

ON THE BIT

When the horse goes forward to the bit, he is:

- supple
- in balance
- accepting and trusting of the rider's aids
- in harmony with the rider
- straight
- relaxed
- energetic
- on the aids
- in the correct frame
- working in a steady tempo
- in front of the rider's legs

In short, he is on the bit when everything works as it should.

As you can imagine, it is not often we see horses honestly on the bit. There are so many factors, and each one has to be right before we can achieve this goal. When the horse is on the bit and working correctly, we know he is well educated. Each time we ride, one of the goals of the warm-up is to end with the horse on the bit.

A horse that is on the bit feels as though his back is like an accordion that can be lengthened and shortened at will. The horse reaches forward to the bit and seeks contact with the rider's hands. The hind legs create an energy that drives the horse forward. This energy then moves forward over his body like a wave, starting in the hind legs and sweeping over the whole top line, out to the bit and through the reins back to the rider's hands. This flow of energy is what gives the rider the feeling of the horse seeking contact with the rider's hands.

The horse is on the bit when the rider can shorten the strides and:

- There is no loss of impulsion.
- The rhythm remains steady.

- The horse does not resist.
- The horse does not move on two tracks.
- The horse maintains his natural way of going.
- The horse does not get tense.

When the rider gives on the reins, the horse should willingly reach forward and out to the bit by making his neck longer, without speeding up or falling on the forehand. By reaching forward to the bit, the horse maintains a contact with the rider's hands. As a result, the rider will feel that he can adjust the horse's top line like an accordion, shortening and lengthening the frame. The rider should always be able to change the horse's frame from a more elevated one, to one in which the horse reaches forward and downward, and then back up again.

To get the horse to go on the bit, the rider must make many half halts and transitions between and within the gaits. It is important to take plenty of time with this work. Using many half halts, transitions, and suppling and lateral work will encourage the horse to seek a contact with the rider's hands almost on his own. Keep in mind that the horse will only be able to make an honest effort if he is in balance, in harmony with the rider, supple, and mentally and physically relaxed. See the previous chapter in this section (The Basics) called On the Aids.

To reiterate, the horse can go forward to the bit only when everything is working correctly. Never start by first asking the horse to give in the poll. The softening of the whole top line should come as a result of the warm up. If you force the horse to give in the poll before his top line is natural and relaxed, he will become tense and this will surely bring him on the forehand. As a result, you will never be able to develop his self- carriage and he will lose his natural gaits.

The horse should feel a need to reach out to the bit. This need is primarily created by two things:

1. The horse's need to maintain his balance—When the horse brings his hind legs further forward, in under his body, his center of gravity moves further back. You could imagine, if he moved his hind legs far enough forward, he would fall on his rear or at the very least, lose his balance backwards. But since the rider also asks the horse to move forward, he is forced in one way or another to shift some of his weight forward in the direction of movement. He can accomplish this by reaching forward with his neck, and out to the bit.
2. A natural desire for the horse to stretch his muscles—When the rider makes half halts and transitions between and within the gaits, the horse must vary between shortening and lengthening his muscles. When his muscles have been shortened (compressed) for a period of time, the horse will feel a need to stretch them out. He does this by stretching (lengthening) the muscles in his top line. As a result, the horse reaches forward to the bit.

There must, of course, be something to which the horse can reach forward, so it is important that the rider maintains a light contact in order to meet and receive the energy that travels forward from the hind legs, over the top line, to the bit in the horse's mouth.

Once again, never force the horse to give in the poll. You might believe that your horse looks better when he flexes at the poll and that he is easier to control and sit on, ***but this is completely wrong***. The frame in front of the saddle should be a consequence of how the horse is working behind the saddle. If he feels wrong in front of the saddle, he should be corrected behind the saddle instead.

The rider must be able to develop feeling and unity with the horse and have a clear understanding of the whole picture in order to get the horse to go forward to the bit. This requires that the rider has an understanding of the theory and can prioritize, as well as simplify the process. This is very important work that will result in a horse that develops correctly and is consequently much more pleasant to ride.

Do yourself and your horse a big favor and read the chapters in this section (The Basics) called Harmony, The Rider's Position, The Aids, Balance and Equilibrium, On the Aids, Straightness, Half Halts, and The Frame with great attention to detail.