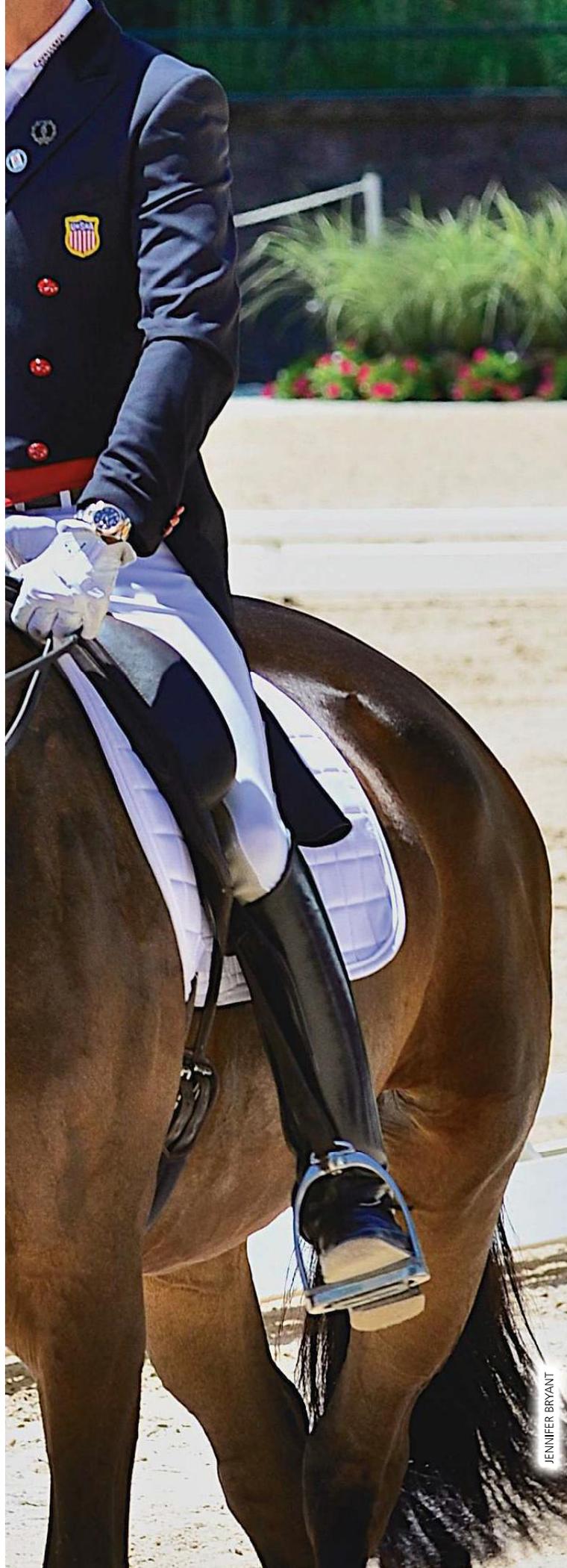


Snaffle or Double?

In most dressage competition, the double bridle is now optional. So should you introduce it? Two USDF Instructor/Trainer Program faculty members help you decide.

BY PATTI SCHOFER

PRECISION INSTRUMENT: Although it's no longer required at any level in most divisions, the double bridle is still the usual choice at dressage's upper levels



JENNIFER BRYANT

To some riders, the move up from the snaffle to the double bridle is a coming-of-age moment—a sign that they have joined the ranks of “real” dressage. And the change from one bit/two reins to two bits/four reins can indeed be a milestone on the road to the upper reaches of the sport.

In years past, the double bridle—consisting of a snaffle bit, called a bridoon, and a curb bit—was required in dressage competition at Fourth Level and above, meaning that there was a clear moment in the horse’s training by which the double bridle had to be introduced. Today, however, when to introduce the double bridle—or whether you ever need to introduce it at all—is largely left to the rider’s and trainer’s discretion.

Over the years, the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) has loosened the rules governing the use of the snaffle and double bridles in USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competition. In US national-level competition, the double bridle (also known as a full bridle or a Weymouth) first becomes an option at Third Level. But except for certain FEI-level qualifying and championship classes, and in certain divisions at FEI-governed competitions (CDIs), the double bridle is no longer required in USEF/USDF competition at any level, even at Grand Prix. (Refer to usef.org and fei.org for the respective saddlery rules.)

With this leeway, the question for most riders and trainers then becomes: Should I introduce my horse to the double bridle at all? Will the double bridle improve his performance, or is he better off staying in the snaffle for the duration of his dressage career? For guidance on answering these questions, and for advice on fitting and introducing the double bridle, we asked two experts to weigh in.

Why the Double in Dressage?

To understand why the double bridle is used in upper-level dressage, you first need to learn how the two bits influence the horse.

The plain snaffle bit acts mainly on the horse’s lips and tongue, and on the corners of his mouth. Pressure on the reins primarily encourages the horse to flex laterally through his jaw and poll. In a double bridle, the bridoon has the same function. A bridoon differs from a snaffle mostly in that a bridoon’s rings are smaller and the mouthpiece is thinner, to produce less bulk in and around the horse’s mouth to accommodate the second bit. Like snaffles, bridoons may have single- or double-jointed mouthpieces; unlike snaffles, a bridoon’s mouthpiece must contain at least one joint.

That second bit in a double bridle is called a curb. A curb is a shanked bit with an unjointed mouthpiece, and

its action is primarily on the bars of the horse's mouth (the toothless spaces on the lower jaw). The curb chain (so called although it may also be made of leather), which rests in the groove behind the horse's chin, helps to keep the bit in place and acts as a fulcrum when pressure is applied to the curb reins. The combination of the bit's action and the lack of a mouthpiece joint means that the curb mainly influences the horse's longitudinal flexion.

"Used correctly, the double is a phenomenal tool," says Sarah Martin, of Blanca, CO, a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist, a USDF-certified instructor/trainer through Fourth Level, a member of the Instructor/Trainer Program Faculty, and a USDF L program graduate with distinction. "It's amazing how much the double helps finesse the horse's ability to carry itself. It especially helps long horses to orient their balance toward their hind ends."

Martin likens the double bridle to a seat belt: It prevents the horse from going too far in the wrong direction. If the horse starts to fall onto his forehead, the rider uses the curb to remind him to shift his balance back toward his hind-quarters, she says. "And then the horse goes, 'Thanks, I was slipping.' That's good riding and training. You have to ask what the horse's longitudinal balance is. Often, you use the curb just as a reminder."

The curb also allows the rider to refine the horse's straightness in a more precise manner, Martin says.

"At the FEI levels with the higher end of collection, the horse must be very straight. The curb really helps them find that straightness in a much more precise way than the snaffle does," she explains. "If you think of the two shanks on the curb as the alignment of the horse's spine, it really lets you finesse the degree of straightness to the balance point of no pressure, whereas the snaffle allows a lot more lateral fluctuation and is harder to get them to find that precise point. It allows too much lateral wobbling.

"Think of FEI like tightrope work, Fourth Level like balance-beam work, and Second Level like bicycle work," Martin says. "As the line of balance becomes smaller, the horse becomes progressively straighter and 'sitting' more."

What Can't the Double Do?

Sorry, riders: Using a double bridle is no substitute for a good seat and correct "back to front" riding.

"Unfortunately, many horses have been moved up to Third Level because the riders can't put their horses on the bit at Second Level. What does that accomplish?" says fellow Instructor/Trainer Program faculty member and USDF-certified instructor Christopher Hickey. Hickey, who divides his time between Edgemoor, SC, and Wellington, FL, is also

the 2007 Pan American Games team and individual dressage gold medalist, co-chair of the USDF Instructor/Trainer Committee, and a member of the USEF Dressage Committee.

"If you are showing Third Level, you should be schooling proficiently some of the Fourth Level movements with the expected collection, not just the 'tricks,'" Hickey says. "You can put a double bridle on a First Level horse and do the movements of the Fourth Level test, but it doesn't mean it's Fourth Level."

Martin cautions that "Often, horses are put into the double before they have developed the strength in the back and the correct balance through the withers and the base of the neck to come up correctly over the topline. Used incorrectly, the double blocks and shuts down the horse, and it can create mouth and tongue problems if the horse hasn't learned to use its body correctly."

Which Bridle Is Best for Your Horse?

Assuming your horse has been brought along carefully and correctly, at some point in his training you'll need to decide whether to introduce the double bridle. Although a bit of trial and error may be involved, the astute rider/trainer will be able to discern which is the best choice for each individual horse. And in some cases, one bridle may work best at home while the other works best in the show environment.

According to Martin, some horses simply don't do well with the added bulk of two bits. Such horses typically have tender, thin skin or lips that are prone to cracking, she says.

"These horses are generally so sensitive that riding them at the upper levels in a snaffle bit is totally possible," Martin says.

An upper-level mare Martin rides does fine in the snaffle at home but gets nervous at shows, she says. "She asks to be held up," as Martin puts it, and the double bridle helps the mare to find her balance in the flying changes and allows the rider to give her the support she seeks without hanging or having to get heavy-handed.

"On the other hand," Martin says, "I have a young horse that is so sensitive in the mouth—and so active mentally and physically, and very compact—that he's not going to need a double to rock him back because he was 'born on his hind end.'"

Hickey himself does not show at the upper levels in a snaffle bridle because he frequently competes in CDIs in which the double is required. But he says that if an upper-level horse in a snaffle shows good self-carriage and appropriate balance, and if it demonstrates collection, lightness, and acceptance of the contact in the snaffle, "the judges would appreciate that."

Martin encourages riders not to assign value judgments to bridle choices. “You’re not bad if you use a double, and you’re not saintly if you use a snaffle. What matters is what helps your horse develop his balance point.”

Timing the Introduction

Hickey likes the horse to be solid at Third Level before introducing the double bridle. He explains: “The horse competing at Third Level in theory should be working at home a level ahead, and an educated rider would be thinking about the collection needed for canter pirouettes and starting half-steps. In my opinion, riders should show one level below what they are schooling at home to be competitive and be fair to the horses. You should be willing and happy with 80 percent of what you are getting at home. If you are barely skating by, you will have a disaster.”

“I’ve never had a problem taking a horse to the double if they’ve accepted the snaffle,” says Martin. “But if you have lots of chomping and salivating and anxiety, or if the horse has trouble finding its balance, you haven’t done enough homework with the snaffle and he doesn’t know how to balance his body.”

Bitting and Fitting

It can be mystifying to sort through the many available bridle and curb designs. “There are so many options, and the mouthpieces are so much better than they used to be; but it’s hard because there is such an emphasis [in judging] on the quiet mouth,” Hickey says. “The horses today have to really move more than they used to. That can create more mouth issues than when they didn’t have to go with so much pressure to go forward. Now thoroughness issues show up in the mouth, [such as when] the horse is not really pushing with the hind legs to the bit, or doesn’t follow the contact or yield to the rein or flex.”

When Hickey selects a bridle, he tries to use the same type of mouthpiece as the horse’s regular snaffle. One difference: mouthpiece size. “You need a slightly larger bridle than the snaffle, by a quarter or a half inch, to get around the curb bit and for it not to pinch. Be sure [the thickness] is not too big, as the curb takes up space.”

Curb bits come in varied sizes and shapes, as well. A longer shank produces greater leverage. Mouthpieces vary in thickness. Ports—the arch in the middle of the mouthpiece that helps make room for the horse’s tongue—come in differing heights, shapes, and angles. The half-moon curb has no port at all; its entire mouthpiece is a rainbow-shaped curve.



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For illustrations of permitted styles of bridoon and curb bits, see the sidebar below.

The curb's mouthpiece and port must be the right shape and thickness for your horse's tongue and mouth to be comfortable.

"You need to be aware of what kind of palate, jawbone, and tongue your horse has," Martin explains. A high port may cause discomfort to a horse with a low palate, for example. A horse with a large or thick tongue may need a curb with a thinner mouthpiece, a higher port, or both to be comfortable.

Hickey prefers a thinner curb mouthpiece with most horses. "Some people think it's sharper (more severe), but when you put a big bit in, a lot of horses have trouble with all the metal in their mouth. I prefer to start with a simple small port or one that is barely a port with a small arch." But "with some horses, the port gives a needed place for the tongue, which is especially important for the horse with a big or fat tongue."

Consider, too, the way your horse likes to carry the bit. Does he chew the bit readily, or does he have a mouth like a block of wood? For instance, a horse with a busy mouth may not need a curb with sliding cheeks, which encourages more movement. But if he tends to brace his jaw, then a mouthpiece that he can lift and drop may encourage him to play with the curb enough to keep his tongue and jaw pleasantly mobile.

Another element to consider is the adjustment of the curb chain. "Be aware that the chain is creating pressure on

the lower jaw," Martin says. "You don't want it super tight. Put your finger between the chain and the jaw, and gently pull on the curb rein to feel how that creates pressure on your finger. People shudder when they see the rein so tight that the shank of the curb bit is being pulled backward; then you know the jaw is in a vise grip. The ideal is that the shank hangs vertical. When there is a connection [with the rider's hand], it comes a little behind the vertical, but you don't want to see the shank continuously horizontal the entire test. There should be that moment of pressure, and then a return to vertical."

It's equally important to fit the double bridle well. The fit of a double bridle's crownpiece is even more important than that of a snaffle bridle because the increased weight of the two bits can put pressure on the base of the horse's ears. A cutback crownpiece, which narrows around the base of the ears, is less likely to cause discomfort.

Likewise, the browband must be sized correctly because a tight-fitting browband can pull the bridle forward onto the base of the ears and put unwanted extra pressure on the poll.

"Today the bridles with extra padding, cutback ear space, and bigger, looser browbands are more fashionable for good reason," says Martin.

The bridle's design also affects the placement and fit of the cheekpieces and the cavesson (noseband), and their relationship to the horse's facial nerves.

"You want the cheekpiece to sit behind the cheekbones

Bitting Choices: USEF-Legal Bridoons and Curbs

From the United States Equestrian Federation rule book, here are illustrations of bridoon and curb bits currently approved for use in USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competition at Third Level and above. Permitted curb chain, lip strap, and curb-chain covers are also depicted.

Refer to the USEF rule book (online at usef.org.) for more information.

Bridoons:

1. Loose ring bridoon bit
2. a. b. c.) Bridoon bit with jointed mouthpiece where the middle piece should be rounded. (Note: A Dr. Bristol bit is not permitted.) Eggbutt sides are also allowed.
- d) Bridoon bit with rotating middle piece.
- e) Bridoon Rotary bit with rotating middle piece
- f) Bridoon Rotary bit with rotating middle piece and looped rings
3. Egg-butt bridoon bit.
4. Bridoon bit with hanging cheeks.

Curbs:

5. Half-moon curb bit.
- 6 & 7. Curb bit with straight cheeks and port.
8. Curb bit with port & sliding mouthpiece (Weymouth)
- A curb bit with rotating lever arm is also allowed.
9. Variation of bits Nos. 6, 7 & 8
10. Curb bit with S-curved cheeks.
11. Curb chain (metal or leather or a combination).
- 12 Lip strap.
13. Leather cover for curb chain.
14. Rubber, leather or sheep skin cover for curb chain.
- *Curb chain hooks can be fixed or not fixed.

so the weight of the bits doesn't create pressure on the cheekbones," Martin says. "It's fashionable for the crown-piece to be one unit, but the problem with that is you can't adjust the noseband and the cheekpieces forward or back. You have to be sure that the cheekbone ends of the cavesson are behind the cheekbones, not on them."

Complete your double bridle with the right reins. Bridoon reins are typically wider than curb reins. Hickey likes bridoon reins with leather stops, saying that plain reins are more difficult to keep the desired length. If rain, sweat, or insufficient grip causes two sets of plain reins to slip, the rider will have a harder time distinguishing which rein is in play and by how much, he points out.

"When the reins slip, the hands end up in the lap," Hickey says. "If the riders struggle to keep the reins, they can't assess what they have in their hand. Riders with small hands need a narrower snaffle rein. I like a broader rein so I can hold on to it better. I've had horses that like a stronger contact, and that narrow rein is uncomfortable. People should experiment with different rein widths."

A common mistake is to hold the reins such that the curb is in constant tension. As Hickey points out, the curb rein should have a bit of slack most of the time; then the rider can use the curb momentarily as desired. ➔



WELL FITTED: Correctly adjusted and with the reins held correctly, the shank of the curb is close to vertical and there is a bit of drape in the curb rein

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*American Farriers Journal. Jan/Feb 2015. Page 87.

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"Is the horse 80 percent on the snaffle and 20 percent on the curb? The ratio of tension on the curb or snaffle rein makes a huge difference," he says.

First Rides in the Double

When he is introducing the double bridle, Hickey rides in it lightly for a couple of days. If the horse is relaxed on the trail, a ride down the road or in the woods might be a good choice.

Even in the beginning, says Hickey, it's important for the rider to take an appropriate contact with the curb rein. "If you ride around on the trail without contact, you're not teaching the horse to go to the contact. When you don't pick up the contact and simply work, you're prolonging the acceptance of the double bridle."

With horses that back off from the extra weight of the two bits or have super-sensitive mouths, Martin may put them in the full bridle once or twice a week and take them for a hack, then go back to the snaffle for the schooling work. But she says most horses accept the double bridle pretty well if they have been brought along correctly.

"I've never had an issue with a horse that accepts the snaffle and understands how to use his body," she says.

After your horse has become accustomed to the double bridle, you'll need to figure out how often to use it. Some horses do best when they're ridden in the snaffle bridle most of the time, with a brief tune-up in the double before a show. Others need a regular refresher session in the double or they get fussy. Still others work best in the double bridle every day.

"If you're going to compete your horse in it, let it become a way of life," Martin advises. "If you lose an edge when you compete, alternate it. Different horses, different approaches."

Above all, says Martin, choose the bridle that helps your horse to perform at his best.

"Some people think using a double bridle is cheating, and that's crazy. It helps horses to balance. I love when Steffen Peters said that the snaffle is not God. Some people think riding in a snaffle is more virtuous. It's not. Whatever helps the horse orient his body is what's best." ▲

Patti Schofler, of Petaluma, CA, is a freelance journalist and publicist as well as a USDF "L" program graduate with distinction. She has earned her USDF bronze medal and is half way to her silver.



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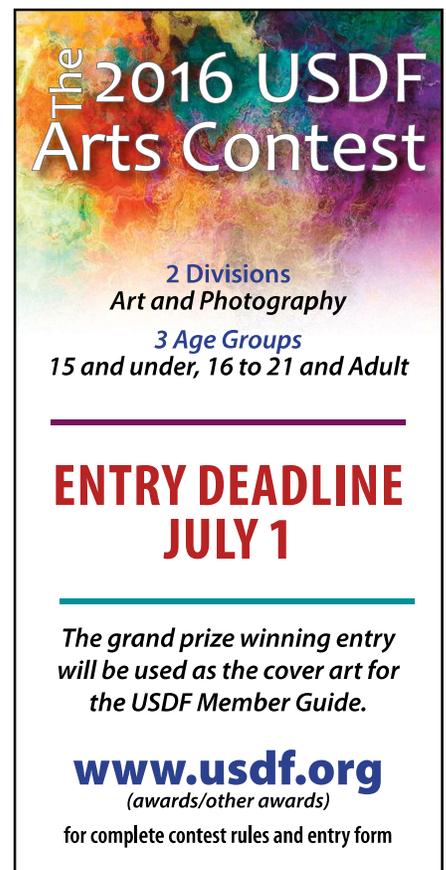
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