

MAKING A BRIDLE HORSE

A “*Bridle Horse*” is both a “process” and a “result”. The finished horse has a unique carriage/neck set. Not any horse can be “bridled”. Horses that flex in the 3d vertebrae are candidates. Thus the horses with desert blood are naturals and others are not.

A finished “bridle horse” horse works on “signal” not “leverage” and is therefore sometimes referred to as a “*signal bit horse*”. It takes five years or more to train a true bridle horse. So why would you want to do it? The answer will be easily understood by those who are practiced in the shooting sports and it is like having a custom trigger that breaks with mere ounces of pressure versus a difficult 10 lbs. You can hold such a horse in your hand like water...soft, supple, light but not on the muscle.

The most common bit in the United States and Europe is the *snaffle bit* which came from the Greeks to the Romans to the Europeans to the colonists on the east coast of America. By contrast, the *hackamore and spade bit* came from North Africa to the Moors to the Spaniards to South & Central America with the *conquistadores* and to Alta California with the DeAnza Expedition. Picture in your mind the time of the land grants, the Don’s, the Vaqueros and a true horse culture.

When Lewis and Clark were crossing the continent the Vaqueros of Old California were riding the finest, trigger reined stock horses the world will ever know and were roping Grizzly bears for fun. When Fremont came to California every dragoon was wounded or killed by the lance at San Pasqual in an engagement with the Vaqueros who were superbly mounted.

The “Vaqueros” were many things: reinsmen, expert dally ropers with the long reata, and skilled braiders. They could tail a cow on

the run, fight bulls with the lance from horseback, and would bet their horses on how far they could slide them. They did not know what a snaffle bit was. They had a unique horse language.....“Amansador” (the horse breaker), “Reinador”(the one who makes fine reined horses), “Dar La Vuelta” (translates “to take your dallys on the horn), “Testarazo” (a body blow with the horse), and “Capriole” (the movement in warfare where the horse leaps in the air and kicks out with both hind feet to rid his rider of attackers on foot).

It is said these old timers “never tightened a rein”. They rode a long time in the hackamore. They did not put a bit in the horse’s mouth until he had his bridle teeth after he was 5 years old. Only one man rode each horse. Thus the horse and rider had an affinity for each other. The horse could almost read the man’s mind. They used double reins, their legs, their voices anything but pull on the horse’s mouth.

The culture spread throughout the Great Basin of the U.S. “Vaquero” (properly pronounced as “Buc-Ker-O) became “Buck-A-Roo”. The flat hats, armitas, the long reata w/ 20ft loop, dally roping vs “hard and fast” and pride in how soft you could rope and lay a cow down to be doctored all this came from the Vaqueros. But most importantly they spread the use of the “*Jaquima*” or “Hackamore”, the *two rein* and the “Spade” Bit. This unique culture and tradition survived into the 1950s when these men who had the complete skill set began to die out. But Ed Connell wrote “Hackamore Reinsman” and “Reinsmen of the West” and Arnold Rojas wrote “Last of the Vaqueros” and Luis Ortega wrote “California Stock Horse”.

And the tradition hung on in California, Nevada and Oregon into the 1960s with such men as Tony Amaral and Dick Deller (One Man’s Opinion About Spade Bits). Through the advent of the National Reined Cow Horse Association, the hackamore gained

ground with gifted trainers like Bobby Ingersoll and today there is a renaissance with men and women who can bridle a horse such as Ray Ordway, Mike Bridges, Buck Branaman, Pat Puckett, Martin Black, Richard Caldwell, Shelia Varian and more who now demonstrate their skill in that unique competition, The “Californios”. And there are some books recently published to include Vaquero Horsemanship published by Ed Connell’s daughter Leslie, in Texas that features many articles on horsemanship by Ed that were published in magazines in the 1950s-1960s and those priceless letters exchanged between Ed and Al Grandchamp.

The old way was hackamore, to the two rein, to the bridle. The purpose of the hackamore is to “make” the horse before the bit is ever introduced into the picture. The whole system is to take the horse to “lighter and lighter” signals.....so several changes of mecates (the horse hair reins used with the hackamore made from mane hair twisted in strands) by weight are made with each of the different size hackamores and *bosals*. When the bit is finally introduced, it is perhaps a “Mac Mouth Piece”, a “Mona Lisa” or a “San Joaquin”, working up to a true “Spade”....and the reins are never “pulled”.

This process takes several good hackamores of decreasing size ($\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{5}{8}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{3}{8}$, $\frac{1}{4}$) and weight. A Hackamore is all rawhide braided with a core, a nose button, bars, and a heel knot and they are described by size, length, plait count, and bevel of the strings. It may have a fiador (a special throat latch), and it will have the mecate reins and the whole set up is called a hackamore. The braided nose band alone is called a hackamore as well but when it is $\frac{3}{8}$ and below in diameter it is a “bosal” not a hackamore.

The mecate balances the hackamore and thus it must be no larger in diameter than the diameter of the bars of the hackamore. A hackamore works opposite from a snaffle. Instead of being

“pulled” by the corner of his mouth the horse is learning to move away from the pressure of a signal on his nose and on his jaws generated by nose button rotation and by bar signal. The principle is *Signal and Release* or rein/release. Q. Which hackamore is right for my horse?? Mike Bridges wants medium stiff lay in his bosals and Shelia Varian wants them as soft as possible. And Al Grandchamp with over 100 years of experience says: “It depends on the horse” (and the personal preference of the horseman).

You can train with just one good quality 5/8's hackamore or with ten of every conceivable size (you can play golf with nothing but a #2 iron but you won't play well). The main point is that until the horse is performing at top level in that size you DO NOT CHANGE. And if you start a horse in a snaffle (that's the new way) you might go back and forth from hackamore to snaffle. And you might two rein with the snaffle and the hackamore. The sequence of hackamores is 3/4 to 5/8 to 1/2 and when the horse is solid in the 1/2 then you introduce the bit and a 3/8 bosal and the two rein.

Bits are a whole different topic. Let's look at a true Spade. I won't try to describe it as Dick Dellums has already done that very well. But I will add that Arnold Rojas wrote that “from the bar to the top of the port must be at least 3 1/4”.” The port must be at an angle so that it will signal the horse just as the curb tightens....use only a leather curb with the spade NEVER A CHAIN. Horses have different size mouths, different tongue thicknesses. We want the effect of the bit to be in proportion to the sensitivity of the mouth of that particular horse. We want no wrinkle in the horse's mouth and two fingers between the curb and the chin groove. We want the horse to “pack” the bit (pick it up with his mouth and ‘carry it”). The secret of the spade is that the horse never learns to lean on or brace on the bit and thus never has a hard mouth. When the bit is first introduced we'll leave off the *romal* (the braided reins) and just guide with the mecate and the 3/8 bosal. Then we'll

add the Romal with the Mecate in front and the Romal behind. We'll eventually introduce Romal signals and finally place the Romal in front and the mecate behind it and signal primarily with the Romal. Finally, the mecate is removed and the horse is "Straight Up in the Bridle" but he wears a small "Bosalilo" to "honor the horse" and a get down rope to lead him.

This has been a broad overview to a very deep subject and the old adage to "drink deeply or not at all" applies. If you are interested seek out one of the men I named and become an understudy.

Copyright John M. Hutcheson, 539 Gab Creek Farm Road, Dahlonega, GA, 706-864-3690. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.