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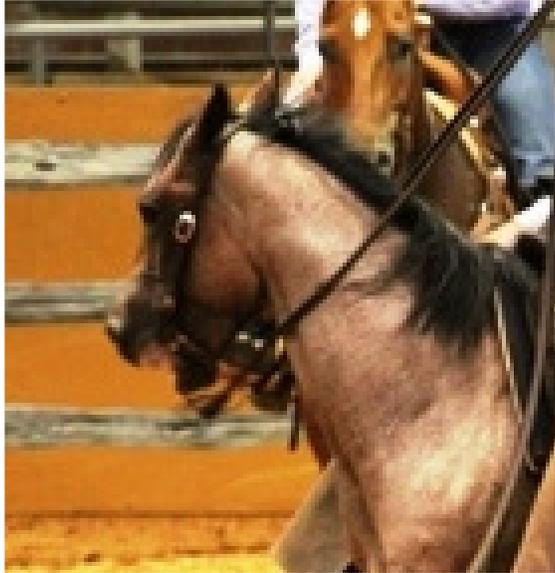


## **Leon Harrel Training Center**

### **"Magic Hands"**







(These photos lost some of their clarity when they were resized to protect the identity of the rider.)

You can clearly see the results of the heavy handedness of this horse's training program.

This lesson is about the importance of developing excellent hands. You've undoubtedly heard the phrase, "the hands make the rider".

Recently, I watched this rider attempting to show his horse. The frustration he experienced as a competitor due to his horse's poor performance was obvious. As the day progressed, it was hard to ignore. Prior to entering the show pen, not only was this horse already exhausted from hours of loping, but it was also one of the hottest days of the summer. Frustration was definitely the order of their day.

I observed that every time this man moved his hand even slightly, his horse's mouth opened wide to avoid the bit. He worried about his mouth constantly. I was unable to determine what kind of bit he was using, but the fact is, any bit can be turned into a weapon in heavy hands.

To be honest and fair, I don't believe this owner was even aware of the pain that his horse was in. He may have been fairly new to cutting and showing and simply lacked information.

He had probably been convinced by others that it was an attitude and behavioral problem in his horse that needed correcting with more of what caused it in the first place. Gotta love that logic!

To confirm my conclusion, following his run, his trainer then immediately mounted this horse and spent another 30 minutes viciously yanking and jerking this horse while working the flag. Needless to say, this poor little horse had a lot of adversity to deal with that day. You can see by the expression on his face, he was incapable of doing his job correctly. He was just trying to survive.

**BITS: Here is some information that will help you understand the importance of this subject more clearly.**

### **Significance**

The significance of the bit is control. The horse has a spot between his front teeth and his back teeth that is toothless. This area is called the "bars" of the horse's mouth, and this is where the bit rests once inserted. Bits are designed in all kinds of ways to put pressure on the bars of a horse's mouth, as well as the palate, the tongue, the cheeks, the chin and even the roof of the mouth.

### **Types**

There are a dizzying array of horse bits. They are broken down into many categories, but there are two basic kinds. The snaffle bit is "broken" or "jointed" in the center, and this break helps to distribute pressure off the bars of the mouth and guide it elsewhere, such as the tongue, cheeks and roof of the mouth. A curb bit is a straight piece of metal that may or may not have additional metal in the center of the bit, but it is not jointed or broken. Curb bits are more severe than snaffle bits.

### **Shanks**

The shanks are the lengths of metal that hang down from the bit, almost like handles, and the ends of the reins attach to the shanks. The longer the shank, the more severe the action of the bit is as it is used. Almost all curb bits have shanks. Some snaffles, such as the Tom-Thumb snaffle, combine a shank with a snaffle. Although the length of the shank is short, this can be a very severe bit as the shank increases the "sawing" action of the snaffle in the mouth tremendously. The shank is like adding power steering to the bit that is already being used.

### **Thickness of the Bit**

Another important thing to consider is the thickness of the bit. A small, thin bit can be the cruelest torture imaginable for a horse, and can actually sever a horse's tongue in the wrong hands. A thick bit is easier on the mouth, and will in most cases be less severe. Think of a cheese-slicing wire versus a butter knife. Always consider what you are actually putting against the sensitive tissues of your horse's mouth.

### **Warning**

Do not buy a severe bit just because your horse may be too much for you. Consult with a professional before you purchase a shanked curb or other severe bit. By putting a harsh, pain-causing bit in your horse's mouth, you are more likely asking for trouble than you will be controlling it. In addition, constant abuse of the horse's mouth will deaden it over time, and cause permanent damage that cannot be undone.



**Bits and spurs were originally designed for refinement of communication and meant for horseman with feel and the desire to coax the very best from their mounts. They were never intended to be weapons of torture and abuse.**

**DO NOT** allow any trainer to injure your horse in the name of "training". Remember this, when you pay them to treat your horse this way, you condone their behavior. I promise you, this is NOT what it takes to get the best from a horse, and often times it signifies the end of whatever potential they may have had.

### **NO ONE ENJOYS RIDING AN UNRESPONSIVE HORSE**

I refer to this unresponsiveness as "having *no feel*". By "*no feel*" I'm referring to the following symptoms:

- they won't stop without excessive pressure on the reins
- won't turn without excessive pressure on the reins
- won't yield to your legs without kicking and or spurring

Horses get this way for two main reasons. They lack solid foundation training, or they have been yanked and spurred so much that they have literally had to dull themselves to the pain. In many instances there may even be nerve damage to those areas of their body. (the mouth and flanks are the most commonly abused areas on a horse)

In my opinion, if you can't ride with your fingers most of the time (if not all of it), then your horse is too heavy. In order to correct this situation, you need to be aware of the pressure you are using in this most delicate area of a horse. If you want a light, responsive horse you *must* have light, responsive hands. In this case, you'll need to take some time to re-sensitize them. It is very easy to develop that "feel" in your horse - as well as in your hands - if you have a little patience. The payoff is well worth your time and effort.

There are a variety of exercises to promote sensitivity in a horse's mouth.

Checking your horse around is the most effective method. You reward them by releasing the pressure *immediately* when they give to the bit. You can do this by gently and patiently asking for them to tip their nose in either direction, asking for a little more each time. Be careful not to over flex them. Their head does not need to be in your lap. Timing is crucial for this to be successful for you.



In my opinion, this is an appropriate amount of flexion with the ideal amount of pressure. Notice that her fingers are controlling this movement.



I consider this too much flexion for my horses. Notice how the rider's hand is closed completely around the rein exerting considerable pressure to accomplish this movement. \*\*A horse's neck is not meant to be in this position for any length of time. Prolonged use of this method can cause damage to their necks, mouths and jaws especially when they are repeatedly tied and left for more than 10-15 minutes at a time.

Once you get them to give softly and consistently, this also becomes a great opportunity to bring your legs in to play to start developing

another skill, your hand leg coordination in those turnarounds. It is possible to develop *feel* in both your self and your horse at the same time. If you close your eyes, often times you'll tune in much better to what your horse is doing with his body. Learn to feel the different body movements and shifts in your horse without having to see them with your eyes. Make a game out of it and keep it fun. Just like you, your horse will learn much faster if he enjoys the learning process and will retain the information better as well.

When checking your horse around, just do it for a few minutes at a time, then move on to something else that's easy for them, and come back to it periodically throughout your ride. Don't expect permanent results the first day. Moderation is the key.

It took awhile for your horse to build up his defense against insensitive hands. It's going to take a little time for him to learn to trust you with his mouth again, but you will both be much happier and get much better performance results when he does.

Personally, I like my horses relaxed and straight when I go into the herd, not squirming around underneath me while I'm trying to execute my cuts. I find that a horse that's been repeatedly bridled up (constantly flexed and pulled on) tends to be more difficult to pilot in sensitive situations, and is more of a hindrance to my goals than a help.

#### WHY I FLEX HORSES

To teach them to give to the bit, period.

\*\* When checking a horse around, I discourage my students from over-flexing their cutting horses. This does little more in my opinion than aggravate them and give them a sore mouth and neck. I see a lot of this flexing going on, and I have to say that I have never once found it to benefit any horse that I've ever trained or ridden. On the contrary, it has created problems resulting in horses over flexing, attempting to avoid the bit altogether and in general, feeling like a wet noodle under me. Every time I attempt even light contact they become too bound up to move forward properly to complete the moves I ask for. I've had to retrain dozens of horses to overcome this pattern of behavior because they have become virtually impossible for their owners to ride and show.

A happy, healthy, relaxed horse is always the most fun to ride. Horses that have become dull to your aids are very difficult and not much fun at all.

Horses that become overly sensitive to spurs and bits are the horses that are the most worried about their riders and the least able to focus on their jobs.

I wonder why...

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