

The Coachman's Guide – A Bit on Bits

A Bit on Bits

There are literally thousands of bits out there, and hundreds of applications for them. Almost everyday someone comes up with a new and “better” bit. Too many lengthy dissertations explain how bits work, what is useful and what is cruel. Many “experts” have studied bits closely, forming “logical” conclusions about the science of proper biting.

Anatomy

No two horses' mouths are the same. Some have long narrow jaws, while others have short wide jaws, or any variation in between. Tongues, too, come in a variety of shapes and sizes. They can be fat and round, wide and flat, long and thin, or any combination of the variables. Some mouths are sensitive, others are not. A horse can have a soft low pallet (roof of the mouth), or high and hard, and so on. Normally teeth follow a predictable pattern, but all have their own unique variations. Some horses have canines, a.k.a. “tush” teeth, on the uppers, lowers or both. Then there are wolf teeth. These occur as the first pre-molar. There are four pre-molars, the second of which is the one we see and feel most, as it is the first tooth after the bars of the mouth. Wolf teeth in horses are like wisdom teeth in humans – some have them, some do not; some become problematical, some do not. The common practice has been to remove them whenever they occur. However, many are finding their removal to be unnecessary as long as they do not interfere with the comfort of the horse. Owners are often unaware that their horse even has them. In some cases, extracting the wolf teeth can cause more problems than simply leaving them alone.

Placement

One popular rule of thumb is that “the bit should make two or three wrinkles in the cheek.” Exactly two or three? Haven't I heard one or two as well? The fact is it varies from horse to horse depending on size, shape, and anatomical structure. Horses' mouths come in as many different shapes and sizes as there are horses. Some horses' cheeks extend well past their molars, placing the corners of the mouth safely in front of the first premolar. In horses with shorter cheeks, the corner of the mouth can be directly in line with the first pre-molar. If you were to pull just two wrinkles on the first horse, the bit may still be too low,



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and his tongue could go over the bit. Putting two wrinkles in the second horse's cheek will surely put the bit right on top of the tooth. I usually try to place the bit about one finger's thickness in front of the first pre-molar. Then, if the horse seems uncomfortable with that, I may move it up or down from there. Horses express bit discomfort in many ways: excessive head tossing; putting the tongue over the bit and lolling it around outside of the mouth; resisting contact with the reins; or taking too much contact. These are just a few signals that the bit may be improperly adjusted or may not be the right one for a horse. However, these behaviors can also be caused by poor rein handling, a bridle that doesn't fit or any number of other problems, all of which work to the advantage of the merchant trying to sell you the latest universal wonder-bit. It is a murky area fraught with lore but precious little logical common sense.

Action

To me, one of the more misleading discussions has to do with the "action" a bit creates in a horse's mouth. Given the unique shape of each horse's mouth, the same bit will rest in and act upon each horse's mouth differently. Even so, there are a few valid generalizations about how a specific type of bit will act in most horses' mouths.

To make matters even more difficult in choosing a bit, there are slippery slopes to slide down on either side of the question. Unfortunately the one that is seen all too often, especially in carriage driving, is the arms race. A horse pulls on a mild bit; the driver gets tired of pulling, and switches to a stronger bit. This controls the horse's pulling for a while by creating pain. But that only lasts until the nerve endings in the mouth become deadened to the new level of pressure. Then the horse pulls again, usually harder. The driver ramps up the bit again, and the cycle continues. Before long, there is a large bit that controls the horse through pain and neither driver nor horse is happy. Ironically I often take the reins of these horses in my hands, and do something that takes no skill at all. I let the horse's mouth go. If the horse has not decided that there is a direct correlation between bit pressure and speed (or lack of it), he usually drops his head in relief and goes anywhere he is asked with pleasure.

The other side of the slope is in softness. A driver starts with a mild bit, and horse doesn't have the confidence to carry that bit forward on his gums. As the driver becomes gentler, the horse becomes ever more acutely aware of the movements of that driver's hand. The driver goes to a milder bit, which serves the purpose for a while until the horse becomes used to it, and hangs behind that bit, losing a good amount of steering and impulsion all the while. Soon the horse is

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in a rubber or plastic “bit-like” device that the driver can hardly touch. The horse and driver are in no better a position for clear communication than the ones above who are in an arms race.

In the end, bit choice comes down to personal preferences. I find that horses are as randomly unpredictable in their bit preferences as we humans are in our choice of underwear or cats are in their choices of favorite places to sleep. Some hate a fixed mouthpiece, while others will tolerate nothing but a straight bar. There are plenty of horses that prefer different bits for different jobs. I even see horses that love one bit for a while, and then decide they hate it. Months later, you are back in the first bit again. The point is, find a bit that suits your horse and place it where you get the best results. Don't go to one extreme (too harsh) or the other (too soft). If you are showing, make sure you are within the guidelines of the sport in which you intend to compete. These guidelines are usually there for a good purpose. Generally, trainers find certain bits that they use more than others. But beware of those who swear by one bit or another. Sometimes their loyalty to a particular bit type (or manufacturer) may cloud their ability to see what is really best for the horse. All too often, the trainer blames the horse or the reinsmanship for problems that might be caused by an uncomfortable bit. In truth, “A tool is only as good as its operator,” or more to the point, to quote the bit maker, Lorimer, “For every twenty bits I make, nineteen are made for men's heads, and one for the horse's.”

We've got bits of all shapes and sizes at Coachman's Delight. With a generous return policy, you'll have no problem trying different bits until you find the one that gives your horse a happy mouth! Check out our selection online. Got an unhappy mouth and not sure what to try? Give the store a call for advice!