

MEA Pet Peeve of the Month – On the Bit

I met a horse this week who highlighted for his owner and for me just how poorly the term “on the bit” is understood. He was a show horse, but decided he no longer wanted to be one, unless of course, the only gait he had to do was a walk. If any person wanted to go any faster, they’d just have to find another horse to do that work! The owner purchased him not long ago as her saddle seat pleasure competition horse. Then, she found out all his problems. Here are some of the terms used to describe his behavior – ring sour, spooky, not forward, disengaged – hopeless. In training, the solution for this horse who wouldn’t go forward was to start using a crop and spurs. His behavior then escalated to pinned ears and bucking. Exasperated and depressed, his new owner called me to help.

He’s a very elegant, powerful, and beautiful creature. On the ground, he’s pretty mannerly, but quite full of nervous energy. On the lunge line and on the lead line, he was entirely happy to pick up the trot on one small request, and I’d really describe it as a little too eager. He leapt to the trot so energetically I had to slow him down! Forward was definitely not a problem. He did have a problem with stopping, though.

And then we tacked him. This wonderful creature turned into one huge ball of nerves, chewing and chomping the bit so vehemently he was driving *my* nerves crazy! And that was at a standstill. He’s not ring sour, he’s riding sour! His owner rode him while I watched and coached from the ground. His walk was choppy with no rhythm, and totally disengaged behind. He constantly chomped and pulled against the bit. His owner is a very calm and well balanced rider. I asked her to release the reins totally and just touch his sides with her leg to encourage him forward. He smoothed his walk almost immediately, and indeed went forward. We repeated this exercise several times around the ring, and in a matter of less than ten minutes, they were at a trot. It wasn’t pretty, but he was going forward off a touch on his sides. Every time he picked up the trot, he threw his nose straight in the air, looking for the bit. Horse behavior doesn’t always make sense. Their brains are not designed for thinking problems through. Here’s a horse who wouldn’t go forward because of bit pressure, but in its absence, he couldn’t balance himself and searched for that pressure.

So, here’s the “on the bit” fallacy. I have found in my travels of troubled horses that many people believe this term means “take hold” of the mouth to achieve a head set and frame. This horse has been ridden for a long time with a lot of bit contact, and then pushed forward to the bit in order to have the appearance of engagement and frame. Over time, he developed such a hard mouth that he no longer gives to the pressure, and actually locks on to the pressure. It became so overwhelming for him, that he refused to go forward. An inherently forward and energetic horse hits that bit hard, and bit pressure compounds log rhythmically, causing pain. Frequently a harsher bit is used, and spurs are added, escalating pressure even further. After a while, the horse just simply quits.

In order to be “on the bit” the horse must be taught and understand how to release the pressure felt in his mouth. (More reasonably we should use the term “off the bit.”) That is, when the rider moves a rein, even slightly, the horse responds by following that movement and seeks to release the pressure applied. If a rider is continually applying pressure through heavy contact,

the horse never finds that pressure release, and so learns to lock onto the pressure in order to control the pressure. And, by the way, that pressure causes pain! I've lost count of the number of horses I've worked with who have rock hard calluses at the corners of their mouth. If that's what can be seen on the outside, imagine what the bars and roof of the mouth looks and feels like! I've had a few people complain about how much their forearms ache after riding. When that's the case, the horse is probably experiencing that ache ten-fold in his mouth and throughout his body.

This horse was simply complaining about his mouth hurting, but no one ever listened. Think about what humans have done to this poor creature – and then put labels of bad behavior on him as if he had a deliberate plan to not be ridden! Ring sour, bucking, kicking out, disengaged, spooky, and totally hopeless as a riding horse - all because the term “on the bit” was misinterpreted and misapplied.

The good news is that this horse can easily be returned to a “good horse” if we let his mouth heal and bring the pressure way down to a level he can respond to. He'll happily engage. He'll need some re-education about the bit, but isn't it worth the time in order to reverse the damage inflicted by the previous humans in his life?

Lucky for him, he has an owner who feels he's worth it.