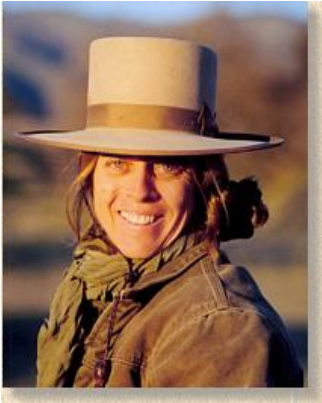


A Bit About Bit Adjustment

Published in the February 1997 issue of The Trail Less Traveled
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Do You Need Three Wrinkles When Adjusting Your Bit?



**Story and photos by
Leslie Desmond**

It's hard to know exactly where and when the enduring theories of proper bit adjustment originated. Where there are horses, there are bound to be horse experts. When they assemble, there is a range of opinion and the inevitable debate, particularly when it comes to the subject of biting.

By "bitting" I refer to the whole array of concerns horsemen and women share regarding bits, including their makers, reasons for use and adjustment. Recently I read an article focusing on one of my pet peeves: the compulsory "three wrinkles" in the corner of the horse's mouth. Search as I might I could find no justification for adhering to this time-honored standard which has been accepted in both the English and Western horse communities for as long as I can recall.

For years I lived by the "three wrinkle" code and was corrected when I didn't adhere to the code. I remember times when I really had to crank that bit up to get them. Sometimes the bit was tight up against the front molars just to get two. What sort of force would it take to get a message from the hand through the mouth to the horse's mind in this scenario? If my memory serves me, it takes pounds and plenty of them.

If we're going to be serious about adjusting ourselves and our agendas to fit each individual horse, then why not start with some flexibility in bit adjustment? Why not start with the question: Why any wrinkles at all?

One reason might be to clear the bridle teeth a stallion or gelding has between his incisors and front molars. In most cases, they have four more teeth than a mare's 36 teeth.

Every mouth is different. In some horses the upper and lower bridle teeth are very close, some are broken, others are removed, some don't grow in completely, and some grow right next to the front molar. But in the majority of cases, it is possible to adjust the bit low enough to keep pressure off the corners of the mouth while not allowing it to rest on any teeth. With this adjustment the horse will naturally gather up the bit and hold it in a comfortable place.

At first he may chew on the bit and salivate excessively, but if the bit isn't bumping his teeth and he's not forced into a "smile," he'll be able to carry it comfortably. You'll rarely see any horse impose wrinkles on himself with this adjustment. In fact, with his mouth nice and calm there's no need to buckle it shut with the noseband.



This horse's expression is the sum of the parts: three wrinkles and pressure on the reins. Many unknowing people address the "problem" with a noseband designed to keep the mouth shut. Most horses will close their mouths without a noseband when the bit is adjusted low enough to allow them to naturally close their mouths. Less pressure in the mouth produces a new feel throughout the horse's body, so a corresponding adjustment in the rider's hands and legs is necessary. After practice with the new adjustment the horse should respond quicker and more accurately to less pressure from the rider's hands. The horse should have a calmer expression.

The main benefit of adjusting the bit this way (especially with a green horse) is that it eliminates baseline

pressure in the corners of the mouth to be overcome when I take up the reins. The weight of the bit and reins is carried across the poll. He can feel what I ask him to do the exact instant I move my fingers or hand.

What he feels in his mouth directs his mind to position the bridge of his nose or shift the angle of his head and neck in the direction we need to go. Meanwhile, the feet and body are shaping up to move forward or backward in response to the direction and support provided.

This is the beauty of the whole thing: it works just as well with a spade bit as with a snaffle. Do less, get more--a peculiar and wonderful equation.

When you lower the bit on a horse whose experience has been in the "three wrinkle" school, it might take a few rides before he adapts to the new feel. But, after you do your homework, the pressure required to influence the mind through the body to the feet will be measured in ounces. The lightness, willingness and natural flow of form to function in the horse's body is retained in this scenario. The life is available, the feel is tangible, and best of all, the horse is right there. What a great feeling!



Grazing into pressure with a chain over the nose does not contribute to the goals of lightness and responsiveness under saddle. A horse that is accustomed to being handled with a tight chain across his nose is apt to be ridden with a tight rein and a noseband. That is because pressure is pressure. The lesson this horse learns in both these situations is: "If I just keep on pushing against the chain and bit, I will eventually get them to stop whatever it is they're doing." The horse was right!

Some Bad News Bits

I embarked on this most difficult process of choosing bits and bridling horses as a much younger and shorter person. After many years of cramming, jamming, coaxing, bribing and finally learning to gently introduce a bit to a horse, I've noticed some things about what a horse likes or dislikes in his mouth. I should point out right up front that I once took pride in a collection of strange and exotic-looking bits--which included one-of-a-kind jaw-breakers, palette pokers, double-twisted wire gag bits and other contraptions that, I now realize, were nothing more than emergency brakes for the ignorant, desperate and misinformed.

I wish I still had these bits as points of comparison. But over the last few years I've collected some outstanding examples from others who have found a better way. These I keep in a five-gallon bucket that bears the label: Bad News. When it comes time to bridle a horse somewhere, I often dump it out and pass around the contents for all to see and think about. There's extra-long shanks, crook shanks, high ports, bike chains, tongue wraps, fish backs, piano wire, pinch face ... too sharp, too tight and all together too much.

This gives rise to plenty of dismay and discussion. Sometimes, just before I leave a place, someone will come up and offer me the worst in their collection to add to mine.

“This is sort of like Lent,” a woman told me this fall as she made her contribution to the bucket of bad news. “But this is for keeps, I really don’t want it back.”

I was happy for her and her horse. I hadn’t owned a stud chain in many years and just the feel of it in my hands brought the use of it back in my mind. For a moment I really suffered thinking of the horses I had loved who I thought needed it.

It wasn’t them, it was me ... I didn’t know.