

August 2009 Beyond the Basics *Developing Contact: Theory & Practical Use of Bits- The Bridle Horse Part IV*



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These past few months have been a great opportunity for me to further my understanding of the horse and my role in developing a relationship that is soft, willing, and light. I hope that as you have been following this series of article regarding contact and how bits and bosals play a role, that you have reaffirmed the principle...Developing our horsemanship skills takes time! The true aspiring horseman is committed to creating a relationship that is built on respect, understanding, education, patience, and hours of mindful practice. We are truly honored that these horses allow us to interact with them, and in the process, they ultimately finesse and mold who we are to become.

I start Part IV of this series with these thoughts, because nowhere in your horsemanship journey is it more important to slow down, understand the principles, and give yourself and your horse ‘time’ to develop than with the final step of making a bridle horse. For the traditional Vaquero-style development from the bosal, to the double-rein, to straight up in the bridle, the commitment may well take 4 to 7 years!

For the Classical dressage double-bridle horse, which may be finally ridden on only the curb rein, it is a similar time commitment. In these pursuits the well-being of the horse, both mental and physical, through mindful gymnastic development and experiences, creates an athlete that is truly a dancer, and moreover, a life partner. I highly recommend reading the book, *Tug of War: Classical versus “Modern” Dressage* by Dr. Gerd Heuschmann and watching the video “*If Horses Could Speak*”. It will most likely open your eyes to the importance for humans in understanding the anatomy and muscle make-up of the horse, particularly as we move forward in our discussion of ‘contact’, bits, and making a bridle horse.

For many people today, the time it takes to bring along a true bridle horse, and provide him with experiences that will not only teach him how to move to accomplish a job, but carry us in a light, happy manner, is not attainable. And while we may wish that we could purchase a “bridle horse”, the fact is that most of us simply do not have the skills to control our bodies, hands, and minds! The bit used in this classical situation has nothing to do with controlling the horse, but rather the honor of utilizing the equipment in the lightest of manners. So what are us mere mortals that do if we want to develop our horse gymnastically, but simply do not have the time or skill to develop a prima ballerina dancer?

I have found great success in bringing my horses through the vaquero-style double-bridle progression (i.e. In my case: Snaffle bit, to hackamore, to hackamore with the low ported-broken shank & riding with two reins, to finally working with just the low ported bit and a bosalita for leading.) I understand that this system is not truly traditional, but the nature of the low ported-broken bit, such as the Myler brand 5” model, allows for mistakes by the human much more than a true bit. I may still ride for a year primarily using the hackamore rein for lateral communication, but I pick up on the reins attached to the broken bite earlier than if the horse were carrying a true bit. This progression allows me to condition the muscles, ligaments, and joints of the neck, head, and ribcage which so greatly effect the free movement of the back muscles. By the time my body balances are ready to put the horse in a true Vaquero-style bit with hackamore reins and bridle reins, my hands have been educated to assist the horse to carry himself effortlessly.

The types of “true” bits I am discussing range in styles of mouth piece from Half-breeds to Salinas to Spades, with various types of shank and check designs. They

Myler 5” Shank Low Ported Barrel Narrow



Bob Avila Vaquero Bit



typically are not broken in the mouth-piece, and usually have a roller or 'cricket' for the horse to play with using his tongue. (If his mouth is loose, so is his jaw, and mostly likely so are all the muscles in his body!)

These bits are truly pieces of art, and the true working cowboy or aspiring horseman not only is proud of the honor felt in bringing his horse along as a bridle horse, but is very proud of this trappings and the artist that made them.

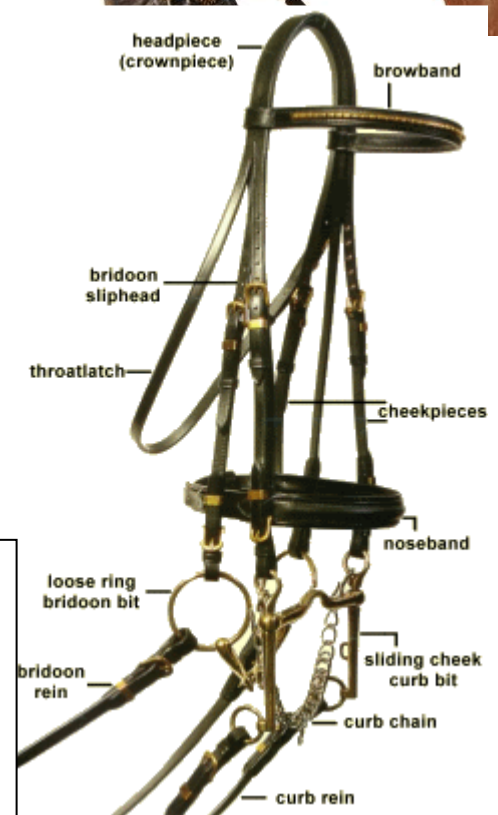
We have a number of fine Vaquero-style bit makers here in the northwest, such as Ernie Marsh from eastern Oregon. Most often, bit designs and skills are passed down through generations by mentors, which gives the true bit it's functionality (in the right hands!), along with being a beautiful piece of art.

The honor of brining your horse along in the Classical dressage double-bridle should be no less than that of the Vaquero. Unfortunately, in both instances time and ego, fostered by a lack of understanding of and commitment to the horse seem to be the norm. In these cases where horses are ridden and shown moving over-flexed, behind the bit, and carrying themselves in a non-rhythmic fashion, the finesse of the double-bridle in enhancing the movement of a gymnastically conditioned horse is lost.

The function of the double-bridle, whether in a Classical dressage set-up (i.e. A loose ring bridoon (snaffle) bit, combined on the same headstall with a curb bit), or in the Vaquero set-up (i.e. A light bosal / hackamore under a separate headstall with a true bit) are basically the same. The bridoon and hackamore reins function to remind the horse for supple flexing through the ribcage combined with the neck and head muscles and ligaments. The curb bit and true bit reins ask for lengthening and gathering over the topline, with balance in the neck and head muscles and ligaments. The feel of 'contact' should have been established years earlier in the progression, and now the double-bridle serves to enhance and finesse the 'contact' with freedom in the back muscles, engagement of the hindquarters, and ultimately collection of all the elements.

If the horse has been mindfully brought along in the progression to the double-bridle, he should be a pleasure to watch. Lightly and happily carrying out his job, whether that job is separating a steer from a bunch of heifers, or riding a dressage test! In both cases, it was not the bit that made the difference. Rather it was the long-term commitment of the human to study and understand the nature and anatomy of the horse, combined with 'contact' – mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually – to develop a connection for life! Now that's the picture of an aspiring horseman!

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Reinsman of the West by Ed Connell
 Making of a Bridle Horse (video series) by Buck Brannaman
www.martinblack.net/videos.php Bridle Horse Series with Martin Black
www.eclectic-horseman.com (Articles & Mercantile)
www.houlihanhorsegear.com (Merchandize for the vaquero traditions)
 Developing a Bridle Horse (Clinic Series) with Alice Trindle in Haines, OR
www.gomersallsaddlery.com Greg Gomersall is a fine saddlemaker and carries quality vaquero-type tack
www.spanishspade.com Marsh Bros. Oregon Silver