

BITS AND PIECES

By MONIEK PEEN

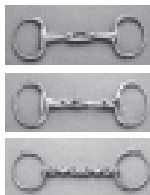
In the last issue of Horse Times I read the article called "bits and biting". This article raised my interest because until now I hardly realized how many different types of bits there are as well as their respective functions. Not being an expert on bits myself, I read some literature about the subject that provided me with some very useful information I would like to share with you. Although I would never try a new bit on my horse without the advise of an expert, it is always nice to know a couple of basics.

When choosing a bit for your horse, ask yourself the following questions:

1. About the horse: is it inexperienced (meaning either young or does it have some basic training)?
2. About the rider: are you experienced or not (although the answer to this question is not always objectively answered)?
3. Are you involved in jumping or dressage? (These categories are not mutually exclusive, but they can provide you with a starting point.)

Once you have answered these questions, you can take a look at the various possibilities that exist in "bridle-world". If you are inexperienced I believe the first part of this article will be of more interest to you. Should you have more experience or have specific problems which you wish to address the second and third parts of the article will be of more interest. The following is partially taken from a booklet by Fliss Gillot. Already mentioned are the so-called snaffles. Especially the eggbutt jointed snaffle is commonly used and is a safe choice if either you or the horse (or both) are inexperienced. Furthermore the metal the snaffle is made of makes a difference, just as the type of rings, eggbutt or lose, you use. Since this was all explained in the last issue of Horse Times, I want to continue by mentioning some other types of snaffles that could be used when facing certain problems with your horse. If your horse pulls you can either choose a so-called Dr Bristol eggbutt (picture 1.)

or a twisted eggbutt (picture 2.) Both increase tongue pressure while the second also digs into the bars and corners of the mouth (so be careful!). Furthermore beware that the first type is not allowed in dressage tests. Another option when the horse tends to lean or pull is to try a Waterford or "chain" (picture 3.) This bit doesn't look very nice, but has no nutcracker action while being at the same time very flexible.



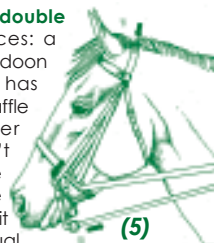
will damage the horse's mouth. Next you have to consider the thickness of the mouthpiece. Bear in mind that the thinner the mouthpiece, the more concentrated the pressure and therefore, the more severe the bit. A short-mouthed horse will, however, have difficulties with a thick mouthpiece.



(4) Check the width of the bit by placing your index finger between the mouth and the bit. The fingers should fit snugly.

For more advanced riding a second type of bit (or rather bits) is used: the double bridle. The double bridle looks like a kind of torture mechanism (and could be used as such I suppose) but things are not as bad as they look. According to Karl Mikolka, the double bridle "is meant to refine and confirm the work which was done with the snaffle". Which also means that you should have developed a soft, feeling hand and sensitive alert legs. Furthermore, according to F. Gillot, the double bridle is not a means for getting the horse "on the bit". If tried, the result will probably be a horse that overbends in order to avoid the contact of the curb rein. However he admits that this type of bridle can be also used to keep the horse under control, the curb is then only used when necessary. Whether you use this type of bridle for serious riding or can't avoid the use when riding in the desert, in either case it is interesting to know how the double bridle functions and how to check if it is correctly adjusted.

As the term indicates, the double bridle consists of two pieces: a bradoon and a curb. The bradoon functions as a snaffle, but has smaller rings than a normal snaffle and a somewhat thinner mouthpiece. The snaffle can't take too much space in the mouth, because of the second bit. Furthermore, the bit should be a bit wider than usual to keep it clear of the curb. The curb consist roughly of a bit and a chain. According to K. Mikolka, the effect of the mouthpiece must always precede the effect of the chain. For the action of the double bridle see picture 5. Mikolka furthermore gives very useful information about how to use this bridle, which I will share with you now.



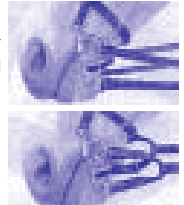
If you think this is too technical, don't hesitate to call in the help of an expert. What you could check out yourself though, if you are using some sort of snaffle-bit, is to check whether it fits properly.

Picture 4 shown should give you a clear indication.

First you have to make sure that no more than a quarter of an inch of the mouthpiece projects on either side of the corners of the mouth. If you use a jointed snaffle, you should measure this with the bit held straight across the mouth. There's no need to tell that a bit either too small or too large

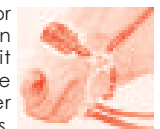
A looser adjusted chain will help getting the horse more on the bit, while a tighter adjusted chain will help horses which like to overbend and carry their heads too low. Keep in mind that the effect of the chain may never overpower the effect of the mouthpiece. He also gives some rules of thumb: a light mouthpiece with a short upper and lower cheek will serve a horse with a sensitive mouth and a supple neck; a somewhat thinner (=sharper) mouthpiece with short cheeks will serve where a supple neck is combined with an insensitive mouth; a light mouthpiece with long cheeks will serve a stiff neck connected to a sensitive mouth. If you want more information about the use of the double bridle, I like to refer to the article of Mikolka on the internet (just type karlskorn).

For those who can't get enough, there is more. I will discuss this very briefly, just to give some insight into the different alternatives. These types, however, don't seem very useful for dressage training. One is the so-called pelham. It consists of a single bit with a curb chain and combines the action of a snaffle with the action of a curb. It is easier to fit than the double bridle and reduces the chance to make mistakes. According to Gillot, this type of bit goes well on horses with a small mouth. The function is however not as refined as the that of the double bridle. The advantage is that you can choose to ride with one reign or two. One reign is to be used especially during country rides and by children, their hands being too small to control two reins. This type of bit you will also find when riding near the Pyramids, because the Arabian horses used often have small mouths.



Another "alternative" is the gag. When you pull the reins, the bit slides up the cheek pieces, into the corners of the mouth, so pressure is applied simultaneously to the poll and this point. Again, this type of bit is used a lot in cross country riding. More specifically it is used when the horse is very strong and over-keen and is inclined to bend down over the hand. Using a curb would only make things worse.

Finally, a bitless bridle exists for those horses that for one reason or the other cannot be bit successfully. This has been the case with a small Icelander horse I rode in the Netherlands. His mouth had become completely insensitive, therefore a bitless bridle had to be used. Not that riding an Icelander poses a great threat, but it is annoying when a horse is out of control, as small as it may be. The principle of the bitless bridle is that pressure is put on the nose of the horse which should have a positive result.



After reading this article, please keep in mind that besides the choice of a bit there are a lot of other options to improve the performance of your horse, so keep an open mind.

Literature: "Guide to Bits and Biting" by Fliss Gillot; Westgate and Canterbury.
 "Thoughts on the Double Bridle" article by K. Mikolka; 1994; (found on internet on www.equisource.com/karlskorn).

Different Kinds Of Bits Are Available At :

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