



Bitting the Walking Horse

Invariably, when I begin working with a new horse, I must spend hours in bit training, getting him to bend freely, soften and lightly *follow the bit*. This area is so very key to getting relaxation, balance and softness to your horse that I'd place it right up there with foundation training like manners, loading, stopping and starting, etc. Teaching the horse where to carry their head allows the rider to be free and loose on the reins, this increases the horse's comfort and encourages them to pay greater attention when you do make contact. On top of that, the more natural headnod movement your horse is inclined to walk with, the more important and key the bit training becomes for both the horse and the rider. I've found that improper use of bits and hands is the single biggest gaiting impediment that I see daily.

I guess my whole point of raising this topic is that the "walking horse bit" is one of those commonly accepted practices that is simply a myth, and is often *completely wrong* for most riders and the delicate communications that a bit is supposed to assist with. We are asking a horse to stride loosely forward while nodding his head in productive rhythm, but told to put a bit in his mouth that frankly inhibits that very necessary movement. Logic tells us that any "bump" we feel through the reins as the horse nods with his walk is the same "bump" he feels in his much more delicate and sensitive mouth. Furthermore whatever force or impact we feel through the reins is being *multiplied* through the longer shanks on his soft mouth tissues. FORMULA: If the length of the shank below the mouthpiece is, for instance, 3 times longer than the purchase above the mouthpiece, then ANY pressure we exert or feel on the reins is multiplied *times 3* on the horse's mouth tissue. So a walking horse bit with 10" total shank of which 7 1/2" are below the mouthpiece will multiply any pressure you feel on your fingers by almost 4 times on the horse's mouth! Even extremely light contact can result in discomfort to the horse's mouth that can't help but discourage any natural headnod motion by bracing his head, neck and shoulders.

When a horse experiences discomfort in their mouth they begin to resist and get stiffer in their top line to support that resistance, and the longer the curb the more I've found this was so. You begin to see behaviors such as head tossing, pushing against the bit, going behind the bit while dropping their heads low. Many people might jump in here and say the hands are obviously too hard, and I'll not deny this is very probable but often not the only problem... and I will further agree that a person with extremely light and sensitive fingers and superb balance may be able to ride the longer shanks without interfering with the horse... maybe. I've watched enough people riding their gaited horses to know most out there don't have these "super sensitive hands". Their horses become stiffer in their bodies and start to lock up to resist all head movement. These

horses then end up with "U" necks or "elk" necks with bulging and over-developed resistance muscles along the front.

LEVERAGE vs. SNAFFLE: My personal experience has been that using a *true curbless* snaffle plus lowering my hands, frees up the horse and encourages a more natural movement of his head and neck to counterbalance the drive of the walking gaits and better able to utilize a "productive" headnod. The lower hands become a fulcrum for the head to pivot in the nodding motion without "bumping" the bit. The true snaffle is also a "direct action" bit; meaning that any pressure or pull we exert translate in only ONE direction on the horse. While a leveraged curb bit takes that single pulling pressure and translates it into 3 directions of pressure on the horse's head: up on the jaw, down on the bars and tongue and down on the poll. This becomes much more confusing to young horses or horses who are training. Using the direct action of the snaffle bits makes your training much more clear and concise and advances communications between horse and rider. Also the longer the purchase (above the mouthpiece) the more of the pressure that is directed downward on the poll when the leverage is engaged. So if your horse has a tendency to pop their head up, you might look for a curb bit that has equal amounts above and below the mouth piece.

SHANK LENGTH: Now there are always people out there who are so addicted to their long walking horse bits and will forever fire off comments that "if your hands are soft enough, it's not harsh". Or another one you hear all the time "any bit, in the wrong hands can be inhumane". Well, my response to them all is "what do those longer bits do for you that shorter shanks do not?" When I see one of these long bits on a horse, I invariably see a stiff horse following that bit. This is the number one problem in horses brought to me for gait correction! The first several days I usually have to spend just teaching them to follow a snaffle for a one-rein stop, then lateral flexion and give to the bit. Then we get to move on to the second most common problem: teaching them to lower their head and get their necks round and loose...but that's for another article.

COMFORT: I heartily recommend that any bit should be as comfortable as possible for the horse, for multiple reasons.

- The bit is your primary tool of communication with your horse and if he's uncomfortable he may become afraid to engage it, and you will lose that communication.
- When your horse gives you the desired response from your rein cue and you release the pressure, the horse should *fee*/complete release and be as comfortable as you can make him while having a bit in his mouth. If he doesn't he might not realize that he's given you the desired response and will keep moving his head, tossing, shaking and eventually feel increased anxiety and frustration for never getting his release as his reward.

FUNCTION: I personally prefer double jointed mouthpieces that give a lot of flexibility, and find that most horses are slightly more comfortable with a low port for moderate tongue relief. I know that the most popular are the single joint, but I have found that they not only can be more aggressive on the palate, but can also create a nutcracker effect on the lower jaw if both reins are engaged. Again, keep in mind I want the horse comfortable. I like the mullen barrels, the French links and the elliptical links as well as the triple barrels.

DIAMETER: I do *NOT* recommend anything with the word "wire" in it! Remember that any mouthpiece thinner than 1/4" diameter becomes severe, but you can also take this too far the other direction... I've found if it is larger than 1/2" diameter can become uncomfortable for many shallow mouthed horses and horses that simply do not have that clearance at their bars when their mouths are closed. You must look inside your horse's mouth conformation to see how much room he has and make sure he has clearance.

TONGUE RELIEF: Don't hesitate to put a finger in at the bars and FEEL, the room and the arch of the tongue and how far it extends above the level of the bars. This will indicate if you need to accommodate that tongue with a light or port to allow the horse adequate comfort and not inhibit his need to swallow. Another critical consideration is that if you're riding a gaited horse and wish to have productive headnod for the walking gears, you must allow adequate tongue relief. Many do not realize that a horse's tongue is attached, via ligaments, to both the hyoid bone, sternum and the shoulders. As the head nods, it is natural for a horse to move his tongue forward and back with the up and down motion of the head. Many horses almost appear to "lick at the ground" as they work at a comfortable headnodding flatfoot walk. Others will actively click their teeth in time. Too much tongue pressure will naturally inhibit this motion, or at least make it less comfortable.

Now I'm not preaching that everyone immediately run out and put ring snaffles on their horses when they themselves have no idea how to ride with one. There is a definite safety factor when you are used to using a curb-action bit on a horse with a 'big motor' or who is high strung. You need to train both yourself and your horse what to do when things get spooky when riding out of a confined area, but you start with "in the arena or round pen" teaching your horse to "give" at their poll as well as to learn a one-rein stop. Instead of the rider attempting to "control" the horse with long shanks, you must learn to disengage the hind-quarters and redirect your horse when he gets nervous. Remember this is horsemanship: control is an illusion when you're working with another creature with a mind of its own. We can only seek to influence and condition what the horse is doing to a greater degree as we progress in his training and increasing our partnership with this horse.

There are some benefits to a mild curb bit as a horse's training advances, for more subtle communications, but this is only after they are working well in a snaffle. While we can train our horses to respond to less enforcement, it takes time and effort, and people safety must always come first. So go to your arena, your round pen, or your corral; wherever you feel a measure of safety and start there. I've even started in a large stall. You start by training them to give their heads laterally at a stop, so the space doesn't have to be that big.

So stop trying to achieve a sense of control through bits, and use them instead for the communication tool that they are. I forget who said it first, but I believe the quote is that "trying to stop a horse with a bit is like trying to stop a car with the steering wheel; it's the wrong tool for the wrong job". To me, a "walking horse bit" is most often the wrong tool for the job of getting walking horses to comfortably walk and nod. I think my real contention here centers back to the misnomer "walking-horse bit" as though these bits are the best solution for a "walking" horse... NOT!

I have been asked to post photos of some of my favorite bits. I will do so, but caution first that each owner should look and feel inside their horse's mouth to determine conformation and fit. Below are some things to keep in mind when choosing a bit for your horse:

- You can measure the width needed by using a string through the mouth where the bit sits then adding 1/4 inch.
- Generally the smaller the diameter of the mouthpiece the more severe a bit is on your horse's bars and tongue; stay between 1/4 inch up to 3/8 inch. Note: anything larger than 1/2 inch can be uncomfortable for some smaller mouthed horses.
- The mouthpiece is CRITICAL to the horse's comfort and just as important as the length of shank. I do not care for single jointed mouthpieces. In my opinion, the design is prone to discomfort as discussed above. By adding a second joint or barrel these issues are all resolved.
- Honestly analyze your riding habits... will you have time to train in a secure area? If so you might wish to have a snaffle bit to utilize in these training areas. If you mostly trail ride, and are not totally confident of your horse responding to a snaffle, a mild curb with total shanks less than 6 inches can be used.
 - I understand many western bits have shanks greater than 8 inches, but these are not designed for riding with *constant contact*. Intermittent and brief corrections are what most western riding "should" entail, but I still advise riding with the lightest hands possible.
 - If you wish to ride with constant contact, I would recommend a short shank Pelham or Kimberwicke as you graduate from the snaffle. These

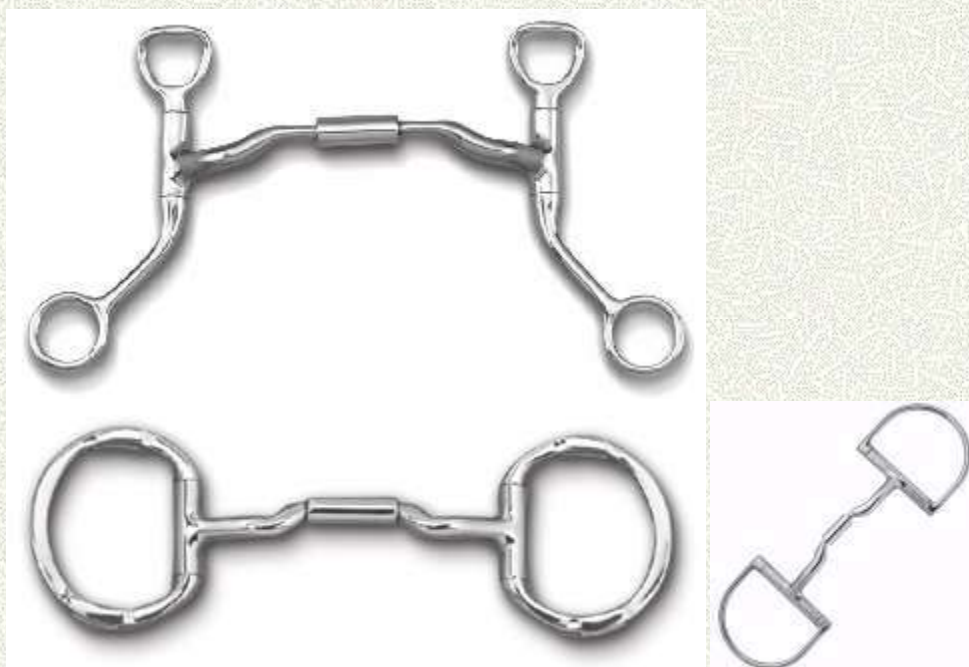
shanks also have the benefit of acting as "double duty" by placing your reins in the rings that are even with the mouthpiece they pretty much act like a direct action snaffle because they will lose their leverage in this position. Dropping the reins to the lower rings will give you a mild leveraged curb action.

- Keep in mind a comparison of purchase and lower shank (the FORMULA above).
- Be careful that the width of the purchase is wide enough for the upper area of your horse's face. Many people do not think to check the clearance at the top of the bits. Most of your better made bits will accommodate this increase in their design.
- Bottom line; if your horse is comfortable and working well on a bit, do not change it unless a problems comes up.

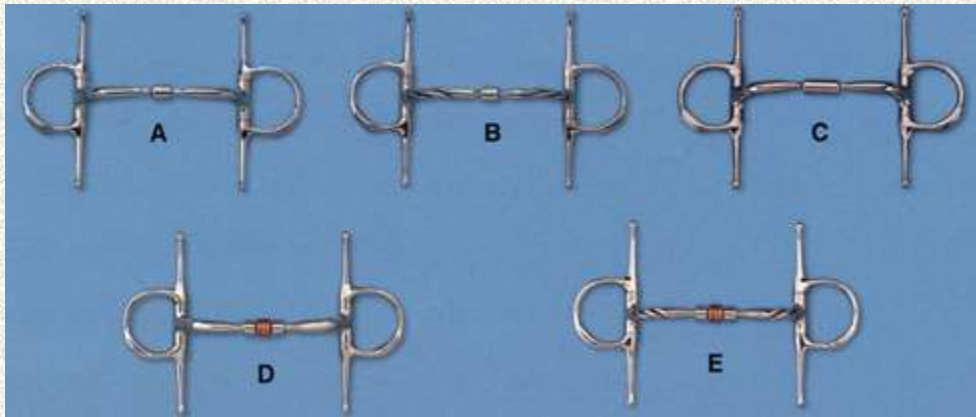
Some of my personal favorite bits in order below (note that I am not recommending any bits for compensation):

Myler English D ring snaffles; Myler full cheek snaffles; French link snaffle - these "training bits" are wonderful and comfortable in your horse's mouth. They only pull in one direction and are most direct while training a horse to give to and follow the bit. Please note that if you feel your horse needs a little more tongue relief, the MB04 mouthpiece, shown on the HBT western shank below can be ordered on any of these Myler bits. If even more relief is desired and the horse has progressed in his training, an MB33 has a moderate port with the same basic design.

Myler HBT 5" Western curb shank; western D with MB04 mouth, English D with MB04,



Full Cheek snaffles with mullen barrel mouths, and a French Link English D snaffle.

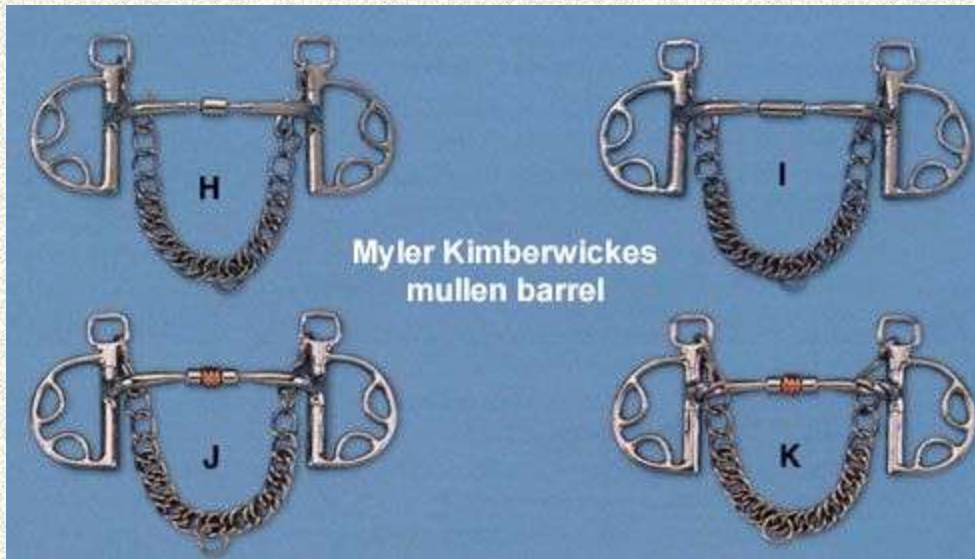


French Link

English Pelham mullen barrels



Myler English Kimberwicke mullen barrels;



French link curb bit; Myler Combination bit - These training bits may not be appropriate for the show ring, but they have a definite aid in teaching a horse to bend at the poll without being severe in the mouth. The Myler combination bit uses a bosal action which engages first, while the mouthpiece slides along in mild gag action and only engages when the horse does not respond to the bosal.



Low port Kimberwicke - many horses simply do not like much "action" in their mouth. They prefer a solid, stable mouthpiece. This low port gives them a small amount of tongue relief while keeping the stability they rely on. Watch that they do not take it too far and start leaning on this bit.



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