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What are Bit Seats, Do I Need Them?

Bit seats are quite simply the beveling and smoothing of the front part of the first molar and should be a routine part of every basic float and balance. In every horse's mouth there is a space that separates the incisors from the molars that is covered with soft tender loose skin, commonly known as "the bars". This tender skin can easily get pinched between the bit and the first molar if the tooth is not properly rounded off. Rounding the front of the first molar also prevents the soft tissue of the lips from being drawn back and pinched as well.

One of the most common scenarios associated with performance horses happens when a quick tug on the reins, pulls the bit into the first molar, pinching the skin (identified earlier). The sharp bite of the bit, breaks the horse's concentration and continuity of the performance. A second scenario, often blamed on behavior problems (easily fixed by bit seats) comes with the quick or even rough hands of the inexperienced rider pinching and bruising the tender skin between the bit and first molar.

Just as there is controversy with most things in the equine industry, horses needing bit seats also vary with one opinion to the next. "As every well-trained equine dentist knows, anything in the mouth that causes discomfort or pain, or that interferes with the horse's ability to freely move its tongue, swallow, adjust its jaw or breathe, will provoke from the animal an immediate effort to protect itself." Deb Bennett, Ph.D.¹ Therefore, it is this horse dentist's opinion that bit seats accommodate both comfort and function when engaging the bit. *(To receive a personal testimony of this, try placing your thumb against your cheek directly over the edge of your teeth. When you press into your teeth, you quickly realize the pain and if you continue to pinch the skin against your teeth the intensity increases. Now try to imagine how it would feel if the sides of your teeth were sharp enough to lacerate the inside of your cheek and what kind of damage it would cause. On top of that, consider how it would feel if someone else was pressing a hard metal object against your cheek and that you had no control of when they were going to pinch, how hard and for how long.)*

A fine horseman once said that we should always remember that a bit is a tool of communication therefore it is my belief that if a horse's mouth is healthy, it will then be able to comfortably carry a bit. Good biting and good dentistry go hand in hand.

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

1. Deb Bennet, Ph.D. is a Vertebrate Palaeontologist and natural-history researcher working for the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, educator of equine anatomy at the Academy of Equine Dentistry, Glens Ferry, Idaho, and author. Horse Dentistry & Bitting Journal, Feb, 2002, pg. 15.

If you have a question about your horse's teeth and how they might relate to his health or performance call (306) 266-2060 or e-mail your question to mackequine@sasktel.net.