

THE NOSEBAND

7/21/2014

The noseband on the bridle is seldom considered and often misused.

Like many things in dressage, it is unconsidered, or an issue of fashion. Riders often do not consider the function or effect of the noseband. Often the rider cossets the horse with loving care, room service, and health care, but does not consider the effect of the noseband.

In general, and ideally, the noseband is an adornment, not a positively functional piece of equipment. And like any such thing, it is susceptible to misuse and abuse. In practice, it is often counterproductive.

What is the function of the noseband?

- In general it is intended to force or bind the lower mandible to the rest of the skull.
- It is intended to prevent the horse from opening its mouth.
- It forces the horse to accept the (sometimes savage) pressure of metal on the gums (bars).
- It can be used for attaching a standing martingale

What is the effect of the noseband?

- It ties the skull together – the lower mandible to the rest of the skull
- It allows the rider to put more (often extreme) pressure on the bars of the mouth, with no escape route for the horse by opening the mouth
- It impairs free breathing
- It can bruise the cartilage of the nose
- It can restrict air flow
- It creates anxiety in the horse when it realizes that it can't escape from forceful contact
- It often causes the horse to strain more to open its mouth
- It sometimes exacerbates crossing of the jaw

What is the origin of the noseband?

In the military, it was part of a combination halter-and-bridle that allowed the bit to be removed for feeding or watering or picketing, yet still have some control on the ground. It was adjusted relatively loosely.

What is the logic of the noseband?

- Decoration
- Demobilization of the horse's jaw (forcing the mouth closed) - tight
- Limit the opening of the mouth –not tight (sometimes temporarily helpful with a very green horse that opens its mouth extremely)
- Force the horse to “accept contact” by trussing his mouth closed

The effects of different kinds of nosebands:

- Caveson noseband– decoration (if loose); holding the lower jaw tightly against the rest of the skull (if tight); the Crank Noseband is a thoroughly unkind variation worthy of the Spanish Inquisition (especially when tightened with a girth tightener).
- Flash noseband – forces the mouth shut and restricts air flow
- Dropped noseband –forces the mouth shut and restricts air flow; can bruise the nose cartilage
- Figure-eight, Cross, or Grackle noseband – forces the mouth closed but does not restrict air flow
- Crescent noseband –forces the mouth closed, holds the bit centered

I want to KNOW, in my training, if the horse is evading contact by opening the mouth, rather than masking the problem cosmetically by forcing the mouth closed. I then work on the basics to get the horse to stretch into the contact.

I do not get the logic of expecting the horse to ‘chew,’ while the jaw is winched shut.

The late Baron Hans von Blixen-Finecke was an Olympic gold medalist, coach of dressage Olympians and Commandant of the Swedish Cavalry School said, in a 1997 interview with Tina Hutton, “I recommend schooling horses without a noseband at all. It does not have to be part of the bridle.”

In my barn, most of the horses work in bridles with NO noseband. Cavesons (for cosmetic issues for the DQ’s and fashion-obsessed) are allowed if loose. The Crescent noseband is allowed temporarily to keep the bit centered (but a full-cheek bit is preferable). The figure-8 is allowed but discouraged. The Flash noseband and the Dropped noseband are mostly forbidden.

The requirement by the National Federation and the FEI, that the bridle MUST have a noseband, defies logic. What is called “accepting the bit” or “accepting the contact” is more realistically “accepting the noseband” (*enforcing* the contact with the bit).

It can be argued that the longeing caveson is a noseband. And it has to be adjusted fairly tightly to keep it from rolling, and chafing the nose – a matter of necessity. That is a different intent than holding the mouth closed to enforce the acceptance of the bit/contact. The longeing caveson must be adjusted high on the nose, above the cartilage.

Some breeding organizations forbid nosebands when the horses are presented for Keurings/Inspections.

If I had my druthers, nosebands would be forbidden in horse shows, so we judges can really evaluate the horses’ acceptance of the bit/contact.