



How to develop 'good hands'

Many of the enquiries we get at The Holistic Equitation Centre come from owners whose horses 'don't like the bit'. Often they've tried all kinds of solutions ranging from more powerful bits to no bit at all but the underlying problems still remain. While it's certainly possible to ride without a bit – and we do so ourselves from time to time when it's useful - our experience has been that when correctly used and **understood** by both horse and rider, a simple snaffle bit enables a deeper level of communication between the partners as well as greater precision in riding and training without any sense of coercion. In practical terms this means calm horses with good brakes and steering accompanied by riders who are more relaxed and more confident.

Provided the bit fits the mouth, an apparent dislike of the bit frequently turns out to be more of a commentary on the hands that are using it rather than the tool itself. If a horse's mouth has been injured by poor riding or strong bits, however, then clearly he will need sufficient time without a bit until the damage (which can be invisible) has had time to heal. It's also a good idea to have your dentist rule out problems with the teeth such as rough edges. If a horse is suffering from pain or stiffness in the poll, neck or back, symptoms such as tension or hyperactivity expressed in the mouth can also mislead as to the actual root cause.

The old French masters regarded the rider's hands as the primary aid because of their particular suitability as a means of influencing the horse's head and neck and thereby the rest of his body. Using the hands well, however, does require a level of skill that takes some education and practice to develop. If the hands are used badly they can very quickly cause a whole host of problems. In contrast, the relatively modern philosophy of riding by the legs and seat alone assumes that a rider never interferes with her horse's mouth. But the reality, unfortunately, is that unless this rider can drop the reins and stick her hands in her pockets without any loss of control, she IS using her hands whether she likes it or not – especially in difficult moments - and will often be using them in ways that block her horse's movement and cause pain in his mouth. His perfectly legitimate protests and attempts to escape the pain, meanwhile, are dismissed with the label 'doesn't like the bit' while the noseband is tightened to stifle further complaints! Surely learning how to use the hands effectively is a much better solution than continuing to pretend that the emperor is wearing fine new clothes!

Much of the trouble stems from the popular modern idea is that there should **always** be a straight line between the rider's elbow, hand and the horse's mouth. While this ideal makes perfect sense in those moments when a horse is going according to his rider's wishes, it is absolutely illogical when the rider



(How to develop 'good hands' cont.)

wants to give instructions, wants to bend their horse to develop his suppleness and flexibility or has to deal with rushing, spooking or other problems.

Any bit, whether snaffle or curb, lies in contact with two extremely sensitive areas – the horse's tongue and the bars of his mouth. It's obvious that the tongue, with its soft texture and extremely high density of nerves and capillaries, will be painful under pressure. The bars of the mouth, although bony, have an extremely fine edge where they make contact with the bit and are surprisingly easily bruised or even fractured. If a rider is not ever supposed to move her hands from the elbow-mouth line, then how is she supposed to regulate the horse's pace without pressure from resisting or pulling, both of which are guaranteed to cause pain to these sensitive tissues? In recent years, snaffle bits with double joints have become more and more popular, but these are at best only a way of mitigating the real problem of hands that resist or pull and at worst introduce a secondary problem in that the two joints now lie very close to the bars on both sides of the mouth. Any sideways movement is highly likely to cause yet more irritation, especially in young horses or horses with narrow mouths.

The most effective solution is extremely simple, but a little unorthodox in our current riding culture. Firstly, the rider must allow her hands to follow (match) the movement of her horse's head. Then, in contrast to the authoritarian approach of fixing the hands and resisting or pulling to enforce her wishes, the rider who is willing to learn how can enter into a dialogue with her horse based on upwards (to elevate the neck for slowing or stopping or to stretch the neck by bending) or sideways actions (for steering) of one or both hands. The hands then return immediately to the elbow-mouth line each time the horse responds. A further vital action of the hand is the ability to encourage the horse to extend his neck as far forward as possible with his nose remaining a little in front of the vertical, a response that stretches the top line and enables the full development of the gaits. By developing these skills, the rider can teach her horse to take and maintain a light and comfortable contact via the corners of his lips. At the same time, she must continually demonstrate through her actions that her hands are worthy of his trust at all times. Although not necessarily easy to do well, this must surely be the lifelong goal for anyone who truly respects his or her riding partner.

As a means to introduce these actions of the bit and make it easy for the horse to understand, rather than fear it, Francois Baucher devised a series of exercises known as 'flexions'. Correctly understood, these exercises enable a rider to explain the bit's effects, gain her horse's trust, correct problems originating from previous misunderstandings and develop her own sense of



(How to develop 'good hands' cont.)

touch and precision with the reins before even beginning to ride. The exercises are first used from the ground where the rider has the advantage of being able to see the effects she produces. Her horse can also learn to understand and respond to the actions of the bit without having to deal with the rider's weight at the same time. Once mounted, the exercises are repeated at the halt, walk, trot and eventually the canter.

By following these simple principles, any rider can quickly win their horse's confidence and make riding a dance conducted by the weight of the reins instead of a wrestling match with no winner.