

June 2009 Beyond the Basics

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

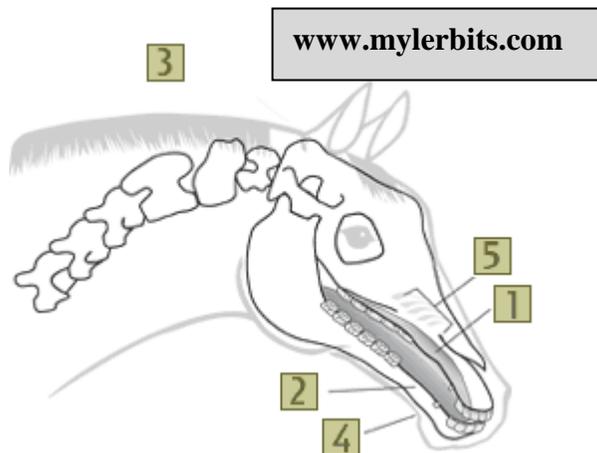
Last month we embarked on studying the concept of ‘Contact’ and examining how that picture related to the ideas behind the use of various bits. I hope you were able to give some of the visual aids a try in attempting to picture and feel ‘contact’. Finding that all-important handshake, with a connection somewhere between a gorilla grip and a clammy whimper 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 severe, so don’t be fooled by its simplicity of design.

Points of Pressure

- 1. Tongue**
- 2. Bars**
- 3. Poll**
- 4. Curb or Chain**
- 5. Palate**



It has been said that the snaffle bit can be the best bit in the world or it can be the most severe. As my friend Joy would say, “It all depends upon the nut behind the wheel”! I found some amazing statements regarding snaffle bits as I researched the internet, and clearly so much of the misconception regarding bits comes from an apparent lack of knowledge about horses! For too many humans, the bit they choose for their horse has more to do with show standards and perceptions, rather than having the comfort and progression of the horse at heart, both mentally and physically. The best bit any of us can invest in is the bit of knowledge, caring, compassion, and grace.

For developing contact, the snaffle bit is an excellent tool, and one used by many master horsemen and women over the ages in a variety of cultures. In thoughtful hands, the snaffle provides a nice connection to the tongue, bars, and palate of the horse to particularly enhance lateral flexion for the horse. When combined with balanced and rhythmic aids, the snaffle bit is a wonderful teaching tool for longitudinal flexion as well.

I am referring to snaffle bits as a general category of bits that are hinged in the middle, sometimes with one or two breaks, or a floating roller or frog, and all of which have no shank. Typical shapes are egg-butt or loose-ring on the side portions of the bit. The curb strap is attached loosely, and is there primarily to keep the egg-butt or ring from being drawn into the horse’s mouth. Reins are attached directly or through slobber-straps, which act as a way to politely attach the mouthpiece, as well as aiding the release feel of the fingers as the human gives to the horse. Materials vary from sweet iron, to copper inlays, to steel and aluminum. Avoid the aluminum or chrome bits, as they cause dryness in the horse’s mouth and are not healthy materials. When choosing a snaffle bit, make sure you have done your homework first. I highly recommend consulting with a veterinarian that specializes in equine dentistry. They can prepare your horse so that the bit fits comfortably, remove wolf teeth, and tell you about the width, tongue thickness, and other details that will help you find the right fit.

Next month, we will talk about developing ‘contact’ with both the snaffle and the bosal. However, this may don’t procrastinate on developing this important ingredient in your horsemanship journey. Give someone a call that you haven’t spoken to for a while, and notice the words you use to think *of*, *for*, and maybe even set a date to go *with* them. Reconnect! Then try the same principles with your horse...Get him on the phone; Create a clear picture for him of where you’d like to go; Then go with your horse – together, as a team, with connection and ‘contact’!