

A BIT ON BUCKING

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April 2004

Apart from bucking caused by sheer high spirits (23/24 confinement, too many oats and too little exercise) a horse that bucks is probably in pain. The pain could be in a horse's back, feet, mouth or elsewhere. But as common things commonly occur I would put mouth first (from the bit), then back (from the saddle) and finally feet (from the shoes). This being the case, a relatively simple way of discovering the cause would be to first try removing the bit. The mouth is one of the most sensitive parts of the body and use of a bit one of the most painful things we do to horses.

For information on bucking behavior and its connection with the bit, go to our website and click on 'Articles.' Now select the article at the bottom of the list entitled "The Effect of the Bit on the Behavior of the Horse."

Another good source of information on bucking (and an infinite number of additional problems too) is Jessica Jahiel's Horse-Sense Newsletter. Visit www.horse-sense.org and search the archives on 'bucking.' You will find at least thirty articles on the subject. The quotation that follows is only one of many nuggets of wisdom that Dr. Jessica Jahiel so wonderfully provides: "Bucking and rearing are usually signs of discomfort – pain – or complete confusion and frustration on the horse's part. They are usually caused by the rider, one way or the other."

A couple of riders have reported that their horse behaved beautifully in the Bitless Bridle for many months or even years and then started to put its head down and buck. They found that, using the Bitless Bridle, they were unable to pull their horse's head up in order to control the bucking. Because of this they were considering going back to a bitted bridle, as this enabled them to raise a horse's head. My response was to point out that devising a way to stop the bucking by inflicting more pain via a bit is not a good way to solve a problem such as bucking that was probably caused by pain in some other part of the body in the first instance. As the rider had already removed the possibility that bucking was caused by pain in the mouth, the logical step was to find the primary source of the buck-inducing pain.

When correctly fitted, the Bitless Bridle is incapable of causing pain. However, it is possible that a Bitless Bridle that fitted well, say two years ago, may over time become relatively tight as the horse grows. So check, for example, that a tight brow band is not causing pain at the base of the ears, or that the buckle on

the chinstrap is not irritating the bone of the lower jaw. Check too that the horse does not have sharp edges on its cheek teeth.

Otherwise, the most likely source of buck-inducing pain is from the saddle; either an incorrectly-fitted saddle, or from a rider whose position in the saddle is causing the saddle to press painfully on the withers, shoulder or back. Check the saddle for faults and the horse's back for pain. If you are unable to locate the source of the trouble, seek help from your veterinarian. Remember that a horse may not show pain on simple palpation of the back. A saddle with rider in place and the horse running and jumping can create immensely more pressure than a set of probing fingers. Horses that commence to buck on landing from a jump may be experiencing pain from the sudden impact of the rider's weight, transmitted by a saddle that is improperly fitted or positioned. The bruising from such injuries can be deep-seated and long-standing. One answer to this problem may be an extended period of rest from riding altogether.

If the saddle can be exonerated as the source of pain, think feet. Is the horse shod? Are the shoes the source of the trouble? Even in the absence of frank lameness when a horse is trotted up, in hand and on level ground, pain in the foot might still explain bucking under saddle when the horse is being ridden on uneven terrain. Such pain may not be present at the walk, may be tolerated at the trot, but become insupportable at the canter. A horse may refuse to canter or start bucking (or bolting) as cantering is commenced. Again: seek professional help.

If pain, frustration, and confusion have all been eliminated, there is one final step that could be taken but this is only recommended as a last resort and **AFTER ALL OTHER POSSIBILITIES HAVE BEEN WELL-CONSIDERED**. A horse that has learned, for no apparent reason, to drop its head and start bucking, might be prevented from getting its head down in the first instance by means of an overcheck rein. A sidecheck or anti-grazing rein may also be used for this purpose. An overcheck runs from the pommel of the saddle, over the poll (anchored to the poll straps by some form of loop) and down the front of the nose, where it ultimately divides and is attached to the 'O' rings on the noseband of the Bitless Bridle. The strap would be adjusted in such a way that it never came into action during the course of normal head movement at work.

Bucking is a serious problem and potentially fatal for the rider. No rider should ride any horse without an approved helmet but it should be seriously considered whether, even with a helmet, a horse that is a persistent and incurable buckner should ever be ridden at all.