

Ask the Experts—Bit Acceptance

By Mary Flood

It can be frustrating buying a nice horse with potential only to discover that he's brought along some unwanted baggage. The job of a young racehorse is to run as fast as he can. Acceptance of the bit is not a priority. Opening the mouth, grinding his teeth, drawing up the tongue or sticking out the tongue are all means of trying to avoid the bit.

Horses often learn to evade the bit to avoid pain. Long-term pain—due to such issues as sharp teeth that were not floated regularly—convinces a horse that anything placed in his mouth will produce an unpleasant experience. When a horse anticipates or experiences pain, he tenses his body and is not relaxed in the topline. He learns that if he relaxes, he exposes himself to outside influences and possible further discomfort.

Your horse's past experiences may have caused him to mistrust contact. He sticks out his tongue to try to protect that side of his mouth from the discomfort of the bit. I commend you for having his teeth floated and trying another bit. You did not say what kind of bit you use, but I would recommend a medium-weight, three-piece, loose-ring KK bit that is anatomically more comfortable than most bits. Be sure that it is properly positioned in the mouth: snug enough for about one to two wrinkles in the corners of the mouth and just slightly wider than the width of the mouth, but not so wide that it slides back and forth when you take the reins. Also check that it's not so narrow that it will pinch. Be sure your cavesson is comfortable padded and not so snug that it clamps the mouth shut. You should easily be able to slip two fingers between the cavesson and your horse's jaw.

After seeing to these details, it's time to turn your attention to your horse's training. Most Thoroughbreds have a difficult time relaxing through their bodies and stretching their toplines. Joyce Harman, DVM, explains, "There is a direct connection from the horse's tongue to his sternum and shoulder. ... Once you have tension at the sternum, the horse cannot raise his back and use his ring of muscles." (See "A New Approach to Bitting," DT, July '99.) Try sticking out your tongue to the side and you can feel how much tension there is in your neck and throat. When your horse is able to relax and stretch over his back, then he will be confident accepting contact.

In order for your horse to relax, you need to help him find a comfortable rhythm and tempo. This is very important. As his rhythm and tempo improve, so will his lateral and longitudinal suppleness, and he will develop elasticity and looseness. This, in turn, will improve contact—his acceptance of the bit—and he will not stick out his tongue so much.

Sympathetic hands and a balanced, independent seat also are essential for helping your horse relax and learn to trust your aids. When establishing contact with your horse's mouth, increase your driving aids—the seat and legs. Keeping steady contact with them when your horse attempts to connect the energy from his hindquarters will help him round his back and seek the bit. Do this gently and with utmost coordination, so your hands become the receiving aids of the hind-end

energy. If he rushes when you send him toward the bit, give gentle, repeated half halts.

As he begins to trust your hands, he will begin to release the topline and yield in the jaw. This release in the jaw will enable the energy you send forward to come back to you for recycling. You then have this circle of energy that continues to flow through your horse from his hindquarters to the bit without getting blocked by your hands. If he stiffens, you can use gentle flexions and counter-flexions to help loosen his neck and jaw so that he seeks a longer and lower frame while keeping the hind legs pushing.

I have found that by improving the quality of a horse's basic training, mouth problems usually disappear or at least greatly improve. You may never completely fix such a long-standing habit, but I have found success after improving the horse's thoroughness. If these techniques are beyond your experience level, seek a knowledgeable instructor to help you.