



Q&A FROM A HORSE DENTIST

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The Origin of Bits, Biting and Dentistry

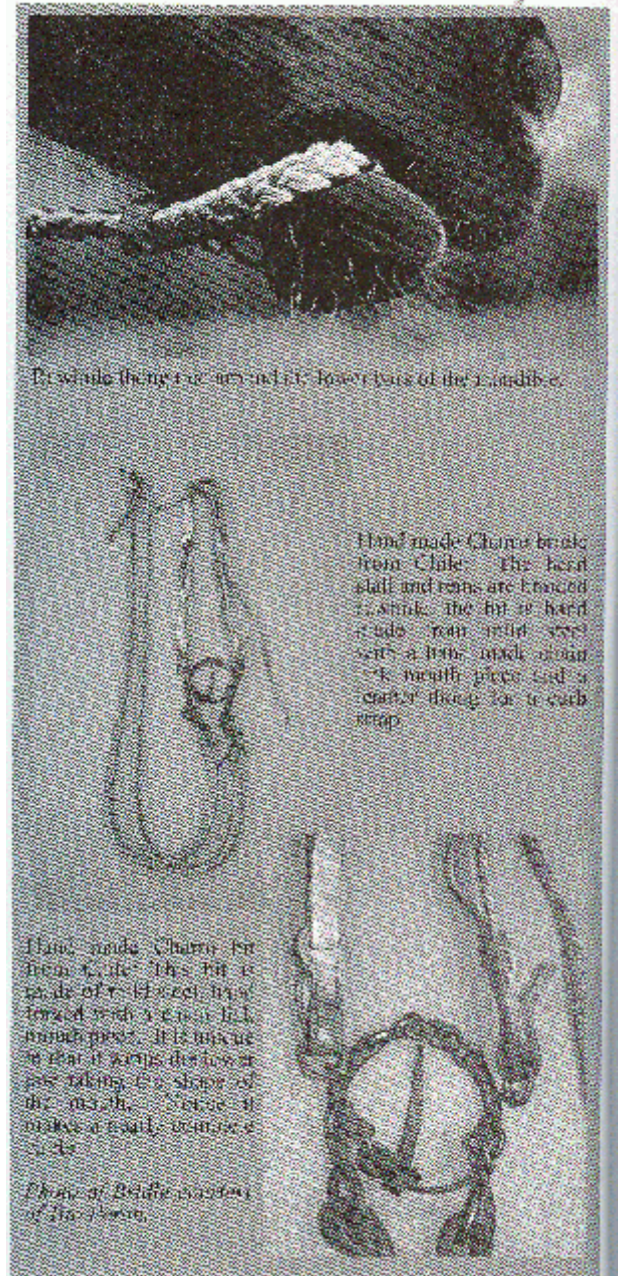
A few months ago I provided you with information about the different uses of bits and how dentistry relates to their function. Since that article (A Bit on Biting), I have received a number of biting queries.

In my career, I have seen a lot of damage to horse's mouths (see figure 7) caused by the misuse of bits. Many of the injuries have come by definition, 'when using a soft bit'. It is sad that most riders don't ever realize the soft tissue trauma they inflict on their horse's mouth until I show them when I am called to balance their horse's teeth. Most riders are unaware of the specific mechanics of the bit(s) they use. After asking to see the bit, once identifying such tissue damage, I am again reminded how important it is to learn everything you can about the bits you use and the damage they can cause.

The following information are excerpts taken from an article written by principal master equine dentist Dale Jeffrey PCEqD, Glens Ferry, Idaho that provides data about the first bit control. This information provides a better understanding of how little pressure is needed to gain adequate control of the horse you ride.

For longer than any of us know, we have depended on the horse for survival. Man's very existence is linked inextricably to that of the horse. Early horses were used for milk and food, clothing, shelter and transportation of goods and people. It is thought that horses may have been bitted as early as 6000 years ago using antlered bits connected to rawhide mouth pieces and reins. If the truth were known, it wouldn't surprise me if man had accomplished this task much, much earlier, maybe 10,000 or 20,000 years ago.

"The amazing thing about the progressive behavior of human populations is the different rates at which early civilizations discovered things. One group will come up with an idea 2000 years before another, the next group will build upon the idea and

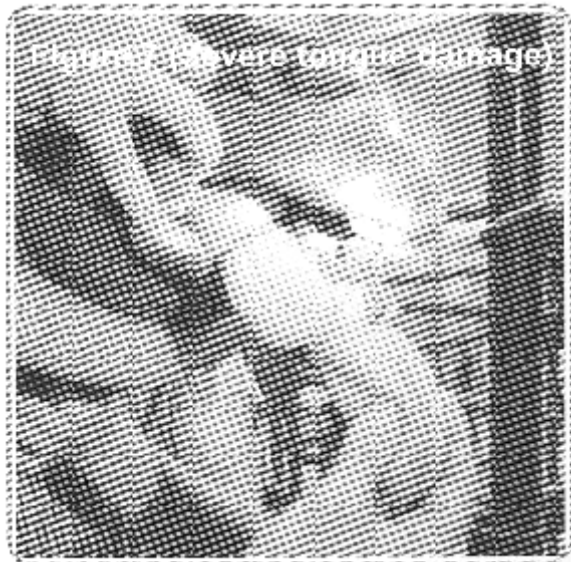


take it to a whole new dimension. Communication is the key to great knowledge; the slower the communication, the slower the development of a body of thought.

"6000 years ago, simple ways were the order of the day. It was understood that if you control the head, you control the animal. For example the use of a piece of rawhide thong, simply tied around the lower bars of the mandible was a way of controlling the animal. Since there is nothing tougher than rawhide, once tied to the jaw, this rawhide string could be left dragging the ground, making it easy to catch the animal then press it into service upon command. It also made it hard for the horse to run off when continually stepping on an extended length of rawhide. Shy animals could also be gathered from a distance using the same ground length method. Rawhide hobbles and leg lines were other simple methods of control that are still use today.

"At first, horses were led and packed. They were used with a travois, two poles crossed and tied over the withers. A passenger could ride aboard to help control the poles, with the aid of what we call a surcingle and or a breast collar. The horse could be led using the rawhide jaw thong and guided by the same rawhide when ridden. If the thong was long enough, it was passed around the neck and tied to the other side with a loop, turning the lead portion of the thong into a set of reins. When used as a single rein, the thong was flipped over the front of the horse's head and from one side to another riders could turn the horse.

"The rawhide thong located on the horse's jaw was the earliest documented form of head control. Once the thong was understood, early bits made of antlers or bones would be incorporated into the loop around the lower jaw to create a mouthpiece.



horse's mouth'.

The bit was originally designed to be a subtle form of communication between horse and rider. Original horsemanship skills with the intent to develop a bond, partnered with this new form of head control was the intent. Early biting practices focused on communication. Regardless how crude these early forms of biting were, they accomplished their objective. Over time, man has transitioned from subtle communication to screaming control and the bit's design reflects today's progressive development. As a horse dentist that sees the lasting result of bit mis-use, I urge you to be mindful of your intent and aware of the effects from the bit you choose.

Remember, all undesirable actions are compensatory to any point of pain and attributes to a horse's balance and ability to perform. If you are experiencing undesirable behaviors while riding your horse, have a certified equine dentist take a look, to get the answer '*straight from your*

If you have a question about your horse's teeth and how they might relate to his health or performance call 1-306-763-0386, 1-403-936-5394, 1-208-420-2701 or e-mail mackequine@sasktel.net. (Excerpts reprinted by permission, Horse Dentistry and Biting Journal, February 2006.)