

## TACK, GADGETS, AND FASHION

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The USEF has spoken of ‘Gadgets.’ What are Gadgets? What is the difference between Gadgets and Tack? There seems to be no clear distinction between gadgets, tack, and fashion.

A real purist might say that there should be nothing but the rider and the horse – no saddle or bridle or halter. That is not always practical or productive or safe (although I did know a Polish chap who rode Grand Prix with no bridle at all – and it was rather good; I have no idea how he did it or taught it).

The standard version of ‘tack’ is the saddle and the bridle, which we will explore below.

### **Tack:**

#### Saddles:

The ‘science’ of saddlery is certainly going great guns. For four or five thousand dollars, you can buy something that is guaranteed to make your horse’s back swing, your legs find the perfect place and support your upper body position – you’ll be cured of what ails you.

An amusing side point is that USEF prohibited “poley pads,” but as usual did not define it. The very same idea appeared as a saddlery fashion, and was allowed, with the acceptable name - called a “thigh block.”

A basic point is that the saddle should do exactly the opposite of what many saddles are designed to do –**allow your seat to move, and allow your leg to move.**

Many modern dressage saddles are designed to do the riders’ job – maintaining position, stability, and placement of the rider’s center of mass. This often does not work, because they do not require the rider to sustain a stable core, nor control the legs. Some saddles are positively detrimental in that regard. The teacup-shaped seats in many saddles encourage women to do what they already do (and shouldn’t) – tip the top of the pelvis forward and passively arch the lumbar spine.

Many Western saddles offer a good sitting-place (rather like the classic Spanish Riding School saddle), but the fenders immobilize the rider’s leg.

The design of the saddle in terms of accommodating the horse’s back comfortably is a separate issue. It is certainly important. A saddle design that is ‘good for the horse and good for the rider is certainly a Herculean task.

#### Bridles:

Some people like to ride without a bridle, or with a bridle sort of affair, but without a bit. It can certainly be done – I’ve done it many times when I have had a horse that had an injury or irritation in the mouth, tooth problems, etc. There was a book written in the 60s called “Adventures Unbridled” by Moyra Williams – and rather interesting it was.

The standard version of the bridle is a strap over the head to hold the bit in the mouth and the bit itself. That expands into inclusion of a browband, the throatlatch, sometimes a second bit and all manner of nosebands.

The browband serves no practical purpose, as any 3-day rider can attest, after pulling the bridle off during a fall from the horse. The same can be said for the throatlatch. If it is tight enough to keep the bridle on, it is too tight to allow longitudinal flexion in the poll and throat.

So if we are going to ride with a bit (standard procedure for most people), all we really need is the strap over the head from which the bit hangs (the crown piece and cheekstraps), and the reins. The rest is decoration and tradition, and potentially a place to hang bling. That seems a bit austere, undecorative, and unfashionable, but it's a fact, in terms of what is actually functional.

To me, everything else is a gadget in some form – harmless or harmful or decorative and fashionable, depending on what it is and how it is used. More complex gadgets include drawreins and variations on the theme of sliding reins and side reins (even Running W's and things that go around, or attach to, the hind legs). These will be covered later in this piece.

There are some newly designed bridles (patent bridles if you will) emerging all the time. Some of them are intriguing. It is important to not put down new ideas in the name of "Classical." Equally important is to not think that a newly patented wonder bit or bridle will cure all your ills. Some horses do not care much, some are very fussy, sensitive and reactive.

### Bits:

Some years ago I had a rather long four-course dinner with Wolfgang Niggli – chairman of the FEI dressage committee and chief judge at the Olympics. Way back then, I asked him repeatedly why it should be necessary to ride FEI levels in a double-bridle. He said that this was necessary because the bradoon raises the head and the curb flexes the poll. My reply was "But if I can do all that in a simple snaffle and because some horses hate all that pig iron in the mouth, why not?" No progress. Finally by the desert course he blurted out "Alright, it is only about tradition!" To me, as a horseman, this is unconscionable.

I am all for limiting the use of cruel bits, but why limit the use of mild bits?

The bit should serve two purposes – control (an emergency brake when necessary) and a means of delicate communication.

In order to cultivate subtle communication, the steel cannot just press relentlessly backwards on the bare gums (bars) of the horse's mouth. The horse must be comfortable with the **light** pressure of the bit (mostly just the weight of the bit) on the bars to be able to hear messages thru the bit rather than going immediately into a defense mode based on pain or fear of pain. When the bit is not being pulled (backwards) it just hangs in the mouth (except when the horse thrusts the muzzle upwards). We might opine that the reason the horse should be 'on the bit' is that when the horse's face is more or less vertical, the bit merely hangs in the mouth, from the poll, without backward pressure. When the rein is acted upon (as must happen when we have a message to send to the horse), it must be extremely gentle so that we avoid reaching the tipping point when the horse switches gears to defensive mode or fear.

As we know, bits come in all forms and configurations and degrees of savagery, depending on how they are used and adjusted. Even with bits there is fashion. Forty years ago the hollow-mouth eggbut snaffle was all the fashion. It has fallen out of fashion (for most horses it was rather like running a big irrigation pipe through the horse's mouth).

Cruel bits are pretty obvious – thin wire, twisted wire, chain, sharp-edged mouthpieces, etc. Beyond that, with a little common sense and observation, one can let the horse tell us what is comfortable for him. It can be a bit surprising. Some horses are more comfortable in a straight-bar (mullen mouth) or even a curb bit, depending on how the rider manages HER end.

Standard bits are often misused and poorly adjusted, which can turn them into torture devices. For example, a normal 'standard' broken snaffle can have its effect changed, depending on the

conformation of the horse's mouth and the direction of pressure of the rider's hand/rein influence. Too thick a bit (usually considered "milder") may cram a lot of metal into a shallow space in the mouth – especially for horses with a thick tongue, low palate or short mouth. Also, if ill fitted, the joint of the snaffle may jab up into the horse's palate.

Patent bit configurations should be viewed dubiously and with caution, and it is probably best to let the horse tell us if he finds it comfortable (once he gets used to it). The newest craze, with a high-price tag, that guarantees us instant success should be viewed with extra dubiousness.

Let's briefly step away from riding and look at tack used in groundwork:

For long-reining I usually use a bit, but it can be done effectively without (you can use a Spanish cavesson – much better than a halter).

For longeing – sometimes I use only a Spanish cavesson initially. Bend and stretch are easy to create with experience and good technique, even without side reins, or longe-line contact with the bit.

## **Gadgets:**

### Nosebands:

As covered in a previous article (<https://www.facebook.com/notes/osierlea/the-noseband/668856889849622>), the noseband on the bridle is often misused. In general, and ideally, the noseband is an adornment, not an actively functional piece of equipment, and like any such thing, it is susceptible to misuse and abuse. In practice it is often counterproductive.

The late Baron Hans vonBlixen-Finecke, 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."

The requirement by the National Federation and the FEI, that one **MUST** have a noseband, defies logic. As a trainer and judge, I want to know how the horse is reacting, not just do a cosmetic cover-up to fool the trainer and judge into thinking that the horse is accepting the contact or accepting the bit– just because it physically cannot open its mouth.

### Side Reins

In general, adjustment of the side reins should not overly limit the horse's escape route. Low side reins (attached at the bottom of the saddle or near the elbows) act downward and backward on the bars and limit escape routes. When attached low, the side reins pull the horse's head, neck and chest down, and can sometimes cause them to learn to hide behind the bit in the name of getting a head position.

Usually, it is best to attach the side reins (if used at all) at the **top** of the surcingle. In this way, the horse can escape upwards when out of balance or anxious. Admittedly, it does take more skill from the trainer to make this work. It also makes it less likely that the horse will hit the side reins, and in a moment of panic, flip over backwards. I have two students who are more or less crippled because an 'expert' put on short low side reins when they were riding, and the horse flipped over backwards in a moment of panic - it could find **NO** other escape route.

### Martingales and tie-downs – mechanical interference and confrontation

In general, martingales deal with mechanical limitation by force, rather than teaching the horse anything. They mostly fight the natural escape route of upward rather than requiring the rider to teach the horse to balance, stretch the topline and accept the contact. An exception is the Irish Martingale, but it limits the rider's ability to use such things as leading rein or raised rein.

### Draw Reins, Sliding Reins, Auxiliary Reins – killing off experimentation

Draw reins are a thoroughly heinous invention. Their only conscionable use is to keep from being killed by a bolting or rearing horse. Otherwise, their main function is to destroy experimentation by teaching the horse that the only proper and allowed response is ‘head set.’

The difference between a ‘head set’ and a ‘head position’ is that a head set is a default place where the horse hides in a frozen position with brittle musculature, whereas a head position is a variable that can change as other parts of the horse’s body, carriage and balance change with the work and the request. A head set destroys experimentation and learning, a head position is an encouragement and allowance for the horse to find a way to experiment without reaching the tipping point into defensiveness.

In some of the old Ridinger-type prints from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one sees draw reins in use. That does not make it right (they also used cats tied to a broomstick to generate ‘activity’), but it IS interesting that often the draw reins go thru a caveson (like what we now call a Spanish or Portuguese caveson) – NOT through the bit.

Various other forms of sliding reins fall pretty much into the same category.

Non-sliding reins (e.g., side reins) may have a use, but NOT to pull the chin towards the chest and NOT to take away escape routes – that is the task of the trainer – to trick the horse into choosing an escape route that happens to coincide with our wishes.

In principle, the idea of ‘tack’ is to give us maximum mechanical advantage and control, but still allow the horse to experiment and learn. Gadgets are generally devices of force to prevent experimentation and create a “LOOK.” Fashion is beyond me, but no harm in it.

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