

Graduating Your Western Horse From Snaffle to Curb Bit

The key to a smooth and successful transition to the curb bit is to have your horse supple and responsive to the snaffle bit first.

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Prominent Quarter Horse trainer Dana Hokana has a philosophy of thoroughly educating the young horse in the snaffle bit before moving him into a curb bridle. Just as a child must learn the basics in grammar school, Hokana believes the horse must be supple to the rider's aids and learn to carry himself in a snaffle before graduating to the curb. By starting slowly and training in a humane fashion, Hokana produces horses that accept the curb bit without tossing their heads or gaping their mouths, and who yield to the bit willingly when she picks up the reins.

Before her young horses enter her training program, Hokana has their teeth checked to make certain there are no physical problems that would cause the horse to not eagerly accept the bit. The vestigial wolf teeth are usually pulled, as they may interfere with the placement of the bit and can irritate the gums. She also has all caps removed and sharp edges filed down. Then, as the equine equivalent of kindergarten begins, Hokana starts her horses in a sidepull bridle. A sidepull is a sort of bitless headstall with reins that allows her to introduce the horse to the idea of turning and giving his head without directly working on his mouth. After 30 to 45 days in the sidepull, she switches to a smooth D-ring or loose-ring snaffle. "I prefer a good quality sweet-iron snaffle," Hokana says. "I have a few that I like with copper inlays set in the mouthpiece. I recommend getting a good-quality, well-made snaffle."

The choice of a snaffle as a first bit on a young horse is a logical one. "A snaffle is an excellent first bit on a horse because it is a mild bit that works primarily on the corners of the mouth," says Hokana. Even though, with increased pressure, the snaffle can work on the tongue and sensitive bars of the mouth, Hokana's goal is to encourage the young horse to yield to her hand through just light pressure on the corners of the mouth. When she rides a horse in a snaffle and applies light pressure with a leading or direct rein, she connects first with the corners of the mouth, which enables her to turn the horse's head from one side to the other, encouraging the horse to give or yield with his jaw, poll and neck.

"As the horse learns to give or bend with forward motion, he learns to follow his nose, making him steerable," Hokana explains, which then permits the horse to become supple through his whole body.

As training progresses, Hokana uses very little additional equipment. "During the first stages of training I will use a long running martingale on some horses." She emphasizes that the martingale is not used to pull the horse's head down. "I don't use a lot of gimmicks. I don't like draw reins and tie-downs," she says, "but I have found the martingale is effective because when the horse has his head in the correct position they don't feel the martingale. It's only there as a preventive measure."

Just like evaluating any student, Hokana has a checklist of accomplishments for her young horses before moving into the curb bit. "I like to have my horses really broke before going into the curb bit. They should give or yield to the snaffle without any resistance. They should be able to execute turns on the haunches, turns on the forehand, sidepass and back up willingly."

Hokana lays a foundation that will allow the horse to be a dependable show mount. As a successful competitor and frequent judge, she knows what is required of a top performance horse. "In our western classes, the current trend is not to hold a horse. They're to go on a loose rein without resistance." To this end, Hokana wants her horses to carry themselves in a snaffle at the walk, jog and lope without being held together by the rider's hands.

Neck Reining

Of course, one more test the snaffle horse must pass before graduating to the curb bit is to respond to the neck rein. This is a major transition for the young horse. Whereas the early training in the sidepull and snaffle taught the horse to yield and turn to direct pulls of the rein, a fully broke horse in a curb bit responds to pressure of the rein on his neck. One of the ways of introducing this concept to the horse is by teaching him to move his shoulder over in response to subtle neck-rein pressure.

Hokana begins by starting the horse in a circle at the walk. For example, when riding on a circle to the left, she holds her

hands approximately 10 to 12 inches apart and slightly above the saddle horn. She will pick up her direction of pull with her inside (left) rein, making certain that the pull is toward her belt buckle, not down toward the horse's shoulder. "I ask the horse to move his shoulder out and over, encouraging him to cross over in front and actually move over on the track of his circle. I'll open my right (outside) hand out to the side to open a space or open a 'door,' and ask the horse's shoulder to fill that door." As she works on this lateral movement, Hokana makes sure that she puts the left rein on the horse's neck to send a clear message that when the rein is against the horse's neck, he is to respond by moving over, away from the neck rein.

This movement alone can take hours of practice to perfect. "I'll take any 'give,' " Hokana says. "I make it as simple as I can in the beginning. The quicker I give the horse a reward, the quicker the horse understands what my cue is." Hokana rewards the horse by softening or releasing the reins.

Learning to neck rein is a long process. "They're not going to learn it overnight," Hokana says. "The horse must graduate from a direct or leading rein, where they follow their noses, to an indirect rein cue." She introduces the concept slowly, likening it to opening a space with her outside hand, tipping the horse's nose in that direction with a slight leading rein, then reinforcing that cue with an outside or neck rein, and then rewarding the proper response.

Hands-On

The rider's hand position is of vital importance. In a moment of frustration, some riders lower their hands toward their thighs or knees. This increases the snaffle's pressure on the sensitive bars of the horse's mouth, thereby giving the rider more leverage as they bump and pull the horse's head down. Though such maneuvering may work temporarily, Hokana sees it as a bad habit for riders to develop. The end goal of training is to compete in a curb bit, and a rider can't resort to such measures when riding one-handed in a bridle. She teaches her riders, from the very beginning, to always ride with their hands in the correct position, so that the pull of their hands is the same in the snaffle as it will be later in the curb. "I ride with my hands close to the saddle horn, with my pull directed toward my hips or waist, in an upward and backward motion. This closely simulates the rein position in the bridle, which again is my end goal." With her hands in this correct position, Hokana finds it easier to add neckrein cues while still in the snaffle because she's better able to make rein contact with the withers and neck.

The Transition

When she believes her horses are ready to move on in their training, she allows them a transition period before going into a curb bit. "When I graduate from the snaffle, I use an intermediate bit called a Tom Thumb snaffle. This bit is a broken-mouthpiece snaffle with shanks and a curb strap or chain." Hokana believes that the Tom Thumb is a mild, nonintimidating bit that can acquaint the young horse to the different feel and leverage of a curb bit.

With a curb, "the horse will feel a tightening on their jaw from the chin strap. And depending on how high the port is on the curb, the horse might feel pressure in their mouth or on the roof of their mouth." All of this is new to the horse, and Hokana proceeds slowly, repeating her basic exercises. When graduation day comes and she deems the horse prepared for a true curb bit, she often starts with a grazer-style curb bit, one that's lightweight and mild with a low port.

When she rides the horse in the curb, she's very careful not to scare the horse by picking up the reins too quickly, as she asks him to give or yield to her hand. As riders, "we need to remember to use our hands accordingly," Hokana cautions, reminding that, "the Tom Thumb will be more severe than the snaffle bit, and the curb bit will be more severe than the Tom Thumb." She feels that being kind and patient will pay off in the long run. "I've seen horses that never, ever were confident or good bridle horses, and I feel like it was probably from how they were started in the bridle. Possibly they were scared early on."

One of the exercises Hokana works on as her horses adapt to the curb is her "pick up," which is how she picks up the reins, making light contact with the horse's mouth. "This builds the foundation for how well the horse will take the bridle. When I pick up on the reins and connect with the horse's jaw and mouth, I want the horse to 'give' right away by flexing at the poll and dropping his head." This is practiced at all gaits and at a standstill. "I will ride one-handed, just like I would in the show-ring, and I'll pick up my reins with my elbow down and my forearm up, until I connect with my horse's mouth." If at first the horse doesn't yield to the light pressure, Hokana moves on to step two, which could be to push the horse forward with some leg pressure and bump a little harder on the reins. But she always remains soft and patient, and teaches the horse that every time he feels her hand he is to give in response, and she immediately rewards him by softening the reins.

Hokana acknowledges that graduating to a curb bit takes time. "I might regress a little my first few rides in a bridle, but that's why it's important to ride a horse a lot in a bridle and not just plop it on them and show them when they're not accustomed to it."

She often finds that young horses have to be helped some as they transfer movements they learned in a snaffle to a curb bit. For example, a horse may not neck rein quite as readily in a curb as he did while in the snaffle. If this occurs, Hokana helps reinforce the neck-rein cue by sliding her free hand down the asking rein, close to the withers, increasing her leverage position and adding a touch of a direct rein. But she immediately returns to holding the reins in one hand as soon as the horse responds. Since it may take up to six months for a young horse to comfortably accept and trust the curb bridle, Hokana urges riders to go slowly and be patient.

Warning signs of a horse that has been moved too quickly into the curb include one that gapes or opens his mouth, or overbridles, dropping behind the bit. Such habits can indicate that the horse is nervous about working in the curb or fears pain from his mouth being handled too roughly. "There are horses that have 'busy mouths.' Their mouths may be shaped differently, they might have a little problem we don't know about, and it may have nothing to do with training. But most of the time," Hokana says, "it's a nervous symptom of an irritated or uncomfortable horse." Worse yet, a horse with a fidgety mouth or one that is over-bridled might be mentally preparing for a sudden painful jerk on the reins from an insensitive or frustrated rider.

Even after a horse is well-broke to a curb bridle, Hokana often returns to schooling in a snaffle. This keeps the horse from becoming dull to the curb, and rather than then moving on to an even tougher bit or one with a higher port, she can attack any problem areas in the snaffle, going back to basics in a mild bit so that the horse remains sensitive and responsive when returned to the curb. This philosophy of patience and an adherence to the basics help make Dana Hokana an excellent schoolmaster to her young equine students.