

SECTION 1

It's all About The Poll!!

TIGHT POLL = TIGHT HORSE

- If you can't soften the poll, you can't soften your horse.
- The “poll” is technically the first two vertebrae behind the ears, as well as the actual joints of the jaw or TMJ
- The poll is multi-directional, allowing the horse to move his head up and down as well as side to side.
- When we ride, we should be continuously adjusting the position of the poll.
- Turning the head to the inside, any second you want, creates proper “flexion” and control.
- The bit you are using has a big impact on how easily you can turn the head.

This is what the poll looks like from the inside out, when a horse is correctly flexible and soft in the TMJ and the first and second vertebrae behind the ears. We call this in English, “On the Bit” – this phrase is neither accurate nor helpful, in my opinion. The lateral flexion and release of the poll opens up the whole spine. All the masters of riding talk about, “See the inside eye” – yes, but be sure you see the whole eyeball, not just the eye lashes, as the quality of the release is more profound.



This photo was taken in Warendorf, Germany at their national training center. Most horse skeletons are never rendered in an “on the bit” configuration, except in Germany...

Notice the size of the jawbone itself and imagine the obvious leverage it easily exerts on the head, neck and shoulders, as well as the entire spine of the horse.

Poll Control

Basically, a rider cannot be shy about consistently asking for the horse to release its poll. Yes, this is done through the hand, but it is also done by how the rider shapes and opens up the horse's spine. I repeat the quote from my chapter heading:

"The head, neck and shoulders of the horse are so powerful that they can stop the action of the back" – *Karl Mikolka*

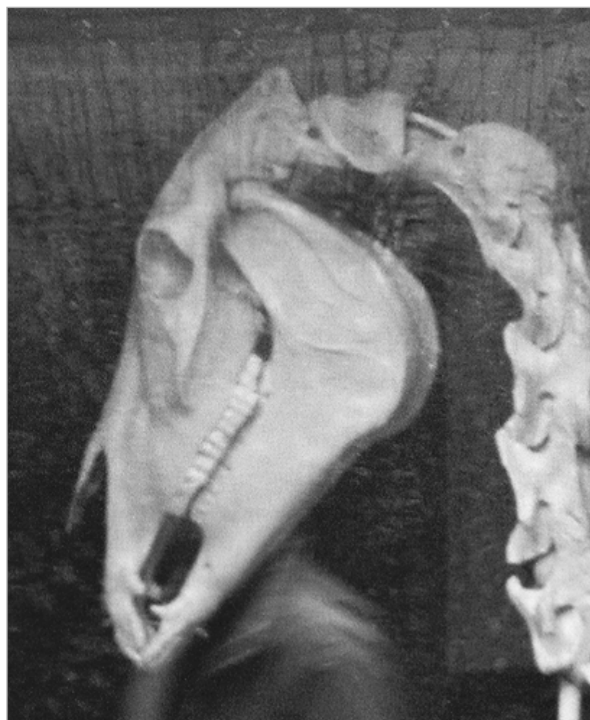
Work-in-hand begins this conversation with the horse from the ground. The ground work also loosens the poll so that the poll and the spine are already much more flexible before the rider mounts up. There is a section on work-in-hand later in this book, but understanding its value, for the good of the horse, is essential. Work-in-hand allows you to



Long line lungeing – one can see that a soft adjustable poll opens up the entire spine. In this moment, I am asking for the give on the inside rein so he can then collect and come over his back.

explain what you want to the horse to do and then be able to observe their reactions and obtain much more information about how bits works. Unfortunately, finding which bits work for your horse and how each horse responds can be a lengthy process, but it is so worth the effort. Most trainers and many barns have collections of bits that often can be borrowed. My personal collection has helped me find bits for horses and their owners for many decades! Bits are completely trial and error – even if we could X-ray the bit in each horse's mouth, we wouldn't know which ones they truly prefer and which ones are most useful.

Another personal observation about my time spent in Europe: it appears that most horses are led from the very beginning with soft polls. This is a suppleness issue, but also a safety issue. But most importantly, it is a pattern of motion that is now in place for horses, and the humans that handle them, to easily communicate. They learn to "stay with the human" and neither struggle, nor dominate. Many of the natural horsemanship techniques are about helping riders learn to handle horses correctly. If this work is all started when they are very young, it is so much easier, as is revealed in Europe. But I have retrained many horses to respond to correct poll softening. Any horse should have consistent ground manners – it starts with the poll! On the lead line, on the cross ties – anywhere, anytime a soft poll is essential for control and safety.



How Bits Work

Bits lay on the marvelous space on the equine jawbone, behind the front teeth (designed for tearing up grasses) and the back teeth (that grind up the grasses, etc.). The jawbone of a horse is a massive, massive bone – when you don't have control of it, the horse has control of you!

Please be careful of using bits that are currently “hip”. Some instructors and trainers recommend only one kind and are rather adamant that all riders use them. Bits are completely empirical – you try them out until you find out what works best for adjusting the poll. Also note if a horse is playing with a bit with its tongue. I find that many, many horses will play with a doubled jointed snaffle with their tongues. If a horse is playing with the bit, it affects their entire neck. A double jointed bit puts more pressure on the tongue and many horses simply don't like it or use it as a kind of toy. For other horses it is fine.

I prefer a fixed ring, single jointed snaffle. The single jointed snaffle usually does not hit the horse in the roof of the mouth when the horse has an adjustable poll and is “on the bit”. Plus, as you ask for flexion of the poll with the inside

hand, the communication is much more direct to the horse's mouth. If you visualize how this works, a loose ring can also move as you ask tactfully for the inside flexion. For all of these reasons, I have come to have increased regard for the basic D-Ring. I personally like Eggbutt Snaffles, but have had nice success with the Baucher bit with horses that need a bit more focused pressure for releasing the poll. All of these bits are “legal” for showing.

When the rings are not fixed, the bit can slide through the horse's mouth, even when a cavesson should be keeping it in place. A nicely fitting flash is a super tool to keep the bit in the proper place for best mechanical advantage. But, it is also kindness for the horse's head, neck and shoulders.



The advantages of the Micklem Bridle are numerous. They keep the mouth nicely closed, without interfering with the nostrils in any way. There is slight pressure on the poll to lower, in a way similar to a double bridle but with much less pressure. With a leather piece fitting softly over the jaw itself, the

Micklem does away with a conventional throat latch that many riders make too tight and can often interfere with a horse's breathing. The Micklem Bridle is one of the best new tack designs I have seen in decades!



Double bridles have both a snaffle and a curb. The curb has a shank that when engaged causes the horse to release the poll very quickly. Although many feel this is harsh, it helps a horse truly release the poll so the rider can lift the forehand up through their spine and help the horse shift back onto the hind legs for more engagement. Years ago,

I heard a snippet of Steffen Peters talking about the double bridle. He said that he puts his young horses in a double from time to time, as there are ways that you can supple a horse on a double that are very sophisticated. Naturally, this improves their overall balance. Steffen is often quoted as saying, “The snaffle is not God”...! I agree with all his remarks. Not all horses are alike, so with utmost respect, we must try to find good answers for bridles and bits.



Tucker, my energetic FEI Thoroughbred, was simply a more relaxed horse in a double bridle. I'd have to say he preferred it – some horses like the feel of the two bits, especially ones that are mouthy. Because the poll can be adjusted much more easily, the double bridle can lead to much more collective happiness for horses and riders. I have introduced at least a half dozen horses to the double bridle with this particular bridle. We try it for awhile and see how it goes and then the owners buy their own double bridle. It is now a very old bridle and when I take up the reins on yet another horse, memories flood over me about all the horses who were so very connected to me through those specific reins & bits...

VIDEO LINK

First Day For This Mare in a Double Bridle

This is certainly not a perfect go, but it does show the kinds of opportunities that exist when using a double bridle.

YouTube Link:

https://youtu.be/R_x2ziapk7g