

# The Important Bit about Horses

By Fridtjof Hanson

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The time has come to seriously question the use of the bit to control a horse.

The horse is a creature that responds to kindness, gentleness and dexterous handling. Horses are strong, powerful and fast but also extremely sensitive.

The challenge of the horseman is always the quest to refine the sensory signals that we share in our communication. The very nature of the bit is the antithesis to this 'quest' because it is far too easy to hurt the horse with this coercive device let alone the respiratory obstructive problems it causes the horse.

The hair and whisker-bearing skin of the equine muzzle are the ideal portion of the equine anatomy to communicate with because of its sensitivity. So using an alternative bridle that makes full use of the horse's supreme tactile prehensile system opens up the door to a far more precise, accurate and effective communication system and language.

The Bedouin horsemen discovered and devised ways to reproduce the feeling a horse would get when a gentle and skilful human hand touches the skin of the horse's nasal bridge by placing a felt-padded, twisted chain which moulds itself to the underlying shape of the nose. Signals through this can be very soft and subtle allowing fine degrees of communication between the rider and the horse.

The second great discovery that we owe the Bedouin is that of the weighted rein (commonly known as the Western style which was introduced to America by the Spanish cattle men who had inherited it from the Arabs during the time they occupied Spain). Unlike the tight rein used by European equestrians, this style of rein droops in a curve which allows the horse a degree of slack to move its neck and head for balancing — the effect of a big heavy head at the end of a long, highly flexible and mobile neck. The extreme flexibility of the loosely held weighted rein allows for the flow of reciprocal information up and down this communication thread so that the rider feels what the horse is doing and with small movements lets the horse know what the rider wants. (Very much the same principle as the mountaineer's climbing rope that communicates what

other climber on the rope is doing even if out of sight.) It is hard to exaggerate the advantage to the horse being allowed to function “on the buckle” as it is called in hunting parlance. This has to be the ultimate in quality of rein control.

What is wrong with the bit? Little known is that the Arabs reserved the bit for warfare when control of the horse to go into battle rather than flee from it was paramount. Otherwise it was found unnecessary. The bit does not allow the horse to position and stabilise its soft palette properly which is essential for open and free passage of air to the lungs. Reducing the diameter of the airway when pulling on the bit can very suddenly reduce the lamina flow, in other words, restrict the horse’s ability to breathe especially while galloping.

The ideal bit-less bridle that I finished up using incorporates these two valuable Bedouin inventions: the soft moulded chain and the weighted rein. However, a further addition is something I learned from a Taranaki farmer, Felix Hungar. This addition is what I call the Felix curb strap.



The Felix strap consists of an 18” strip of light nylon strapping with a buckle at one end, threaded through two snap hooks and two rings in a clever sequence. Snap hooks are also placed at the end of the reins. When assembled correctly with the rein snap hooks clipped onto the two rings on the curb strap you have a bridle that greatly improves the lateralizing signal effect. This is especially critical for accurate work in a harness and also contributes to rider and horse safety because it can, and should always be, used very quickly to correct the horse if it gets a fright and tries to bolt. The time to stop a horse bolting is

**before** he has been able to begin running away. To give a warning as quick as thought, with a sharp quick jerk and then replace the slack immediately – too quickly to give the horse the opportunity to start a tug of war. And don't hesitate to use repeated jerks and releases until the horse has calmed down.

I have had occasion to be astonished at how effective this technique can be in an emergency.

This begs the question: why?

- Firstly: the speed of your response.
- Secondly: the quick release doesn't ignite the horse's escape reflex because you refrain from starting a tug of war.
- Thirdly: the quality of the sensation the horse feels when getting this short, sharp restraining compression around the whole of his muzzle provides, I think, a sense of being saved from a frightening situation.

With the removal of the coercive element of the bit, the bridle is now a very sensitive, accurate communication device that fuses the horse and rider into a full partnership. It goes a long way to actualising the concept that Sally Swift postulates that the ideal body for a rider would include forearms about twice as long as we have thus allowing the rider to steer his horse with his hands around the muzzle. This is not fanciful having more than a grain of truth in it because both horse and rider have highly developed proprioceptors that, with assiduous practice, really does actualise this Sally Swift fantasy.

So, with the end of my life so suddenly coming closer, one of my dearest wishes is to leave a legacy that may permanently and effectively improve the welfare and performance of these wonderful creatures; to help open the door to a better, kinder, happier partnership.

I have always had a passion for horses, but it has taken the span of my life to realise how much horses can teach us about paying attention to body language and to use this skill productively, not just to communicate with our horses but also with each other.

Mine has been a fortunate life providing many opportunities to learn how to elicit willing cooperation and avoid the need for coercive dominating behaviours. I have however been a slow learner and the big lessons have only sheeted themselves home in the last decade since my collaboration with Professors Robert Cook and David Mellor. My good friend John Wheeler has

always been a wise counsellor and open minded critic. Bill Noble and Dana Hanzard have also been major initiators of this quest. My two children Kersti and Christian have been wonderful despite my at times obsessive emphasis of things equestrian on their childhood. And lastly I acknowledge my dearest Joanna for everything she has contributed to my life and the lessons that I have had the good fortune to learn.