

Bit by Bit

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By Les Vogt

Q. I see bits in catalogs called “reining bits.” Is that what I should ride my reining horse in?

A. Your best bit will be the one that allows you to maximize your horse’s performance by giving you optimal control and balance. You must first have everything perfect in your snaffle before using a reining bit to bring out your horse’s ultimate performance.

The two main elements of a reining bit are the mouthpiece and leverage. The mouthpiece gets your horse’s attention and respect. You want to keep him tuned in to you, but never to the point of instilling fear. If you use a mouthpiece that is too light, when you get to a situation with distractions, like a show, you’ll need to handle your horse harder than you’d like to keep his attention. On the other hand, if the mouthpiece is too strong, your horse will tense up or overreact when you pick up your reins, rather than staying soft and round.

Leverage helps to influence where the horse’s neck “breaks” when he gives to the pressure of the bit. A high leverage bit will encourage the horse to drop his whole neck a little lower; an average leverage will cause the horse to break at the crest of the neck; and a low leverage bit can help to lift the neck and shoulders by encouraging the horse to break at the poll. The right leverage position can really help a high-necked or heavy-shouldered horse stay round and balanced for better performance.

Other things to consider when you’re choosing a reining bit: If you think you’ll need to school your horse with a direct rein, you might want a swivel cheek bit that will let you do that. An experienced horse may respond better to a bit that has a solid bar across the bottom, rather than one where the cheeks are loose. Some horses also stay lighter and more relaxed if they have a cricket, a single roller placed within the port of a curb bit, to play with. It depends on your horse and his training level.

Make sure you don’t move to a bigger bit to solve problems. It won’t work. Again, make sure you and your horse are moving well in the snaffle first.

One final point—know your rules. A bit that is fine for the National Reining Horse Association could get you disqualified in a National Reined Cow Horse Association class—so make sure you read the rules carefully before you show.

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