

July 2009 Beyond the Basics

Developing Contact: Theory & Practical Use of Bits..... The Bosal Part III

I hope you have had a chance to spend some quality time thinking about developing ‘contact’ with your horse, both physically and emotionally. As we discussed the importance of developing this connection in the past two articles, it has become so clear that in order to achieve this key ‘contact’ component in developing our relationship to the horse, we must start and return to the basics. This critical foundation includes a willing attitude, combined with a freedom of movement, adhering to rhythm and balance in both the horse and the rider. So as we progress this month in talking about the use of the bosal in developing a ‘feel’ or finding ‘contact’, it becomes even more important that you go back to review the basics, give yourself and the horse time, and become re-committed to truly studying this art form of horsemanship.

I remind us of this requirement to be observant, to be consistent, to develop clarity in what, why, and how we are asking our horse to perform, because it is a huge prerequisite if you are desiring to bring your horse along in the bosal. The instrument I am referring to is the Californio-style leather or rawhide bosal, used by hackamore (jaquima) reinsmen. It has a marvelous history that goes back to the Moors, the Spanish Doma Vaquera, the Mexican vaquero, and now to a handful of aspiring horsemen who study the traditions of the use of the hackamore. Please, in no way, see in your minds eye any number of bit-less bridle set-ups, such as the mechanical hackamore, which operate on leverage, pinching, fear and intimidation.

The bosal is typically made by a craftsman, that uses either rawhide or latigo leather braided over a core of metal, rope, or in many cases, over rawhide. The core is an important component in allowing the bosal to shape around the nose of the horse, while still retaining a soft, forgiving nature. Proper storage of the bosal includes taking your mecate (the rein portion) off the bosal after each use, and storing it in a place away from hurry dogs or gnawing mice. (Note the suggested holder from: www.houlihanhorsegear.com)

The diameter of the bosal will range from 5/8 inch down to the pencil-thin bosalita for the finished bridle horse. The ‘plats’ are the number of rawhide strips used in an intricate braided pattern worked over the core. In a fine bosal, the mark of a true craftsman is indicated in the number of plats. Most working bosals will have 16 plys in the nose portion, and perhaps a few less on the side, and at times the edges will be beveled to create a nice, smooth surface against the horse’s face. Usually the bosal is attached to the head by a simple hanger, with perhaps a shoe-string leather throat-latch to keep the hanger away from the eyes. At times there is a fiador attached for this purpose, and also attached to the heel knot on the bosal. In most cases, accept when using a really heavy bosal, the fiador is not needed with a proper fitting bosal and educated hands.



The last piece of the hackamore picture is the mecate. Traditionally the material of the mecate is horsehair or mohair, and is about 22 to 24ft. long. This length accommodates the aspiring horseman to adjust the fit of the bosal, and still have the loop rein portion and a handy ‘get-down’ strap with which to lead or ground school his horse. The diameter will vary as you bring your horse along, but the diameter of the mecate should never exceed the size of the bosal. (Example: If you are using a 1/2 inch bosal, your mecate should be slightly smaller, such as 3/8 to 1/4 inch in diameter.) Mecates made of mane hair will be less prickly, and as you use these reins in bringing along your hackamore horse, it will be a sign of your progress that the prickly parts have disappeared!

The final question many people have regarding developing a hackamore horse, beyond “How”, “When”, and “Why”, is “How much will it cost?”. A quality bosal will probably start at around \$170, and a nice mane-hair

mecate will easily be \$80. So, as you can see, to acquire several diameter bosals and mecates to accommodate your progression can be quite expensive. You may want to find someone to share the burden, or perhaps borrow (on threat of life and limb)! Learn how to tie and fit the hackamore by taking a clinic or watching videos. (See recommendations below.)

If you are at this point you are still interested in pursuing the development of a true hackamore horse...one that softly carries himself with lateral and longitudinal suppleness...then let's talk about 'how' to develop that softness into 'contact'. Generally speaking, if your horse is soft and giving to the horseman's halter, then he may be a good candidate for the bosal. Keep in mind that the bosal is NOT a leverage devise, and if you end up barking or making the jaw bones or nose sore, then your bosal is not properly fitted and your hands are not working in an educated manner.



The bosal works primarily on three pressure points: 1) The nose button that asks the horse to give at his poll, balance with his neck muscles, and carry himself over the topline from the hindquarters up through the shoulders and neck, back to a softness in the riders hands; 2) The two buttons on either side of the face that ask the horse to give laterally through his ribcage, and follow the focus of the rider.

To ask for longitudinal softness, and prepare the horse to accomplish a job, the 'contact' is made first by taking a breath, picturing and focusing in your mind's eye, which prepares the human's posture, along with a slight shortening and 'feel' on the loop reins. If at this point the horse has missed the signals to prepare his body, then apply a slight bump on the nose button until he finds a more vertical face and arranges his body to be able to move. As with developing 'contact' in using the snaffle bit, what is most important is what happens *before* the desired reaction, that truly prepares the horse and rider team for this all important 'connection'.

For the first few times you ask for this 'contact' with movement, you may only want to ask the horse to carry this posture for a few steps and then release the aids. As you progress, this picture will be the preparatory signal for everything you are going to ask of the horse, so that he his body and mind is organized to accomplish the task at hand.

The traditions of the true hackamore reinsmen and women are ancient and honorable. As with any worthwhile journey, it takes time, patience, understanding, and study to achieve the beautiful picture of a light hackamore horse. The concept of developing 'contact' is as apropos to the use of bosal, as it is to the use of the snaffle, and eventually to the double-bridle or two-rein or straight-up in the bridle picture. 'Contact' is the connection that happens between horse and rider, that occurs before what happens...happens, that creates self-carriage, self-confidence, and ultimately lightness. What a marvelous picture!

REFERENCES:

Reinsman of the West & Hackamore Reinsman by Ed Connell
Understanding the Hackamore (videos) by Mike Bridges
Making of a Bridle Horse (video series) by Buck Brannaman
The Hackamore with Martin Black (video)
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

Upcoming Clinics

Developing a Bridle Horse
Series – Part I – July 18 & 19
Ground School & Driving on
Long Lines – July 21-26
Fort Bragg, CA
Trail Riding & Dressage
Two clinics – July 28-Aug 2
Hamilton, MT
Doma Vaquera Clinic
August 7 – 9 Haines, OR

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