

Thoughts About Bridle Horses

I have been blessed to have known some great horses, and some incredible human beings. They have taught me much; and I hope that along the way more horses, and more people, will teach me even greater things.

The concept of building a Bridle Horse is only partly about skill - rather, it has more to do with learning about oneself. The skills come in time - facing the other is far more difficult.

What I hope will come as a result of drinking in this information, and then practicing it, is not just helping to create a great horse. It is the expectation that it will make me a better person. This, like all endeavors into Horsemanship, is a Journey. This particular Journey takes us into places within ourselves that can be very challenging, and into feelings that can be deeply spiritual.

Along the way, one of the issues we could face is developing the ability to maintain absolute control over our emotions - our temper, in particular. The strength to let go of some emotional baggage we may be carrying could become paramount. Or, we might need to become highly skilled in things like being able to see the big picture, and not stressing over every little detail. Losing the ever-so-human characteristic of demanding, or forcing, an animal to do our bidding will be an absolute requirement if we are to dream of enjoying this Journey. Also learning the art of patience and forgiveness - toward oneself, and with others, is a huge aspect of Horsemanship. The Journey has no end. There is always someplace else to go with this; another horse to bring along, a skill that needs refining, another aspect of ourselves we can find that needs addressing.

For my colts, this journey doesn't begin with the first ride - it seems to me it should begin from the moment the baby foal is born. Everything we do with this youngster is important, everything points to its eventual life with humans and its place in that life.

For me, everything I do every day, every interaction I have with horses and humans, gives me an opportunity to better myself. I try to learn from the horse and work at living just a little bit more in the moment. Letting go of the things that can taint my life is a wonderful deal, and allows me to relax and realize how much life has to offer.

When we have the opportunity to immerse ourselves in something as incredible and in-depth as creating a Bridle Horse, it just doesn't make sense not to take it. But we must realize that this is a huge commitment in many ways: to us as an individual, to our horse, and to taking the time it takes.

It is about a 5 year process - perhaps longer - for the horse to develop physically and mentally, as well as to learn the skills necessary to earn the title of Bridle Horse. This is not something that can be rushed, or cheated; to do so would dishonor oneself, the horse, and the Vaquero tradition.

Instead, handled correctly and in the right frame of mind, we have the opportunity to find the best in ourselves - AND in our horse.

Hackamore Work



Someone once told me the Hackamore is not so much an object - it is a whisper. Although you have a piece of equipment on your horse's head, you can not take it for granted, for it was never meant to try to force a horse to do anything. Rather, it is for perfecting and refining in preparation for the bridle bit.

One thing the hackamore is famous for is its ability to reveal the rider's deficiencies. Used incorrectly, the horse is apt to learn to brace against the bosal, and "run through" the hackamore. What we strive for is to help the horse willingly and happily follow the lead of the rider - which is provided in many ways - only one of which is the hands on the mecate reins. Several cues should accompany each and every request made of the horse. These cues must be absolutely consistent or the horse will lose confidence in the rider and in the hackamore - forcing this rider to return to the snaffle in order to accomplish his ride, and to try to build his horse back up to where he was before.

I start my colts in the snaffle, because I am familiar with it and it works for me; and because nearly everyone who buys one of my colts knows how to ride with one. However, whether or not I am planning to take a colt further in his education, I work at preparing him for the hackamore from the earliest stages of riding. I do this by incorporating cues from my body along with my rein signals, and I begin using my body to send these signals to the colt from the very first ride. It keeps me sharp, and it makes life so much easier for the colt when they become accustomed to listening for a series of messages, instead of relying only on the metal in their mouths for direction. I do not believe it is in the horse's best interest for the human to sit up on a colt's back like a sack of grain, and drag them around solely by a strap attached somehow to their head.

When I school a colt, I tend to mix a fair amount of gymnastic type work in with each ride. The reason for this is to build the musculature up to enable the colt to maintain self-carriage for longer and longer periods of time, and to work toward perfecting his working off my body and not necessarily the mecate reins. Ultimately I want my colt and I to look like dance partners - moving together in perfect unison but with no visible signals for the maneuvers we are performing together. Thus, during this gymnastic work I am careful to use the exact same series of messages for a particular maneuver - until the colt is comfortable in the knowledge that when he feels my body placement shift, as well as my weight changes along with accompanying leg cues and subtle rein pressure - he knows that he knows the right answer.

Transitioning from the snaffle to the hackamore has not yet been troublesome for our colts. I am very careful to keep them soft and responsive on the halter rope during our

daily groundwork exercises, and I imagine this is partly what helps the colts understand the new, slightly different and yet still similar feel of the bosal. And I tend to believe that learning a little about the value of riding even the greenest of colts, in the snaffle but with some of the techniques the hackamore has taught me, has helped in this regard. Let me explain:

The mechanics of the hackamore require that equal pressure never be applied to both reins simultaneously, regardless of the maneuver we are asking for. For instance, although we work very hard to achieve straightness, this need not be accomplished with equal pressure on both sides of the colt's head. Instead, one rein is used for the signal, and the other rein might provide support to help maintain the vertical softness and the balance we so crave in Bridle Horses. The rest of the message we are sending to the colt comes from our body - and after awhile, it begins to look and feel as though the colt is reading the rider's mind. And so it becomes clear how imperative it is that the rider educate - and discipline - themselves to maintain consistency in their cues to the colt.

By the time we move from the snaffle into the 5/8" bosal, the colt is able to recognize and respond to my signals with less and less support from the reins. He has been leg yielding all over the mountains in response to various obstacles Nature has graciously placed there for us, practicing nice circles around trees and bushes, and backing in and around everything we can find - including into and out of barrancas and arroyos.

As the colt becomes softer and more relaxed and comfortable in the hackamore, I will reduce the bosal diameter and/or the mecate diameter (and thus, the weight) in response to this softness and willingness. Depending upon how often I get to work with the colt, and how many different things I get to expose him to, this entire hackamore training period could take up to a couple of years before we truly feel like old, familiar dance partners.

Eventually we end up in the 3/8" bosal and mecate. From here, I will start looking for a bridle bit suitable for this particular horse's mouth. The colt will wear the bridle and carry the reins - but they will not be used at first. Instead, we will continue to work from the hackamore (by now this might be 1/4" to 5/16" diameter), situated under the bridle. I am looking for the colt to lose any fear of that metal in his mouth, and for him to want to carry it and be comfortable doing so. Here we move into the Two-Rein stage.

The Two-Rein and The Bridle

I kind of think of bridling a horse the way I think of a superb glass of Porto.....it is never to be rushed. It is meant to be savored - to feel, and taste, and swirl, and ponder. There is much to be noticed and appreciated in that little glass of aged, sumptuous, high-octane wine. It is smooth beyond belief - yet it will kick later, if you do not respect it. It looks beautiful in the glass, and feels soft in the mouth - yet it has a great deal of power and can almost take on a mind of its own... if one does not respect it. It is for love. It is for great conversation. It is for admiring and partaking of everything good about life. And if we disrespect it and misuse it - we pay dearly for that transgression later.

So it is for the Bridle Horse.

By the time the colt has graduated into the 2-rein he is quite well educated. The suggestions, cues, messages, and signals we have been working on all along are becoming second nature to our horse - IF we have maintained our consistency. Horses seem to like their world in black and white. That is, they do not feel comfortable with gray areas, with having to guess at the right "answer", or with constant changes or fluctuations in the way requests are made to them. In their world, life does seem very clear - the messages horses send to one another are always followed up on - there is always some sort of accountability for inattention, or disrespect. Yet we do not see anger, or punishment in the horse world.

Ego never has a place in the training of a horse. If we have been true to this thought all along, the colt has developed a deep and abiding trust in us as the leader of the dance. So as we begin introducing the use of the bridle reins along with the message sent through the mecate rein, the colt tends to be willing to listen to this signal, and will work at understanding the significance of the movements of the bridle bit in his mouth.

Once again, our supporting body cues must be consistent as these are the one aspect that has never changed in this colt's education. From the snaffle, through all the size and weight changes in the hackamore, and on to the bridle bit - these cues have remained the same. They are a stronghold for the colt - something he can understand and respond to each and every time, regardless what is on his head. My goal now is to begin to pick up on the bridle reins a little more, and at the same time pick up on the mecate a little less. I am introducing what amounts to a whole new "feel" to the horse - the bridle bit.

The snaffle utilized direct-rein pressure on the bars of the mouth, but many exercises required the supporting rein be laid lightly against the colt's neck. Although the hackamore is very, very different and can create more of a 'push' from the opposite side of the horse's face, than the 'pull' that it would seem to, with the hackamore the supporting rein often plays an even larger role than it did with the snaffle. So all along and throughout this educational process we have worked at laying the opposite (supporting) rein against our colt's neck, ever so slightly and never prying with it. Thus, by now the colt has the beginnings of a true understanding of what is called "neck reining". But the action of this heavy piece of metal in his mouth is something completely new and different. It takes time and repetition for the horse to begin to understand a cue, and he must be allowed even more time to build confidence in his response to that cue. This is the value of the Two Rein process, because it provides us with a means to provide that time to understand and build confidence by using the familiar piece of equipment - the hackamore, alongside and in conjunction with the new piece of equipment, the bridle bit.

After my colt is far enough along that I am picking up on the romal reins more than I am my mecate, I can start to leave slack in the mecate. But for instance, if we are to ask for a turnaround and the colt isn't flexing his nose down and inside quite the way I'd like him

to, I can reach down and pluck that mecate rein a little, to remind him of the proper position. If he stops with just a little too much weight on the forehead, I can pick up on the mecate reins and bump him back a little, rocking his weight back where it belongs.

By using the mecate reins for little reminders like these, we can avoid frightening the colt with the power and almost claustrophobic feel the bridle bit can cause in some horses. I want my horse's mouth to always, always be soft, so I try very hard to use my hands on the reins lightly - as one might caress a lover. By using the familiar mecate rein for small corrections, I can help keep the colt's mouth velvety-soft. Again, it takes time for a horse to become accustomed to new and different things - and this is why the familiar phrase "take the time it takes" is so often heard. So I will try and be patient, try and be smooth, try to maintain that caressing feel on my reins, and try to be absolutely consistent with all my cues in order to help my colt in every possible way I can.

Ultimately we hope to be able to ride our horse straight up in the bridle. This phrase refers to the horse having become sufficiently educated that he no longer wears a bosal and mecate. Instead, he now wears the mark of a Bridle Horse - a bosalito, worn under the bridle just as during his two-rein days, but instead of having a mecate tied to it, the front of the nosepiece is affixed by a tiny string to his forelock. He also wears a get-down rope, tied around his neck and used for leading the horse, since one should never lead a horse by the bridle reins. Lastly, if one desires to do so, the horse will have the bottom 8" or so of his mane shaved - with one small tuft left in the shaved portion, signifying he is a Bridle Horse.

I have not yet experienced the honor of putting a horse straight up in the bridle. Our palomino Morgan mare, Ariel, was getting close. She was in the 2-rein when she was sold to a wonderful family who will use Ariel's gymnastic abilities to their fullest extent. Ariel is now living on a working cattle ranch, and is also being used as a dressage horse. Her new life consists of cows during the week, dressage ring on weekends.

There is one thing I do know about Bridle Horses, though...or, perhaps more correctly, one thing I believe; once you get a horse to this stage it is more than a dance. Now you are making music together. I think watching a Bridle Horse and his rider work together is like watching, and listening to, a magnificent piano duet - or Flamenco guitarists, with their fingers flying on the guitar strings. It should be harmonious. It should look easy, and fluid. It should seem as though the two are one, wrapped in the magical music of the Bridle. This is how it seems to me when I watch the two horsemen I admire, ride their Bridle Horses. Buck Brannaman and Mike Bridges, arguably two of the most incredible Bridle Horsemen of our time, definitely make this music with their horses. Someday, this is what I hope to accomplish with my horse.

So I will be starting a new Bridle Horse prospect this year. This colt and I are embarking on a 5-year clinic series for this specific purpose, with Mike Bridges. I have a lot to learn - in fact, each step I take seems to reinforce the idiom "the more we know, the more we realize we don't know". Thus, the Journey continues.

I would like to acknowledge Ed Connell, and his books on this subject:
Hackamore Reinsman
Reinsman of the West; Bridles and Bits
Vaquero Style Horsemanship