

## Essential Horsemanship: When is a Stronger Bit Really Necessary?

**Your horse's behavior might be telling you one of two things: Either it's time for more bit or more training.**

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Your trail riding partners think it'd be a fabulous idea to gallop to that big oak tree in the distance. But you get a sinking feeling in your stomach. You're certain that you'll still be flying at a dead run until your horse reaches the next county.

Whether you're out on the trails or performing at a show, your horse needs to respect your requests to slow down and stop when asked. But how can you tell if it's time for a trip to the tack store or time for a riding lesson? Here are two tips to help you decide.

First, make sure that your horse understands what you're asking. For example, if your horse has never truly grasped the concept of neck reining, simply sticking a harsher curb bit in his mouth won't magically transform him into a reining wonder. The same goes for a hunter or jumper. If you skipped the part of his education that included maintaining a rhythmical pace throughout an entire course, then stepping up to a Pelham won't help. To help you decide, ride in an enclosed arena using your current bit. Work through turns, circles and transitions. If you discover that your horse feels more like a runaway circus train than a compliant teammate, it's probably not time for a stronger bit. Instead, seek out the advice of a professional trainer or instructor who can help you and your horse communicate better. On the other hand, if your horse can execute the arena tests but attempts to evade your aids by boring down on the bit and getting faster, or scooting off at the lope or canter, then a little more bit might help resolve your issues.

Second, if your horse has demonstrated that he's generally a reliable, responsive horse, temporarily opting for a stronger bit under certain circumstances isn't a sin. In fact, it can be a life saver. A horse that suddenly spooks out on the trails needs to be pulled to a stop before it bolts into danger. A jumper competing on an outside grass course requires a braking and turning system that's dependable. In those instances, having a special occasion bridle equipped with a slightly stronger bit can come in handy. Always remember, however, that if you step up to a stronger bit and use it consistently it'll be difficult to return to the milder one. That's because the corners and bars of your horse's mouth can become toughened as it acclimates to the increased pressure of the more severe bit. Plus, you'll begin to rely on the available power that a harsher bit provides. Instead of improving your horsemanship, you'll be in danger of continually reaching for the next stronger bit. Remember: a bit is only a tool. True control and communication comes through your skills as a rider.

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