

Gina's *Top 10* Guidelines for Bitting

- 1 Use the simplest bit for the job**

Whenever I have a new horse in the barn or a new student, first I want to see how the horse goes in a very basic double jointed loose ring snaffle. This gives me a more accurate feel for where the horse is in his training and what the next logical steps will be.
- 2 Always remember to go back to the basics**

If you have been using bits other than the basic double jointed snaffle during the competition year, try going back to the snaffle during a break from competition or over the winter. It is always a good idea to take a step back and see if your training has been effective and produced a more rideable, responsive horse
- 3 Use enough noseband to make your bit work**

For a strong horse, if it is legal for your discipline, try using a stronger noseband before you upgrade to a stronger bit. Even a very strong bit wont help you control your horse if his mouth is open. And a very mild bit can be over used and make the horse dull in the mouth because the horse opens it's mouth to escape the action. I've seen plenty of horses made hard in the mouth by plain snaffles. For dressage, jumpers and eventing, try a flash noseband, figure-8 or dropped noseband.
- 4 Train in a milder bit than you show in**

When you get to the competition, your horse is likely to get more excited and be stronger, especially to jumps. If you work on making your horse listen to your aids at home when practicing with less bit, you are more likely to not only train him to be better schooled, but also have better luck in controlling him when you are in a stressful situation.
- 5 Compete in a bit that is strong enough to be effective**

If you get to the competition and you do not have enough bit for your horse to pay attention to, you could end up being counter-productive in your training. Frequently, horses that are under-bitted end up with riders who pull too much with not enough leg on. This can create a viscous cycle of horses pulling more, riders going to more and more bit and using less and less leg.
- 6 Safety takes priority especially when dealing with children**

Horses are big, strong, animals. Jumping and riding cross country require that the rider has enough control to be safe. Not taking this seriously enough can result in a dangerous situation. When in doubt, I always err on the side of stronger bit for a younger rider or an inexperienced rider jumping and riding cross country. If they feel confident and that they have enough control, they are more likely to have fun, and learn to use their leg and seat aids more effectively which will ultimately reduce their dependance on the stronger bit.
- 7 Find several bits that work and then change them around**

A lot of times a "new" bit works really well because it feels different in the horses mouth. The change in type of action can be just as effective as the action itself. So, it is a good idea to find two or three bits that work well for your horse and than change them around. It will keep your horses mouth "fresh" and give you that little bit "extra" every time you make a change.
- 8 Fit the bit to your horse's mouth**

You can use a piece of string with a knot tied on one end. Slide the string through your horse's mouth where the bit would sit. Place the knot on one side of your horse's mouth and make a mark on the opposite side of his mouth. Measure the distance to determine your horse's bit size. The average sized 16 hand horse will usually wear a 5' bit. You will need to allow 1/4" - 1/2" bigger size for a loose ring cheekpiece to prevent pinching.
- 9 Fit the bit correctly on your bridle**

When your bit is attached to the cheekpieces of your bridle, you should see one "large" wrinkle and one "small" wrinkle on each side in the corner of his mouth. There is some personal preference in variation of this, but that is a basic guideline. Different bits will have different sized rings and may require adjustment on your bridle.
- 10 Have an equine dentist evaluate your horse's mouth**

An equine dentist will be equipped to make sure your horse's mouth is in the best shape to be wearing a bit which may include creating "bit seats", removing wolf teeth and removing sharp points that may be causing ulceration and discomfort. Bitting issues may not actually have anything to do with the bit but rather with the health of your horse's mouth.

“ I think the combination of the right tools in the toolbox along with the knowledge of how to use them is a recipe for success.”

– Gina Miles

