

Side Passing



19 work over poles or boards

Now we can introduce poles or boards. I like boards better as they don't roll, the horse can step on them without hurting himself, and they are easier to carry around.

We can ask him to step over and back over single boards, a combination of boards, back straight between boards, back around corners, and we can also side pass him over boards

This work is very important for a driving horse so he learns to trust stepping over things, touching things with his feet, staying within certain limits of an obstacle etc.

If this kind of work is omitted he may easily panic in the carriage when he has blinders on, should he get into a situation in the woods or in a obstacle class at a show

Work Over Poles or Boards



20 working horse over all kinds of different obstacles

Now we can give free rein to our imagination. Puddles, streams, tarps, black and clear plastic, ply wood, teeter totter, soda cans, plastic jugs, tires and what ever else you can think of. You can lead your horse or send him over or into things, push things between his legs like paper bags, soda cans and plastic jugs.

Working Over Obstacles



The more you get him used to the better. Just keep it all a fun game.

As I said earlier, these are all very basic exercises, and you can teach your horse a whole lot more on the ground, but if you don't have much time to spare, these will do fine for most horses. Some horses are very timid or strong willed, and they may need additional time and consideration.

But for the majority of the horses this is a great and sufficient base for beginning with ground driving and the actual driving education.

INTRODUCING THE WHIP

Just one more thing we have to do before starting the actual driving process: the horse needs to understand and accept the whip as an aid. He should never fear it. Respect yes, but not fear. This we accomplish by rubbing the horse all over his body with the whip, between the legs, up and down the legs, behind the ears, etc.

Getting Comfortable With The Whip



One can also swing the whip through the air around the horse, hit the ground with it, make some noise with it, at first very gently, then increase the motion and noise. I also like hitting a wall or other objects with the whip.

Then we teach him to listen to the various touches.

There are two basic things we want to tell the horse with the whip: move forward and move sideways

The difference is where we touch the horse with the whip

Introducing the lateral aid

I like to begin this with moving the hind quarter. This is basically the same exercise as moving the hip, but now I tap the horse lightly with the whip in a spot that I can easily reach from the carriage. The same basic principles apply as before, start with the lightest aid possible, and instantly stop as soon as the horse complies, and always one step at a time.

Move The Haunches



Then I do the shoulder move. Usually I introduce this during the ground driving process, using the halter. For this, I stand behind the horse, turn his head with the reins a bit in the direction I want him to move to and tap him on the opposite shoulder. He may first move forward or back up, but will soon understand, esp. if you explained the shoulder move to him well in the beginning.

Move The Shoulder



After doing this both ways, I ask for side passing. A few steps are enough.

Side Passing



The whip as a forward aid

To signal forward movement it is best to touch a driving horse high up on the back, right behind the saddle, on

either side of the back strap.

One can also get the horse used to it by tapping him on top of the croup, but this may lead to bucking. But you can practice it anyway, just so he won't buck if you accidentally hit him there.

Personally, I train my horses to accept this spot as sort of an emergency spot like: you need to move forward NOW and no questions asked. This location of touch offers itself more to really get a horse to move as it directly affects his hind quarters and thus the engine. (when horses among themselves want to really move another horse out of the way, and this horse does not listen to gestures, they usually bite him on the croup)

Touching the back requires more mental agreement from the horse. It is at or even in front of the so called "driving line" of the horse, the invisible line in a horse's body where a cue signals either forward or backward movement to him. In other words, when you want to push a horse from the ground, facing his side, you need to address the right part of his body. When you apply your aid and intention too far forward he will not move or even back up. This line is usually close to where the rider's leg would be, but each horse may have a little different spot, often depending on state of mind. So when you touch a horse close to this line, he may interpret it at times according to his mental state. If he feels willing and bold to go forward, he may do this, but if he feels timid and rather not go there, he may not respect it as a forward aid.

TEACHING ABOUT THE BIT

As this is the most important aid in driving, I will spend some time now sharing my thoughts and experiences regarding the application of the bit.

The very first step is ground driving.

GROUND DRIVING

By now the horse has learned all the ingredients for successful ground driving. There are two stages to this, ground driving using the halter and ground driving using the bit.

At this point I also would like to mention that I teach everything first without blinders, and when the horse has gained confidence and understands the concepts, I repeat everything with blinders.

What is the horse supposed to learn at each stage?

Using the halter

In this stage the horse is supposed to learn the ability to walk ahead of the trainer, learn the basics of steering and the basic balance of moving on straight lines and around turns. He also learns about voice and whip commands.

As a horse at this stage is quite wobbly, won't be able to keep a steady rhythm, may be quite timid about being sent ahead, it would be unwise to start him on a bit. One has to correct too many of his actions, and this would only hurt his mouth.

He can carry the bit in his mouth to get used to the feel, but the reins should not be attached to it.

I like using a side pull bridle for this, it gives more control than a halter and has rings sown on on each side of the face to attach reins to.

Side Pull



The only other equipment is a surcingle with large rings on the side and higher up, where normally the rein rings are located on a driving saddle, or a driving saddle and long lines or driving reins.

For better control of the hind quarters, the reins are at first run through the rings on the side or the tugs on the saddle. When the horse steers reliably and walks well forward on straight lines, does his transitions well and walks over scary objects without hesitation, the reins can then be run through the top rings. This is very important as we want him to learn steering like he will feel it later on from the carriage, and we don't want to teach him to be laterally confined by rein contact. Although necessary at first for the very basic controls, running reins through the side rings or shaft tugs should only be a short transition period.

Ground Driving With The Side Pull Wearing A Bit



During the halter stage, you can ask many different things from the horse like performing transitions, negotiating turns, stepping over and through obstacles, conquering scary sights, taking him on long walks on trails or quiet roads, and the introduction of the whip. The more you get him used to, the more you can teach him at this stage, the easier it will be for him once he is controlled by the bit.

Using the bit

In this phase of his training the horse needs to be made familiar with all the basic commands the bit is supposed to convey, and needs to learn to willingly accept the bit and trust it.

Most of the work will be done at the walk, as it is difficult to keep up with a horse at the trot, but if you are athletic enough you can certainly do some trot work, and especially work on transitions. Just be sure not to balance yourself on the reins or restrict the freedom of the horse's neck.

More detailed trot work will have to be done from the carriage.

Ground Driving With The Bit



Bit commands

So what precisely is the bit supposed to tell him?

Obviously, we use the bit to control forward motion and to steer the horse, like we did when ground driving on the halter. It is the principle of yielding to pressure again.

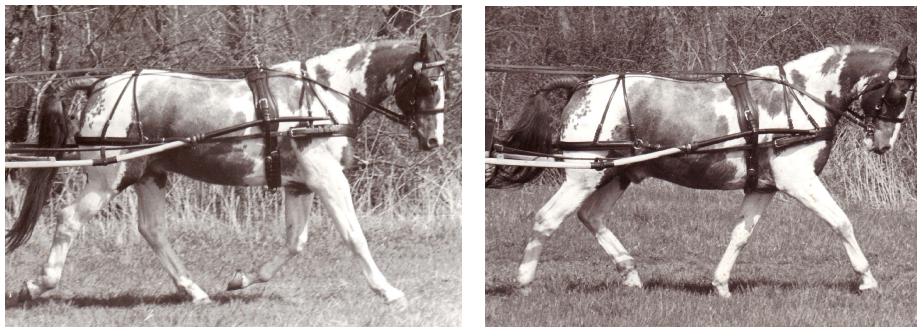
Not so obvious, the horse should accept the bit as a safe haven, as his trusted place to go at all times, in other

words a constant goal toward which he can work in confidence and relaxation. We should not give him any reason to dread the bit, to fight it or to hide behind it.

I like Dr. Deb Bennett's phrase: Being on the bit is not something that the bit does to the horse, but that the horse does to the bit.

I also like her statement that a horse only likes to be where he feels 100% OK, and that he only can learn when he feels that way. If a horse is not comfortable, all he can think of is that he would like to be where he could be comfortable, where ever that is: with his buddies, in the barn, back home etc. etc. Really just like us.

Horse 100% OK And NOT OK



Backward function of the bit

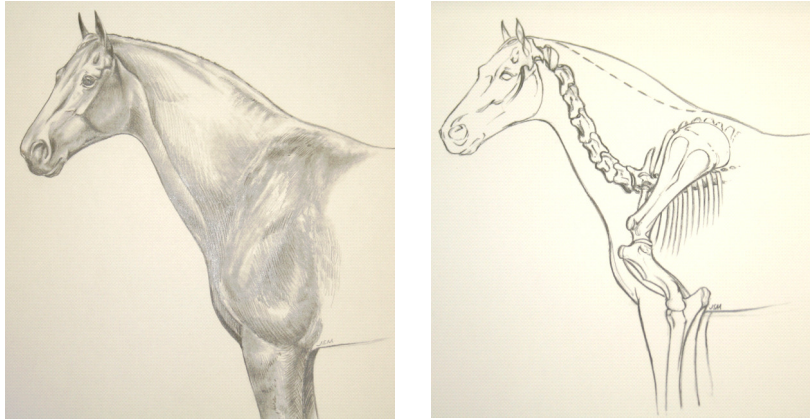
It is common knowledge that bit action has backward function, by the very fact that it is at the very front of the horse and that its activation is either unpleasant or restricting to the horse, or both, if not used properly.

One might ask, is it really restricting? Horses keep running or even taking off when lots of bit pressure is applied, so it can't be all that restricting, right?

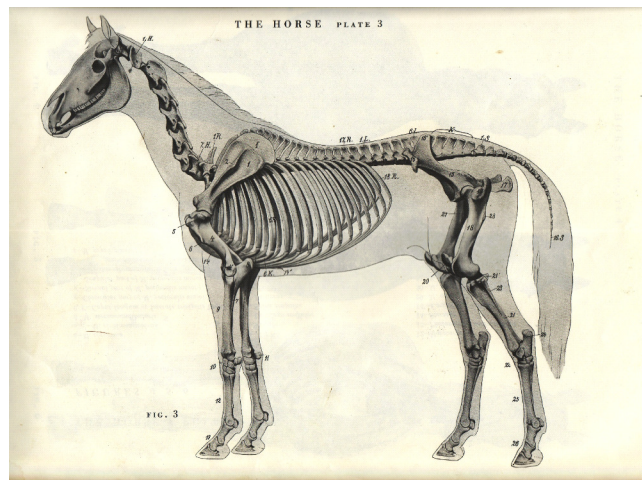
What restriction means here is that it impedes free and relaxed forward movement, it stiffens joints in the horse's body and does not allow him to move unrestrictedly, a state where all joints have free range of motion.

What it mostly restricts directly is the poll and neck, as the neck is highly mobile, and this in turn restricts the entire horse.

Horse neck/spine



Skeleton



Why is this so bad?

Because it makes the horse uncomfortable, makes him physically and mentally tense, makes his body crooked and his energy difficult to contain, and causes bodily injury over time.

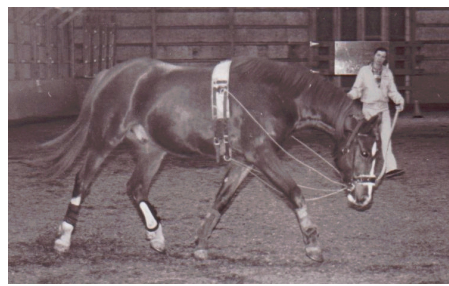
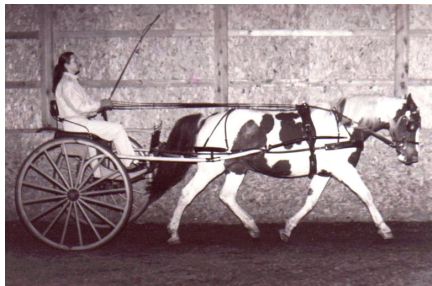
Needless to say, it also makes the horse a very unsafe partner to be with. How would we like to spend time with a person who makes us feel like that, or accept being controlled by such a person? I am sure we would look for a quick way out of this unpleasant situation.

Forward function of the bit

So how does one turn this restricting backward function into an inviting forward function, and is it not dangerous, at least in the beginning of the training?

To answer the first part, we ask the horse to stretch to the bit in a forward downward direction, take it literally out front with his mouth and learn to use it almost as a crutch for insecurity and a still shaky balance. At the same time he needs to learn to soften his poll and not lean on the bit. He is supposed to take up contact with it, but also yield to it. The way he can accomplish this is by pushing a little against the bit through the top of his neck while keeping his poll relaxed and supple. As a result, the horse (with the help of the driver) will establish a very light and elastic contact, and his body will be in longitudinal balance, something one also calls self carriage, and this in turn allows him to become straight and laterally balanced.

Stretching To The Bit



The reason this is not dangerous is that we first train the horse to do this during ground driving, and because he stretches and relaxes his spine which in turn relaxes his mind, he actually controls himself. A tense horse is constantly producing adrenaline which stimulates the flight reflex. A relaxed horse feels safe in his surroundings and does not think of flight. His mind will stay clearer and his reactions will be a lot more thought through should he become startled. Also, when he is working toward the bit, all his energy is really contained by the bit, so if something does startle him he is in direct contact with the driver, his energy is contained between his rear end and the bit, and the driver can quickly adjust rein length or whatever is necessary to keep the horse under control and restore relaxation. And of course, we work the horse in a safe surrounding so even if he would take off for some reason, like snow sliding off the roof of an indoor, he can't go far and can be brought back under control quickly.