

June 2009 Beyond the Basics

Developing Contact: Theory & Practical Use of Bits..... The Snaffle Part II

Last month we embarked on studying the concept of ‘Contact’ and examining how that picture related to the ideas behind the use of various bits. I hope you were able to give some of the visual aids a try in attempting to picture and feel ‘contact’. Finding that all-important handshake, with a connection somewhere between a gorilla grip and a clammy wimp is not easy! Then to combine that ‘feel’ with good posture, rhythm, timing, balance, and clear intention just adds to the complexity of developing this art form called horsemanship. Let’s see if we can take it one step at a time and truly examine how to develop ‘contact’ by using the snaffle bit.

The Snaffle Bit & Contact:

As we discussed in the previous article, the snaffle bit is an excellent choice for most horses in schooling the development of ‘contact’ in that it is both a lateral and longitudinal communication tool. We also cautioned, that in the wrong hands, the snaffle bit can be very harsh, so don’t be fooled by its simplicity of design.

If it were a perfect world, where we all had the time to truly study the horse and ride everyday to further enhance our abilities at communication, we would most likely follow training progression of our Spanish and Mexican friends. In these traditions, the horse is schooled in a bosal, or sereta to develop self-carriage, self-confidence, and yes...contact. Unfortunately, most of us don’t have the time, nor understanding of these tools, to effectively use them as an instrument to develop a connection from the back of the horse, up through the poll, and back to our sensitive hands. Consequently, we humans pull, the horse resists, and we tumble into a downward spiral regarding communication. (Note: I will talk about the use of the bosal in the next issue, for those who can invest the time!)

What all of us can learn from the Vaquero traditions, is that the snaffle bit can be used by those of us who are mere mortals, but to develop true ‘contact’, the prerequisites of good attitude, rhythm, balance, timing, focus must be adhered to in both horse and human! Much has been written about being “on the bit” or “on the aids” or “contact of the aids” or “developing a soft-feel” and all authors seem to agree on one factor...You must have a strong foundation of the basics. So before we begin to talk about “How” to develop contact by utilizing the snaffle bit, let me recommend three reminders:

No. 1 – Remember that ATTITUDE (a willingness to yield in a respectful manner) plus MOVEMENT (the better they go forward, backwards, sideways, and cross their hindquarters...the better they will do everything else) equals POSITIVE COMMUNICATION.

No. 2 – Recall your ‘Horseman’s Protocol’ before every transition. (i.e. Breathe & become Present; Think-Picture-Focus which sets-up your posture; Allow; and Reward just *before* it happens!

No. 3 – Use the Dressage Training Scale as a development tool for the horse and for you!

Ok then...Let’s get started with some specifics on developing ‘contact’ by using the snaffle bit in combination with your other aids. It is absolutely critical that your horse understand the basics of positive attitude, and rhythmic movement, before you start fiddling with his mouth. There needs to be some understanding of the driving power coming from the

hindquarters, not being drug along on the front end. It is not so much a question of ‘when’ do I start to ask for ‘contact’, but rather ‘what’ have I prepared for prior to asking. I can ask for a softness at the poll early in the development, as evidenced by one or two wrinkles in the jowl area, accompanied by a slight raising of the poll and re-balance of the horse’s weight to the hindquarters. As we continue on, this will develop into true contact and one day being ‘on the bit’. (See Jane Savoie’s article: nwhorsesource.blogspot.com/2009/02/on-bit.html)



I begin to develop contact in all my horses by executing some Work in Hand exercises. In other words...I start on the ground. It is important to remember that you are communicating to a very delicate and sensitive spot on the horse. The corners of the mouth, bars, tongue and palate are all affected when we ask the horse to give at his poll, grow his neck upwards from his shoulders, and shift his balance to the hindquarters slightly. Can you just imagine how that snaffle bit would feel in your mouth?

Remember, that as you practice your Work in Hand exercises and then apply them up into the saddle, that it is important to keep these thoughts in mind through your reins:

First, the reins should act as an extension of you! They are somewhat elastic, with your fingers willing to hold and release, and they are NOT part of your 'tug-of-war' human mentality. No Pulling Allowed!! Dennis Reis said once, "If I cut the reins they should bleed."

Second, recognize that you have an 'Active' rein and a 'Supportive' rein, and they have different functions and feelings for the horse, particularly when accompanied with your other aids. (I.e. Seat, Leg, Hands, Focus) The 'Supportive' rein is typically on the outside of the bend and it suggests to the horse to carry himself longitudinally from back to front, and captures the balance when moving laterally. (i.e. As in a leg-yield balance moving from the inside hind to the outside rein, or a half-pass balance moving from the outside hind to the inside fore.) The 'Active' rein is usually on the inside of the bend, and mainly serves the purpose of keeping the proper bend and in younger horses to provide direction. Now there are many other combinations and functions if we really want to get technical, but for developing beginning 'contact', let's just keep it simple. (Review: *Riding Essentials* by Francois Lemaire de Ruffieu)

Once your horse can carry himself with a softness in his poll, moving with a small measure of back to front energy, and accomplishing the beginning Work in Hand exercises, you are well prepared to start asking for 'contact' while in the saddle. Always start with forward motion and think of your aids in this order...Seat, Legs, then Hands. My seat asks the horse to prepare for a little 'half-halt', or in my mind's eye I hear, "Get Ready...Get Prepared...Listen Up". My legs encompass the horse like a bow-legged cowboy, gathering the belly of the horse up into his back. And finally, my hands squeeze the reins, talking to the tongue with my ring finger having the 'Supportive' rein in a more constant caress and the 'Active' rein sponging more actively. In the beginning I will carry this 'contact' only a few steps, and then reward by releasing both ring fingers. As we progress, I will ask in the same manner, using the 'half-halt', but ask the horse to carry this contact primarily through the 'Supportive' rein.

The Definition of "On the Bit"

Written by Dr. Max Gahwyler and Bettina Drummond

Allowing the horse to seek the aids as the older Germans said, or the coordinated aids, aids coming through the back, non-interfering aids, weight aids, seat aids, supporting aids, leg aids, etc. with the horse determining the contact would probably better represent what we really should aim for in Dressage.

In the end, developing 'contact' is critical to every discipline that truly wishes to athletically prepare their horse, and keep them as a fit, balanced partner into their later years. The snaffle bit can allow us to find that initial connection, which combined with your other aids and applied with the focus of a job, can create a beautiful picture. Start slow...Reward often...and Feel for the Contact – the Connection!