing features whatsoever" between proper western bitting and good horsemanship in general.

Dale Myler, one of the developers of the Myler bitting system (which is used for both western and English disciplines) is also a clinician who puts the ancient Spanish concepts to work, whether a rider is using Myler bits or any other type of bit that allows the horse to perform properly.

Chaney himself has no particular axe to grind about one sort of bit or another, but he does recognize that the form and action of the ancient Spanish bit was pretty close to what Myler, Inc., research has independently discovered.

Bitting Basics

Chaney cautions consumers to look for well-made bits. "If you balance a bit on your fingertip, it should tilt forward, as it would in the horse's mouth," he says. Material is equally important. "Some of the bits out there are made of inferior alloys as well and irritate a horse's mouth and prevent him from creating or dealing with saliva properly," notes Chaney. The issue of saliva is an important one, to both Chaney and Myler; horses make up to six gallons of it a day, something that doesn't stop just because you're riding the horse.

"In the anatomy of the horse," says Myler, "the muscles go from the underside of the tongue to the hyoid bone and the hyoid leads to the temporo-mandibular joint. Muscles go from there down the side of the neck and to both shoulders. If you look at a plain snaffle, especially if it is used badly, the horse cannot manipulate his tongue to swallow. That in turn will cause him anxiety. Try it yourself. Take your finger and press down in the center of your tongue and see how long it is before you panic at not being able to swallow. Think about the dentist's office: they keep

suctioning your saliva away so you won't be stressed by your temporary inability to swallow properly."

Traditional Spanish/western bits worked a lot like the modern Myler bit and other bits that offer ports so the horse can use his tongue to facilitate swallowing. As long as such bits are used properly, they are merely a "signaling device," says Chaney, not a means to punish the horse into submission.

Method of Progression

It is for that reason that properly trained, properly ridden and properly bitted western horses grow into the very bit most riders (western and English alike) think of as the least abusive bit, the snaffle. In fact, a snaffle is harsh.

"The snaffle is an Anglo invention," Chaney says, "and was designed in large part to overcome deficiencies in riding and training skills of the later immigrants to the western United States. In early Mexico and Spanish California, there was no snaffle. Horses were started in a 'haquima', which we have translated to Hackamore. A bosal is merely the noseband of the haquima. In early Mexico and Spanish California, most horses were started at age four or five, not earlier, in a haquima. Some were not started until age six, when the so-called 'Bridle teeth' began to come in."

After being introduced to training with the bosal, the horse would next be trained with a haquima/hackamore. A double-rein arrangement uses one rein to create pressure on the haquima headstall and one connects to the bosal, or noseband. As the horse was being developed, a direct rein technique was used with the hackamore rein, and gradually the rider would take up more with the bridle rein that attached to the bosal and would eventually attach to a bit.

No contact was made with the bit until the horse was well educated enough to respond to light commands (pulling on the reins was never a part of classical western training, and certainly not with a bit in place). By the time a Spanish/western horse was 'finished,' the horse would be using a fixed mouthpiece with shanks. To many riders, these bits appear to be very severe. Most think of them as more severe than the jointed snaffle. But Chaney says that's because most riders have the wrong idea about what a bit is supposed to do, and they therefore use it improperly.

"In proper usage, the fixed mouthpiece and shanks form a signaling device, not a training device," he says. "By the time a horse was ready for the bit, he was to be ridden with a great deal of float in the reins, responding to slight signals by the wrist with the hands close. It all depends on signal and release, never constant pressure." Says Chaney, the Spanish swordsmen had to have highly trained horses that would pirouette and do other close-quarters and precisely timed maneuvers with a bare touch of the rein or even no rein; after all, the swordsman had at best one hand to use to communicate his desires to his horse. It is the same in working western horses. A rider working cattle has only one hand, at best, to communicate maneuvers to the horse because the other hand is operating a lasso or lariat.

The Spanish influence is also seen in the styling of the shanks. While many people regard the fancy scrollwork on western shanks as overkill, Chaney points out that even that is in the best Spanish Conquistador tradition. "The swordsmen were upper class individuals, so they had some money to spend and a desire for beauty and elegance. They had spent a lot of time training themselves and their horses, and they justifiably wanted to have the best, the most elegant, equipment to show it all off," Chaney says. This desire has come through to today's riders in the form of a great deal of embellishment on the equipment, all historically accurate in intent.

An Aid, Not a Punishment

Chaney says that the bits in western riding are meant to honor the relationship between horse and rider. "Whether in warfare or ranch work, that horse was depended on day in and day out. It had to be dependable and rock solid, with no torture device in its mouth. A rider who needs more and more leverage, rather than less and less, has not mastered the basics. And yet, we see people riding untrained horses with severe bits trying to get the job done," Chaney says. "If you ride a horse for an hour and your hands and arms ache, think about the horse," says Myler.

Watch for Feedback

As you make the progression from bosal to hackamore to bit, look to your horse for signs that he is ready for the next step. Chaney says horses cannot lie. Because they are herbivores, their only defense is escape; they don't have claws and they can't pounce. So if the horse is bolting or evading, he's escaping and is not ready for the next step. Be patient and keep at it. "No human being would put up with what we do to a horse in improperly and abusively asking for things. It's remarkable that they accept it. They are unable to use cunning and stealth, like carnivores our dogs and cats or omnivores, ourselves. So they simply evade by trying to run from us or getting into resistant positions, which we then punish by our harsh use of our bits. The horse is still a powerfully archetypal animal and that's why even non-riders are drawn to them. But my advice about western biting is this: "it's all about correct and proper horsemanship. People who don't want it should just leave horses alone."

In part two, the experts discuss the impact of bits on breathing and relaxation, and they speak about the horse's mind as the essential "bitting" element.