Introduction to Bits and Bitting

Courtesy of Kendra Kowalski

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Chapters

- Introduction to Bits and Bitting
- Pressure Points
- Choosing a Bit
- Bit sizing
- Further Considerations
- Mouthpieces
- Western Bits
- Conclusion

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

HORSE COUNCIL
BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Horse and the Bit

Understanding the tradition behind English and Western will help you decide which bits are right for you and your horse. Always bit for safety.

Historically speaking, the English horse developed as an extension of a person's body in battle or on the hunt field.

He was expected to be attentive at all times, looking and moving strongly forward. On the battlefield he would need to respond immediately to the signals of his master. On the hunt field he would take direction quickly and obediently to negotiate rough terrain and fences. For the safety of the horse, rider and those around him, the horse was alert to every cue from his rider. Because of this the English horse requires steady contact with the bit, weight and the legs of the rider.

Generally speaking, the English horse travels in an uphill manner.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Introduction

The Western horse on the other hand, was the Ranchers companion and workmate.

He needs to do one job which left the rides hands free to do another. An example of this would be straying on the track of a fleeing cow while the cowboy threw a rope. Then the horse would work the end of that rope, keeping it tight while the rider dealt with the livestock.

The Western horse was expected to keep his head down to watch the ground over which he was traveling. The Rancher was busy and the days were long. The horse learned to wait or do his job with the least amount of direction.

Often Ranch work entailed bursts of speed and quick changes of direction. The bits developed for Western horses were meant to give strong signals quickly. Then the reins were released back to slack until the next signal was given.

The Western Horse is given the responsibility for low, sweeping energy conserving carriage.

Be clear in your mind the type of athlete you are developing.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Why use a bit?

To push or pull a large animal is exhausting.

Bits, used sympathetically, allow quick precise communication between the horse and the rider.

The rider's seat, weight and legs all apply pressure As with the bit, as soon as there is give, we must give back by softening the pressure.

Our goal is to apply progressive pressure and release as soon as the horse responds.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

How to use a bit

By attaching ourselves to the horse from the hand through the rein to the bit in their mouth, we are in effect asking the horse to hold hands with us.

We ask them to give or to take with their head, neck and body as we push forward to rock back.

Once the horse understands the instruction given through the bit it is the clearest means of linking up with our horse.

Remember there is a progression of enlightenment as the horse learns what the tugs, pull and contact are all about.

Have a clear picture in your head of the desired result so that you are just as quick to soften to the horse as he is to respond to you.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Points of Pressure from a bit and bridle

When evaluating a bit, always remember these seven points.

- Over the nose, from the pressure of a nose band if the horse opens his mouth the avoid the action of a bit.
- Under the chin, from a curb strap.
- The edges of the lips at the side of the mouth from the mouthpiece of a bit.
- The bars of a mouth, which is the gum area of no teeth between the front and back teeth. This is where the bit sits.
- The roof of the mouth, from the middle joint of the mouthpiece of a snaffle or the port of a curb bit.
- The Poll. Any pull on the reins puts pressure on this sensitive area behind the ears. There is very little muscle covering the bone where the skull joins the spine.
- The tongue. All bits to some extent press on the tongue.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Horse and the bit

We want the horse to pick up the bit, close his mouth on it and put his tongue against it to stabilize the bit in his mouth. Then he can interpret our signals.

Most often the beginning bit used in a horses mouth is a hollow loose ring snaffle or a sweet iron loose ring.

These are lightweight and jiggly. A horse soon learns that by closing his mouth on it, he can stop it moving in his mouth.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Choosing a Bit

HORSE COUNCIL
BRITISH COLUMBIA

How to pick the right sized bit

To determine the size your horse wears, tie a knot in a piece of string. Put it through his mouth with the knot resting against his lips on the one side. Note the mark against his lips on the other. Measure between the two knots, and add up to a quarter of an inch.

A bit that is too narrow will press the horse's cheeks against his teeth and cause cutting on the inside. A bit too wide pulls too far to one side and the joint of the bit can cause severe pinching of the tongue or poking into the roof of the mouth.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

How to pick a bit size

To check bit fit, pull the bit across on your horse's mouth until you see it is tight on one side.

There should be space on the mouth piece between the horse's lips and the ring.

Not all bits are available in all sizes. For example 5 3/4" is a difficult size to acquire.

North American markets measure bits in inches.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Bit sizing for the breeds

Generally speaking 3, 3 ½, 3 ¾ and 4 “ are miniature sizes

4 and 4 ½ are pony size

4 ¾ to 5 are Arabian size

5 to 5 ½ are horse size

5 ½ to 6 are warmblood size

Manufacturers supply to the majority market of 5 to 5 ½ bits

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Thick or Thin?

The thickness of the mouthpiece is measured at the butt end. This is usually done in millimeters.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Thick or Thin?

The thicker the bit, the more pressure is distributed on the bars of the horse's mouth. Too thick a bit irritates the horse as he ends up sucking air because he cannot close his mouth. This will also crowd the horse's tongue.

Thinner bits concentrate pressure on a smaller area. Beware of too thin as the danger lies in bruising the horses mouth before he has a chance to respond.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Wrinkles

Adjust the headstall so that the bit sits against the corner of the mouth.

Undue wrinkles puts unnecessary pressue on the lips. The rule is the longer the horses mouth, the snugger the bit.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Further considerations

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Bit metals

- Stainless steel – is an attractive, highly polished hard metal that manufacturers can easily produce. The advantages are that is it durable and inexpensive.
- Cooper – is a softer metal that warms quickly. Copper causes the horse to salivate, which in turn makes him want to keep his mouth shut so he does not drool. The horse is encouraged to swallow which helps relax his jaw and neck.
- German Silver – often a very high nickel content like copper is softer and causes salivation.
- Aruigan – a high copper content metal.
- Sweet Iron – is a metal intended to rust that has a sweet tast. It help keep a wet mouth so the bid does not drag.
- Rubber or hard plastic – considered kind on the tongue and mouth.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Bit progression

The general progression from mild to stronger goes from a loose ring snaffle to an eggbutt, a Dee ring, a full cheek snaffle and then to bits with more leverage such as kimberwicks, pelhams or gags.

In Western speak, that would be loose ring, dee snaffle, full cheek, short shanked snaffle, then to longer shanked bits with a curb mouth.

You've gone too severe to quickly if your horse starts to react to the contact by flipping his head up and down.

How a bit works

A single jointed bit works as it applies pressure to the sensitive sides of the bars of the lower jaw, by its folding action.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

How a bit works

The disadvantage of the single joint is that it can often poke a horse in the roof of the mouth, or pinch the tongue in the joint. Also the sliding action of a loose ring can irritate the lips at the corner of the mouth.

An eggbutt snaffle is often a little thicker than a full cheek or Dee ring. It is the cheekpieces that help these bits work. The bar pushes the horses face in the direction of the pull of the rein.

Leverage bits like a kimberwich or shank bit rely on a chin chain or strap to put pressure on the chin and poll, which puts a great deal more pressure on the mouth.

A gag bit lifts the horses head (rather than pulling it in to the chest) by putting pressure upwards on the corners of the mouth by leverage over the poll. Often a good choice for speed work, barrel racing, or cross country where it is important not to interfere with the horses ability to use its neck for balance.

If you have ever wondered why one branch of the snaffle mouthpiece is longer than the other, it is so the center of the bit is in the center of the horses mouth.

HORSE COUNCIL
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Research

- Take a variety of bits and put them in your hand. Then manipulate the rings to approximate how that bit would feel in the horses mouth.
- Feel what is going on in the center, does it pinch?
- Feel the action of the mouthpiece. Is the whole bit affected or does it give signal on one side or the other>

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth Pieces

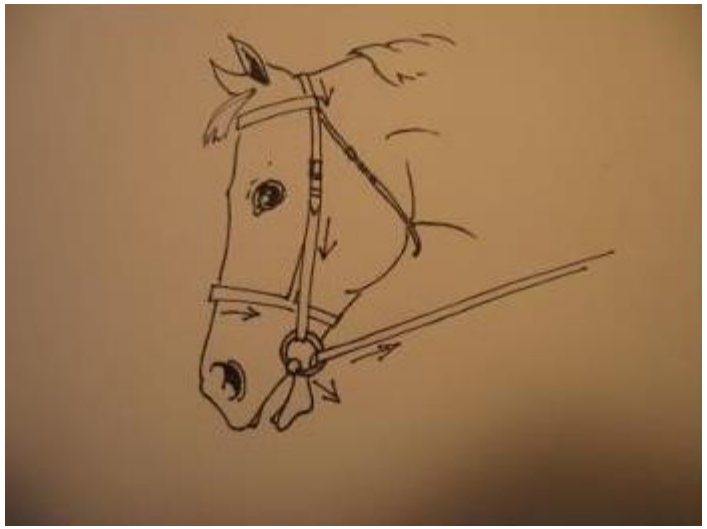
HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Remember the seven pressure points:

- Nose
- Chin
- Lips
- Bars
- Tongue
- Palate
- Poll

Snaffle mouth, works on the sides of the bars



HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Peanut or lozenge mouth has independent action of either side of the mouth. Less pressure on the sides of the bars, more pressure straight down. Rounded edges of the lozenge puts dull pressure on the tongue.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

French link

Flat pressure on the tongue

Dr. Bristol

Center piece is at an angle and digs into the tongue.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Ergonomic mouth piece

Puts pressure on top and sides of bars

Copper Rollers

Allows tongue to escape up and down. When the horse draws back the tongue, the bit applies stronger pressure to the bars.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth Pieces and Cheek pieces

Double bits

Bradoon (snaffle) and Weymouth (curb) used together in a horses mouth. The quickest relief and the quickest pick up possible.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Pelham

Used with double reins or a bit converter. Uses all pressure points based on how the reins are manipulated.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Gag bit

Pressure releases instantly as soon as the horse “gives”.

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Kimberwick Snaffle

Chain works on the chin to create poll pressure.

Kimberwick Curb

Called and Uxeter when the cheek pieces are slotted for different rein leverage positions. Ported curb mouthpiece gives tongue relief. Solid mouth puts pressure flat on bars.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Full Cheek

Properly attached to the headstall by cheek keepers, increases the poll pressure. Cheek sides push horses head around.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Eggbutt Mullen

Spreads tongue pressure. Pushes evenly down on the tongue and bars. Good for straight ahead, not good for turning.

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Pinchless

Good independent pressure on sides of the bars. Less likely, because of center rotation, to contact roof of mouth.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Mouth pieces and cheek pieces

Try lots of bits. They were designed for different applications. You will find out what works nicely at home may not be strong enough to keep your horses attention when on the trail or at a competition.

When competing always check the rule book to see what bits are legal for the class you are competing in.

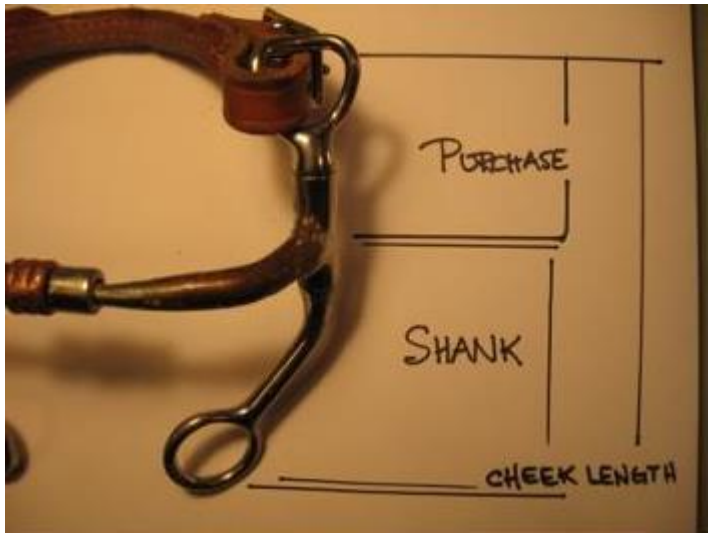
HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Western Bits

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Western bits

Western bit action pulls down on the bars, up on curb strap and down on the poll. This all exaggerates the power of the mouthpiece.



HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Western bits

There is the overall cheek length, purchase and shank to consider when evaluating a Western bit. All are designed to pick up and release, not to ride in a steady contact with. The shorter the purchase the quicker action on the poll.

The longer the purchase, the slower the action on the poll, but the poll pressure is stronger.

The straighter the shank the quicker the action on the mouth. A swept back or grazing cheek the slower the action, which allows more time for the horse to comprehend and respond.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Western Bits

An “S” Cheek bit provides smooth action, with the poll, mouth and chin all contracting in an even manner.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Western

Look at the ratio of purchase to shank on Western bits. Physics tells us that if the shank is twice as long as the purchase, the pressure on the poll is twice as strong.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Western

Often the high ported bits have spring action on either side of the port. They are designed this way to lift on rein briefly to lift one or the other shoulder of the horse.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Western

Again, decide exactly what it is your want to do and choose a bit accordingly.

Remember a Western bit is usually not adjusted as high in the mouth as an English bit. Because continual contact is not the goal.

The tighter the chin strap adjustment, the quicker and more powerful the bit works. The norm is two fingers between the strap and the chin.

Because of the strength of some Western bits, there is an opportunity to do damage to the bars, tongue and poll. Once these areas are damaged the injury can last a very long time or the horse may loose feeling forever.

Western

Regarding Western mouth pieces, though some of them can look very harsh, remember they are to be used with quick light pressure and then instantly released.

For instance, though a high port may look intimidating, the tongue is allowed complete freedom of pressue as it goes into the port area.

The higher ported bits will contact the roof of a horses mouth encouraging him to lengthen and lower his neck for balance.

Bits and Bitting – General Points

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Points to Remember

- By weight cues, leg aids and the bit you are able to influence your horse,
- No one bit can fix a problem and no one bit works on all horses.
- The bit involves seven points of pressure. Bars, tongue, lips, pallet, chin, poll and nose.
- The preceding information is intended to help make bit choices easier by allowing you to understand their function.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Points to think about

- Be sure that your horses teeth are OK
- Check saddle fit at the first sign of problems
- Learn about nosebands and martingales
- Check the rules of different Breed, regional, club, HCBC and Equestrian Canada bit regulations before competing.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Take home message

- No bit will take the place of training the horse by repetition to understand the cues.
- No bit will help skip the steps of developing the horse to a mental and physical fitness level that allows him the suppleness and strength of bone and muscle to perform the work asked of him.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

About the Author

Kendra Kowalski

I have owned and managed Abby Saddle Shop in Abbotsford, BC for 21 years. During that time I have talked to many people about bits. I've ridden, I've read and I've studied. I have taken every opportunity to talk to bit manuafacturers: the information in the course are some of the conclusions that I would like to share.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA

Congratulations!

Thank you for completing the Bits and Bitting online course. We hope that this introduction encourages you to further research this important topic.

HORSE COUNCIL BRITISH COLUMBIA