

May 2009 Beyond the Basics

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

It's been said by Master Horseman, Bill Dorrance, that you need three things to become a horseman. First, you need to have, and take, and give *time*. Next, you need to develop what the Dorrance's and Mr. Ray Hunt referred to as *feel*. The last suggest by Bill Dorrance in his book, 'True Horsemanship through Feel' is for aspiring horsemen to find a good *teacher*. This second item...the illusive and all encompassing *feel*...seems to be the most difficult item for us humans to acquire, particularly as we try to find true connection through the reins, or what our dressage friends refer to as 'contact'.

In this next series of articles, we will be discussing the broad concept of developing 'Contact' or what some refer to as a 'Soft Feel'. I will endeavor to relay my understandings of the use and theory behind such tools as the snaffle, the bosal, the double-bridle, and true bits such as the spade, half-breed, curb, and Salinas. It is important to stress that these are my thoughts, based on personal experiences, observations, and my teachers, both human and horse. As I researched my personal library, as well the internet, it became very evident that there are a wide variety of opinions, many stated as fact, on the subjects of developing 'contact', and relating that to use of the bit! So the bottom-line is always the same...Do you own reading, observation, listening and then ask your horse what makes sense and feels right! Develop your own 'Horsemanship Journey' and aspire to ideals that fit you and your horse.

What is Contact? If there was an easy answer to this question, I think horsemanship would be easy! However, as I have expressed many times, true horsemanship concepts may be quite *simple*, they just are not *easy* to employ with consistent finesse. For me, 'contact' is the connection, both mentally and physically, that develops the horse and rider team to 'feel' for one-another, in self-carriage and with self-confidence. It is more than the horse giving in the jowl, but a combination of driving the energy up from the hindquarters, in a circular fashion, to a soft-feel in the hands to accept and caress that energy. I want to feel for the horses' tongue by starting at the hind end and visualizing the wave of energy come from back, up through the neck, and resting with lightness in my hands. Here are some pictures that help me identify the feeling of 'contact':

A Good Dancing Partner is one that does not hold you so close that you cannot move, nor one that is never there to give you guidance. I want to dance with someone who in polite, thinks of me before we get to the dance floor, suggests the direction we may start, then gently guides me with a supportive feel at the waist, and a posture that says he is proud to dance with me. There is 'contact' between us, feeling of, for, and with one-another.

A Wise Sailor is one that does not pull on the lines to try to control the direction of the boat. Nor does a sailor try to let nature take its course by allowing the wind to hit the sails, while he maintains no feel on the lines. Rather, a thoughtful sailor will prepare ahead of time, check out the wind direction, place the sail, by little manipulations on the lines, so that as the wind comes up he can capture the energy and guide the boat effortlessly.

Why is Contact Important? Simply put, if I do not have 'contact' I probably do not have a connection! Mr. Ray Hunt would refer to the need for us humans to think *of*, *for*, and *with* the horse. I thought about the meaning of these three words for years, and finally developed this picture to help me visualize a small portion of his meaning: Think about the last time a friend that you hadn't spoken to for a while called you up on the phone. I will bet the first words out of her mouth were, "I was thinking *of* you". Because of the phone line and shared memories, you had an immediate 'connection'...CONTACT! As you chat for a while, she makes a suggestion *for* both of you to get together...Connection with a positive suggestion...Even more CONTACT. As a result of the phone conversation, the two of you meet and go *with* one another to a fabulous event...the ultimate in CONTACT! Why is contact important? Without your friend making the phone call and connecting, you would have never attended the show!

How to Develop Contact: The scenarios above point out the importance of what you do *before* you place a feel on the reins as being critical to your success in truly developing contact. First, go through the ‘Horseman’s Protocol’ and make sure that you are present, have a clear picture in mind, and willing to have a positive attitude. Next, warm-up using the gymnastic exercises, particularly the ‘Bolero’ ground school exercise, and the ‘Long & Low’ stretching. Last, depending on the development of your horse (i.e. age, physical preparation, mental attitude, and to some degree the jobs you will be asking him to perform) ask him to develop a measure of self-carriage, balance, and rhythm while gathering the energy belt buckle up to your hands, rather than pulling your hands back. Ideally, the horse lengthens his neck, softens in the jaw, keeps his poll as the highest point as if pushing up a feather, and drives from the hindquarters. The reins have a connection to the tongue, and the rider’s fingers act, if needed, in slight sponging squeezes to message away brace. The rider’s elbows are heavy, legs are approached or connected to the horse, but not kicking or bumping him forward into the contact. You are providing a place for the horse to drive up to, and begin to gather or collect his balance underneath.

The Snaffle Bit & Contact:

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 meate, 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.

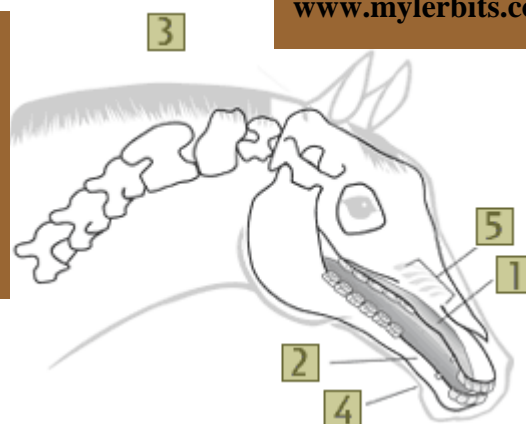
“...it is only by allowing horses to move on a free rein, and not in holding them in, that success may be obtained. Riders who hold in their horses are insignificant riders and will never advance. Riders who give their horses freedom are those who will taste the delicacies of equestrian art.”

Thoughts by Nuno Oliveira from Reflections on Equestrian Art (as he suggests we should read...Exterieur et Haute Ecole by Captain Beudant.)

from behind and put a feel on the reins. Ride your

Points of Pressure

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



www.mylerbits.com

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’!

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