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MAKING CONTACT

How to use a bit
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** It is best to develop a feel for light contact using a snaffle, non leverage bit. However, if your horse has been trained in a curb, for safety's sake, by all means use a curb bit to begin this process. However, try to find one with relatively short shanks of no more than 5 inches to learn with. Generally, riding with steady contact, even light contact, on a curb bit is not a good idea.

“Contact: communication through the relatively light adjustment of the reins .. which creates a dialogue between the seat, back and hands of the rider with the mouth of the horse.”

Michel Henriquet, Contemporary French Master of Dressage

The subject of contact with a gaited horse's mouth is often confusing and sometimes controversial. Some riders assume that gaited horses must all work in curb bits, in tight cavessons, with a constant strong pull on the reins if they are to perform their gaits. On the other hand, “Western” and some “natural horsemanship” riders expect their horses to work with completely slack reins, with only an occasional “bump” in the mouth to slow them down or ask for a gait change. Each camp looks on the other with suspicion, and in fact, neither comprehends exactly what contact with the horse's mouth is all about. Both types of riders can profit from learning about riding with light contact to help their horses perform better in their gaits.

Why light contact?

Light contact through the reins between a horse's mouth and a rider's hands develops communication and dialogue, allowing the rider to ask the horse to modify his speed, balance and gait with the touch of a finger and the horse's mouth to express his confidence or confusion at the rider's requests. Heavy, pulling “contact” however, sets up resistance in the horse's jaw and neck, develops a horse that travels out of balance, carrying more weight on his shoulders than his hindquarters, one that leans on the rider's hands with a numb mouth that can only feel and respond to heavy pressure. Often, horses ridden this way become so dull in the mouth that only increasingly more severe (painful) bits can control them. On the other hand, riding with no contact at all and the reins “thrown away”, while certainly effective on horses that have learned to balance under the weight of a rider and carry themselves in gait, or those that only trot as their intermediate gait, deprives young or untrained horses of a clear, easily understood method of communication through the bit. Gaited horses, particularly those that have a problem with the pace, often need help learning to balance themselves under a rider so that they can perform their desired gaits. Without the direct influence of the rider's hands through contact with the bit, the process of developing this balance is very difficult, especially in horses that can perform a variety of easy gaits. With light contact through the reins, at first no more weight than that of a small plum in each hand, later no more than the weight of the reins, it is possible to help a horse develop the balance he needs to perform his gait, and at the same time, keep his mouth responsive and relaxed.

What does your horse know?

Before you can successfully develop light contact with the mouth of a gaited horse, you need to determine what he knows about the use of a bit. If you are faced with a horse that has been trained to go with the “traditional” 10 lbs of pressure in his mouth, at first you are not going to have much success riding him in gait if you try to ride with much less pull in his mouth than he expects. If, on the other hand, you are riding a horse that has had only “natural” training and has no idea that

any pressure on the bit can mean anything but “whoa,” you will not get very far trying to ride him with constant contact, no matter how light, on his mouth. Ride around in an arena a little while, in a walk, feeling out what the horse knows and expects from a rider. Try riding with slack reins, or with some contact to see which method the horse understands. Once you have figured out what the horse expects in the way of bit use, you can begin to modify what he knows and teach him to accept light, kind, contact with the bit.



Developing a feel for light contact:

If you are accustomed to riding “western” style you may never have felt contact with a horse’s mouth. If you are a typical “English” style rider, you may have felt only heavy contact. To help your gaited horse learn to work in light contact with the bit, you need to educate yourself to the feel of light, considerate, consistent contact with his mouth.

How to hold the reins:

Mount up. With the horse standing still (using a bridle fitted with plain, inbraided, leather reins, no wider than 3/4 inch), begin by picking up the reins, one in each hand, holding each independently, not crossed or “bridged” in your hands. Bring each rein up through the bottom of your hand, so that the part connected to the bit is either under your little finger or between it and the ring finger, with the loose end of the rein passing out through the top of your hand, held between the thumb and index finger. Hold your hands so that the thumb nails are on top, at a distance of about six to eight inches apart, lower than your waist, one hand on either side of the pommel of your saddle. Your wrists should be straight, not cocked up or down, and should have no tension in them. If they feel tight, drop the reins and hold your arms out to your side, letting them flop downwards several times to relax, then take up the reins again. Keep your elbows close to your body, relaxed and slightly open, so that a straight line is formed between your elbows, through your wrists, to the horse’s mouth. Be sure that both your reins are the same length, that your hands are level with one another, and that there is NO tension in your arm from fingers to shoulder. With your fingers, “crawl” your way down the reins, taking up the slack in them until you feel a slight resistance, just a bit more than the weight of the rein, maybe about the weight of a medium strawberry in each hand. Contact!

Contact in motion:

Ride at a slow walk, trying to keep the feel of the very light contact in each hand. At first you may notice that your hands move back and forth as your body undulates in the saddle while you try to maintain that feel of the strawberry in your hands. You have just discovered that the basis for even, light contact is a steady seat and hands that act independently of your torso! Try to keep your hands steady, with your little fingers directly over the “buttons” on each side of the pommel of an English saddle, or just in front of the conchos on either side of the swell in a western one. This will be much easier if you keep your wrists, elbows and shoulders relaxed, holding the reins still with your fingers. With your hands held steady, you may notice that the contact in your fingers varies quite a bit between the starting weight, up to the weight of a large

apple, and down to that of a feather. This is a normal part of the horse feeling out your hands, and moving his head and neck in the walk. Just maintain your hand position and try to return to the basic contact level without either pulling or giving with your arm. Tighten or open your fingers to maintain this feel, keeping them elastic and relaxed on the reins.

More speed, similar feel:

When you are comfortable maintaining light contact at the ordinary walk, speed your horse up to a faster gait, either a flat walk or one of the intermediate gaits. The contact you feel through the reins may increase slightly, more like the weight of a small plum in each hand than just the feel of the strawberry weight. This is normal at first as a horse speeds up in gait. Eventually, when his balance under you improves, this contact will lighten back to the level you were able to maintain at the walk. Notice that the horse increased the pressure on your hands as you speeded up, and that you merely maintained your hands in the same position you held them at the walk.

At the faster gait, you can begin to teach the horse to position his head and neck in response to light contact on the reins. This is **not** the same thing as setting his head, instead it is a way of working with his whole body so that he can relax on the bit and carry himself balanced a little toward the rear. Keeping your hands steady, ask the horse to move with his nose tucked somewhat toward vertical. Do this **WITHOUT** pulling back with your arms. Your hands stay in a fixed position, your legs squeeze and release on his sides to drive him forward, and your fingers do the work of asking him to flex at the poll and relax his jaw. Tighten your fingers a little on the rein, asking the horse with light vibrations to “give” with his jaw. Relax the tension in the reins the instant he relaxes his jaw — you will feel this as a lessening of the pressure in your hands -- and return to the “strawberry feel” in each hand. This relaxation of your fingers when he gives his jaw is a key to teaching the horse to work with light contact. Remember to first squeeze/release with your legs, then take/release with your hands, **NEVER USING BOTH HANDS AND LEGS AT THE SAME TIME**. If you avoid “riding with the brakes on” the horse will begin to travel willingly forward while maintaining contact through the reins without lugging on your hands.

Contact and Control:

A hard-mouthed horse, one accustomed to strong steady pressure on a curb bit, may have trouble understanding that he can indeed be ridden with light contact. At first, he may try to speed up or disobey rein signals that are delivered with a “whisper” rather than a “shout.” Obviously, it is not a good idea to let such a horse run away with you, but resist the temptation of riding with strong contact to keep him under control. Instead, use a series of squeeze/releases on the reins along with a deeper seat that is balanced slightly to the rear to slow the horse down and remind him to control his speed. Squeeze the reins with both hands, tightening your fingers around them, then slightly open your fingers to return the tension in the reins back to the basic light contact feel you started with. Repeat until the horse responds, slows and relaxes with the lighter rein contact. This will take some time and practice, especially with a horse that has been made numb in the mouth from inappropriate bit use. However, in time, even a horse with an iron jaw can be made lighter through the use of this technique. Remember that it is not the contact of the bit that controls the horse, but his understanding of all of your aids — the use of your seat, legs and hands — that keeps him calm and obedient.

Contact and Body Position:


Contact with the bit should indicate to the horse where you want him to carry his head and neck, how much flexion you want him to have at the poll, and how you want him to balance his body. It is just as difficult for a horse that is not accustomed to any contact at all to learn to accept light contact that asks for these things as it is for a horse that is accustomed to being “held in” in gait with strong contact. At first, a horse that does not understand light contact will often toss his head, throw his nose up or root “behind” the bit, objecting to the feel of your hands through the reins. He may also slow down or stop at the first hint of any weight heavier than the loose hanging reins in his mouth. The solution to this reaction is to keep your hands steady, fixed and quiet, and alternate light vibrations with your fingers on the reins when he tosses his head with squeeze/releases with your legs if he slows down, until he discovers that he can carry the bit with the weight of your fingers on the reins. Again, it will take time for the horse to accept the idea that the bit works for more than basic stopping or turning cues.

Once a horse has accepted the idea of working with light, even contact on the bit, learned to relax his jaw and bring his nose somewhat toward vertical when asked by light vibrations on the reins, he can begin to work more effectively in gait. If he has a tendency to pace, he can be helped to do a less lateral gait by lowering his head and stretching his neck into light contact. If he has a tendency to trot, he can be helped by raising his head and bringing his nose toward vertical. In both

cases, the contact with the bit should remain the same, but where you hold your hands will change how he carries his neck and head.

Toward Ever-Lighter Contact:

Once a horse is balanced, set in his gait, and accustomed to relaxing his jaw with light (strawberry) pressure on the reins, you can teach him to work with less and less contact, until he carries himself in gait with only the weight of the reins on the bit. Devote part of each ride to a period of riding with only the feel of the reins draped in your fingers, first in the walk, later in the intermediate gait. At first, he may be confused and speed up or seek heavier contact by reaching down for the bit or nosing out. Remind him to carry himself at the speed and in the position you want by light vibrations on the reins, pulling and slacking on them using your fingers only, until he returns to the correct gait and balance. Then try again, riding with lessened contact. With practice, you can eventually ride in gait with a very light feel in your hands, just slightly more than the weight of the reins, in either a snaffle or a short shanked curb bit. This is the lightest, "on parole" contact that makes riding a true pleasure, and allows the most complete "conversations" between your fingers and the horse's mouth. Once you have experienced it, you will never be satisfied with a horse that must be ridden with heavy contact or one that remains ignorant of a bit.



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