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Principles of Western Biting II

In the last installment of this two-part series, the author further explores the principles of biting the western horse.

by Laura Harrison McBride

Last month, we learned there are two things a western bit should not do; it should not interfere with breathing or with swallowing saliva, according to Dale Myler, one of the inventors of the Myler biting system, and John Chaney, trainer and owner of Against the Wind Ranch in Clarksburg, Maryland.

In addition, Chaney noted that much of today's western biting practices derive from the Moors of North Africa via Spain. Fortunately, the Moors had learned a bit about humane operation of horses after the period of Egypt's 18th Dynasty, around 1450 B.C. In Egypt, before that time, riders positioned nosebands so low on the horse's mouth to keep it shut that they had to slit the horse's nostrils so the horse could breathe. (The horses were trying to open their mouths to breathe when the bits forced their tongues into their airways.) This barbaric practice didn't end there, though; according to Stephen Budiansky, author of 2004 book entitled *The Nature of Horses*, paintings from 15th and 16th century Europe the very time of the Conquistadors show that some trainers were using such viciously rigid training cavessons that slitting the nostrils was a required tactic.

Both Chaney and Myler agree with Budiansky that such overbearing and inhumane biting has no place in horsemanship. They further note that while some people admire the appearance of a tough rider holding a hot horse in check with rough handling of a severe bit, that is not the aim of riding in general, nor of good western horsemanship in particular. The problem is, they say, that so many people have trained horses to the bit improperly that the result is often a 'hot' horse that can only be handled with barbaric equipment. It is possible, however, to back off and re-bit your horse for his comfort and yours, all the while improving performance, as well as your horse's happiness and longevity.

Slow and Steady Wins the Race

"This method takes a lot of commitment, and a really amazing amount of time, but why not do it?" Chaney asks. "What we are doing, if you are familiar with German dressage training methods, is no more than that, with increasing sophistication of the biting." And remember, he says, in developing their training methods, the Germans imported Spanish riding school instructors.

The horse has two major centers of operation, his hind end and his front end. Both are controlled by his mind and influenced by yours. When the rider abuses the front end, the feedback to the horse's brain says 'resist.' It would be hard to find a more straightforward explanation of biting and the involvement of the horse's mouth than that given by R.D. Scoggins, D.V.M. in his 2004 article, 'Bits, Biting and Dentistry.' He reminds readers that the design and function of a horse's mouth makes it a perfect 'steering device.' This, he says, is because the interdental space the bars of the mouth allows the bit to lie comfortably without interfering too much with the tongue.

Dr. Scoggins also notes that correctly biting a horse has little to do with mechanics, and everything to do with feel, timing and balance, and that it is much more an art than a science. "In the hands of some individuals, a complex high-port-curb bit is an instrument of communication with all of the delicacy of playing a violin. In another person's hands, a thick hollow-mouthed snaffle may be as dangerous as a surgical scalpel in the hands of a monkey." Dr. Scoggins explains that the reason for the standard progression in western biting is that the older the horse becomes, the more room there is in the mouth. Because the snaffle is, generally speaking, the smallest and lightest bit, it is used first. That's why young western horses are often shown in snaffle bits or hackamores (which might be considered a formal bosal) through their fourth or fifth years of age.

The horse's introduction to the bit is critical. Notes Dr. Scoggins, "It is important that the horse respects the bit but never becomes afraid of it. Either lack of respect or fear will cause the horse to become stiff and brace against the bit. This can result in hollowing of the back, stiffness in movement, running away, rearing or bucking. Softness, on the horse's part, and respectful obedience, are what is desired." This thought resonates with modern masters as well.

New Approach to Old Practices

Two of the foremost proponents of the new approach to western biting, along with Chaney and Myler, are Kim Weyand, a competitive rider and vice president of Mikmar Bits, and Larry Mahan, who was rodeo's most acclaimed cowboy for 14 years, winning the World Championship All-Around Cowboy title an unprecedented six times. Weyand says that which specific bit one uses first is not nearly as important as the rider's skill level. She notes that many western riders, hoping to emulate what they see on television and in the movies, buy a horse, some tack, and ride away. The problem, she says, is that inexperienced riders cannot make the proper decision regarding a bit for themselves and their horse. There are too many variables to be assessed.

"It's really important when learning to ride and choosing a bit that your riding skills are evaluated very critically," explains Weyand. "Bitting is a controversial subject. You have to go to a professional for that, and take a lesson. You have to take the time and spend the money for that professional to see your skills and recommend the proper bit." Weyand also notes that many riders think they can shorten the learning process by going to clinics, especially bitting clinics. "It's true that there are a lot of clinicians out there recommending the snaffle for everything these days. It has become a very popular thing to do. While the snaffle is a useful bit, it isn't always the end-all answer and often it's hard to go home and get the same response as the clinician did, especially if the rider lacks the experience to perform the maneuvers. Taking your time to develop skill through practice and consistency with a professional is the best recipe."

Weyand does see a place for the snaffle in western bitting, however. She has used snaffles, albeit the more gentle, recently evolved Mikmar version, for beginner lessons. "By popular demand, we produced a line of snaffles. They have traditional side pieces, and our unique wide, flat, double-jointed mouthpieces. But like the Mikmar training bits, they are slightly slanted and gentler. For the beginner rider, it gives them what they need to slow or stop their horse without unduly punishing the horse as they learn."

To properly train and improve a western horse, though, "the horse has to be calm to get the work done. Often a snaffle is misused and unintentional abuse is done to the horse's mouth, but a bit that's comfortable helps the horse stay calm so he can learn," Kim says. The Mikmar training bit was developed to help riders learn to handle a hard bit or a curb bit while learning to ride with the reins held in one hand. And, in the fashion preferred by Chaney, it puts pressure on more than just the tongue or bars of the mouth. Its nose rope divides pressure to four areas - the nose, mouth, chin and poll. In short, the bit avoids harsh contact with one area of the horse's front end, distributing it more evenly and comfortably among several pressure points.

According to Weyand, another advantage to the training bit is that even though it has a long shank, it is a slow-activating bit. It has lots of play, rotates slowly, and puts pressure on the mouth very slowly. Therefore, it is less harsh and more forgiving of untrained hands.

"A lot of my horses were in the training bit in horse camp. Most of the campers had never sat on a horse before, and had no control of their hands. But this sort of bit, with its slow action, keeps horses very calm and helps them cope well with mistakes from a young rider's hands," Weyand advises.

More than Just a Bit

Mistakes from the hands are not something a horse will experience with Larry

Mahan. Mahan takes the concept of western bitting out of the mundane and into the sublime. To him, every interaction with a horse, especially the ones involving the human hand, is an opportunity for spiritual growth.

When it comes to bitting, Mahan doesn't endorse one product over another; what he does endorse is good riding.

When Mahan starts a young horse, he uses a snaffle bit. But he always looks for what is really comfortable for the horse. "If the horse starts to get a busy mouth, I put a gentle little bit on them and let them hack around for a while," he says. "I like to use a bit with a roller; they then begin to use the tongue on the roller, rather than chewing on something. Whatever you do, you have to remember that the bit should become an extension of the horse, and should be something he is really comfortable with."

In case people forget, he also notes that the curb strap, when present, "will determine how the bit moves in the horse's mouth. The looser the curb strap, the more the bit can roll. If the bit is loose, it creates more motion on the bars of the horse's mouth." Here's the really hard part of western bitting: there are no hard and fast rules. "It's all in awareness and observing," says Mahan. This is where he and Chaney see eye to eye. "You have to spend the time," says Mahan. "You have to let the horse live with the bit; he's going to accept it sooner or later. With age comes patience. But even without age, anyone training a horse has to take enough time to observe and see how the horse gets along with any bit you use. We have to have more time than the horse." After observing comes feeling. "I'm to the point where it's so important to feel what's going on. The process, to me, is that we really have to feel back from the horse his reaction to the feeling I have presented to him" through action on the reins to the bit. "I think of everything as energy," Mahan says. "For me, the important thing is to keep working to become the best horseman I can become." To that end, he communicates to the horse using his body, mind and emotion, not just a bit or piece of equipment.

Mahan admits that when he was a young cowboy, he did a lot of things that are totally opposite from the way he approaches riding now. He didn't give horses an opportunity to optimize their equine potential, as he puts it. "To me, now, it's a mission that I'm on to make sure I don't bring any 'baggage' to my horse world. I'm there to get into the moment, a place the horse always is," Mahan says. Like Chaney, he believes a horse is incapable of dishonesty. "Horses don't manipulate you; they don't smile when they don't mean it," he adds, a good point to remember when you are trying to assess how a horse responds to a bit.

"We have to constantly work on developing our feel, because any bit, no matter what discipline it comes from, is so dangerous and painful to the horse if we don't treat it so gently. It doesn't matter if it's a rubber Happy Mouth. I

don't use a lot of leverage bits with broken mouthpieces. It seems to me that unless we have hands that can detect every movement that is going on in that horse's mouth, there's a possibility that we create discomfort for that horse. After that, we have to have total control over every tissue and cell in our body so that the line of communication with the horse is a loving soft feel. Imagine going to a bad dentist; it's the same if we are not so gentle. I've heard every marketing line in the world to get people to buy bits, but what it all comes down to is us becoming as knowledgeable as possible, and then we are giving the horse a fair shake," Mahan says.

Mahan likes the Mikmar bits because of their versatility. He highly recommends The Larry Mahan Imagination Signature String, which is nothing but a simple length of baling twine. Mahan believes that you can take the Imagination Signature String, wad it up and stick it in your pocket and any time your horse gets you to the point where you don't know what you should do next, you stop, take the Imagination String out of your pocket, rub it three times with your right or left hand, and put it around your horse's neck or wad it back up and stick it in your pocket. Hopefully, that break will give you enough time to think of what you need to do next - what you should be doing next - to help that horse understand what you are trying to get across to him.

"There are good bits and bad bits; there are good hands and bad hands. When we communicate something through our hands, it would be nice if we know what feel that horse is experiencing. If we back up from the hands, the feel that we have presented to him should have come from the heart. You can go to a snaffle to a kimberwicke and I like those on some horses but what it all boils down to is that it's the rider's call. If the rider has sufficient knowledge and understanding, it will be a win-win situation for horse and rider," Mahan says, regardless of the specific bit in use at the time.