



Photo by Aida Schreiber

Bigger Bits VS The Horses

Count Down To The Top Five Myths About Horses

- 5 - Giving your horse treats will buy his love and respect.
- 4 - A cozy stall with shavings and a blanket when it's chilly will keep your horse warm happy and healthy.
- 3 - Keeping your horse shod will keep his feet healthy.
- 2 - You'll probably outgrow your love of horses.

And the **number 1 lie** we've all bought into - If your horse is out of control, you need to buy a bigger bit!

Introductions

Maybe I'm thinking too much like a woman but believing a bigger bit will help your troubled relationship with your horse would be akin to believing threats of violence to force submission, would mend a troubled relationship between two people.

Picture a cozy little restaurant. You've caught someone's eye. They march over grunt something you can't quite understand then grab you by the hair to take you to their cave. Would you go willingly?

On the other hand, if they took the time to get to know you. Politely asked for your hand, then communicated in a way that made you feel comfortable and safe, odds are you'd go willingly; at least onto the dance floor.

I may be reaching a bit here (no pun intended) but horses and women have a few things in common. Both have a strong natural desire to please. Treated with love and respect, compassion and fairness they will do just about anything for their partner if asked the right way. As the human half of this partnership shouldn't we search for "The right way" to ask our horses? I'm quite certain the human brain is much larger than a walnut.

Let's get out of the dark ages. It's about time we started using more brain, and less brawn. I'm certainly not negating the fact that horses need discipline, and they are very powerful animals. If I had to ride my horse in a severe bit, I would not ride her at all.

If You Lead They Will Follow

One of the perks of my job is working with many different horses in a variety of settings. Something that I've found to be an absolute truth is this; not only do our horses need a leader, they long for one. By having you as their leader a lot of pressure is lifted from their shoulders. They no longer need to fret over the ever changing scary sights and sounds in their environment. They will look to you and assess your demeanor. Are you walking fearlessly or hesitating with each step ready to jump should your horse jump?

A horse that is being led by someone who is afraid knows this immediately. He doesn't even need to smell his handler as his handler has already given him four or five signs that he's a pushover (certainly no-one that will protect him)! A horse that is usually spooky pushy or totally out of control, will change in a matter of moments when handled by a confident leader that doesn't allow this behavior. These horses will bring their nose to that person's hand or body and smell very hard, somehow they are amazed that their new leader acts and smells differently, and they begin to relax. Believe me. I'm not dreaming this - I see it all the time.

This is a fact, if you have a calm demeanor but are ready to correct, then redirect your horse's feet out of your space he'll learn to calm down. If you get tense and fail to correct pushy behavior, and instead move out of your horse's way. He will continue to spook at everything and oblige you by stepping all over you. Your horse will be a danger not only to you, but himself, and anyone in his path.

Chains over the nose don't control a horse anymore than bits in their mouth. Good training does!

As responsible horse owners it is our job (if we profess to care about our horses) to provide them with a leader that is confident, assertive, patient and kind. All horses thrive on praise and discipline. Let's forget about a bigger bit for a moment. We need to start focusing on our relationship on the ground if we expect to retain it under saddle. We should strive to know what makes our horse tick before we climb aboard. What does he like? What annoys him? I'm sure our horses would like to get a feel for us before we ever climb aboard and take up the reins. The mood of this relationship could mean the difference between success or failure, a great ride, or a trip to the ER.

If your horse is disobedient it's not because he wants to fight you. He is not a predator he is a prey animal at your mercy. He is just trying to protect himself the best way he knows how. If your horse can't trust you to keep him safe then how can you can't trust him to keep you safe?

Horses that grab the bit, run through, or brace against it; pull the reins out of your hand, shake their heads, open their mouths, swish their tails, pin their ears; rear buck and bolt. Do these things out of pain and frustration from a lack of communication between themselves and their riders. The bit can be a source of extreme pain, especially when it's used in a panic situation. Why do we continue to buy into the lie that our horses are just being defiant stubborn or lazy?

They may have some of these tendencies but if they knew a way to avoid pain from the bit, or from a chain over the nose they would take it. Sadly many will never be given the option of avoiding these devices.

A Little Can Go A Long Way, In Other Words – Less Is More!

Most riders are taught to pull or squeeze their fingers on the reins until the horse comes to a halt. The problem lies in the lack of an immediate release. It's not so hard to teach a rider to lightly squeeze the reins. The hard part is teaching them to let go! They need to release immediately after a gentle request.

The rider is afraid the horse won't stop and he probably won't at first. Has he ever been given a chance? This is where retraining of the horse and rider come in. The horse is thinking he won't get a release, because every time he hears you say *whoa* or feels you prepare to stop he knows his mouth is going to get pulled on till he halts. To prepare himself, he braces against the pressure of the bit to ease the pain he knows he's going to feel. It doesn't matter how soft a rider's hands are, if they sustain that squeeze more than a second, it's making that horse very uncomfortable.

To begin to correct this lack of communication let's start on the ground.

Lets Break It Down On The Ground

Set up 3 or 4 cones in a 30-50ft circle. Your horse is outfitted in a rope halter with a lead rope attached. As you walk your horse, keep your shoulder even with his. Have him stop at every cone.

To make your horse keep up with your feet, you need to hold a dressage/stockman's whip in your left hand to tap his fanny to his front feet keep up with yours. This will prevent him from hanging back. This is the important part. Don't just say *whoa* as you simultaneously pull on the lead rope. You know were you are going to stop but your horse doesn't. As soon as he hits the pressure from the lead rope, he'll shoot out ahead of you, or turn toward you because you pulled his head in. Instead try this.

About two feet before you get to the point where you are going to stop, say his name very softly and slowly. "Rio and *whoa*". As you say this lean your body backwards a little and lift up on your lead rope, you are NOT pulling the lead rope towards your horse's chest. If Rio hasn't stopped moving his feet by now you needn't feel any guilt for giving him a swift correction. A quick snap to his halter via your lead rope. Now back him up where he came from.

Rio is never allowed to shoot ahead of you. Remember do not hold him choked up tight to prevent him from moving; he can hold himself without your help. Hold your lead rope loosely about 18 inches from the snap, if he takes a step correct him again. He should stand on a loose line until you ask him to head for the next cone. Horses stand around all day doing nothing.

Practice Makes Perfect

Once your horse is consistently stopping very softly as you cue him by raising your lead rope just two inches and saying *whoa*, and he's walking when you walk, without having to tap him up, or even say his name anymore because he is paying attention to your every step. You are ready to try some work under saddle.

I like to retrain using a [Dr. Cooks bitless bridle](#) or a Double Diamond rope halter with clip on reins attached. (I clip the reins right behind the knots on his nose, catching both

strands. It can only slide back so far before his jowls will stop it from sliding further.) I prefer no bits, especially while re-training. If you must use a bit, a straight bar without a shank is a mild one.

You are going to repeat the same steps you did on the ground. Your horse should understand the drill by now. Your horse will receive all of these pre cues to help him get this right.

1. Approach your cone. About two feet before you get there, shorten your reins. In the beginning stages of this drill you are going to ride with an English rein (A rein in each hand) even if you ride western as I do.
2. Slowly say Rio, he knows this means you are going to ask for something. Follow this with a-n-d whoa. (The only reason we are adding the word and is to give him plenty of time to respond)
3. Sit deep, press your fanny down or even rock one cheek at a time. Either way imagine you are trying to squash a bug under your butt. Sorry that's the best I can come up with at the moment.
(Try to do 1-3 at the same time.)

4. Gently squeeze your fingers on the reins. Now release, do not hang on those reins! He is going to learn to stop his forward motion without you hanging on to him.

Now give him a big rub if he stopped. If he didn't stop don't worry. I have a solution and it shouldn't take him more than 3-10 cones to get this. Remember we are teaching something new, be patient with him and yourself, as he is not the only one that needs retraining.

If he doesn't stop once you release your fingers, give him a little correction by giving a sharp quick snap of the reins on your bitless bridle or rope halter, a very slight seesaw if using a bit. The last thing you want to do is make his mouth less responsive than it already is. We certainly don't want to hurt him in such a sensitive area. Just a slight correction to give him a slight irritation. Now take all of the slack out of your reins, and prepare to make him back up. You are not going to pull hard, just maintain steady contact with his nose/mouth depending on what you are using till he finds it uncomfortable to just stand there. One step back is acceptable. If all you can get is a try, maybe a slight softening of his neck instead of a brace; that should make you smile. Next time hold till you actually get a step. Now release him and ask him to stand on a loose rein. If he walks off, correct him, then back him one step. Rio has to learn he can avoid a correction and more work by standing on a loose rein. Eventually he'll choose to stop on your slightest suggestion.

Go onto your next cone repeating steps 1-4. Repetition and patience will pay off. Once he is stopping consistently at the walk you can try the trot. I wouldn't be in a hurry - you don't want to lose all you have gained by rushing things. By asking for many transitions from the walk to halt the trot to walk, your horse will really have to focus on what you

are going to ask next. If you are uncertain about trying this without a bit then place a rope halter over your bridle. If you think you need your bit, it's right there.

I would like to challenge you to give this a try. Your horse really deserves a chance to avoid all the pain and discomfort that a bit can inflict. He should never have to experience the pain from a chain that refuses to release his sensitive muzzle.

Imagine a choke chain on a dog's neck that is applied incorrectly. It does not release. A dog's neck is not as sensitive as a horse's muzzle. Yet a dog will yelp or scream when grabbed by a choke chain applied properly while in training. A horse does not scream. He is not a predator like a cat, or a dog. Screaming would attract attention from a predator. He suffers in silence to prevent himself becoming prey, His tender muzzle much more sensitive than the neck of a dog.

A New Beginning

If your horse came to you with this problem it's not your fault, the damage was already done and you're just not sure how to fix it. If you think you caused your horse to become unresponsive to the bit, don't worry he'll forgive you.

I can't even explain what a difference the groundwork will make except to say, *Oh what a feeling!* I'm pretty sure your horse would trade all the treats in the world for an understanding between you and himself that would never require pulling on his mouth with a piece of metal. What do you think?

Cathie Hatrick-Anderson

About the Author

Cathie Hatrick –Anderson is a professional trainer specializing in starting colts and rehabilitating problem horses

She is a member of the Cowboy Mounted Shooting Association. Her Mare Shesa Faint Echo is a Certified Shooting Horse. Last year the pair won the Ladies 2 Massachusetts State Championship. Cathie and her trusty steed traveled to Ohio in 2007 and won the Midwest regional in Lewisburg to move up to a ladies 3 – They did this Bitless!

Robert Cook FRCVS, PhD appointed Cathie as his first Bitless Bridle Instructor in the United States.

Cathie lives in Upton, MA with her husband Robert and son Wes, they all ride bitless.

For more info please visit her website: www.bobcatfarm.com

