

In his book “The Twisted Truth of Modern Dressage”, Philippe Karl, a former rider/trainer at the famous Cadre Noir French riding school criticises some trends of modern dressage, such as overflexed horses, a lack of true classical collection and the use of excessively tight nosebands. Any of these topics would form a fascinating basis for an article, but as I have always had an aversion to anything tight where horses are concerned (and I know that it is one of Karina’s pet hates!) I decided to research and write about the tight noseband issue.

Historically, nosebands were introduced for different reasons in different cultures, including as an attachment point for a standing martingale, as a means to tie up the horse without having to use the bit, for extra safety on the battleground and also purely for aesthetic reasons. The most common reason seems to have been as a way of stabilizing the bit in the horse’s mouth. Currently, the noseband is often used to keep the horse’s mouth closed and to eliminate the possibility of the horse opening his mouth against this pressure, forcing it to accept the bit. This was not its original, intended purpose.

The anatomy of the horse’s head is complex. It has very little padding or covering as it has no large scale muscle or fat deposits. The bone and nerves are just below the surface and directly against the bone of the skull creating a lighter structure but an easily damaged one. The noseband fits two to three fingers down from the cheekbone. If fitted incorrectly, a sharp yank can easily injure the fragile nasal bones or tissue. When pulled tightly, a noseband creates a lot of pressure, which happens to compress the area where the infraorbital nerve comes out of the infraorbital foramen. This nerve supplies sensory perception of the nose. If pressure is put on a nerve then it can be assumed that it could either cause pain or a lack of sensation.

Not only can a noseband potentially hurt or damage a horse, but it can also have a profound effect on its ability to work properly.

Monty Roberts has commented on the trend of using tight nosebands and believes that “this technique is quite unsuccessful as a substitute for good hands, time and horseman-like training techniques that encourage a cooperative mouth rather than force a cooperative mouth.”

In his book ‘Tug of War’, Gerd Heuschmann noted that, “Nosebands of any type must not be adjusted too tightly, without exception. The jaw must remain mobile and breathing unimpeded, otherwise tension will build that transfers to the entire body. Riding with hands that are too hard, and continuously influencing the horse with overly strong rein aids have a negative effect on the horse’s entire body.”

To discover what Roberts and Heuschmann mean by these observations and to discover how tight nosebands can have a detrimental effect on the way a horse works it is necessary to look further into anatomy and physiology.

The horse produces a large amount of saliva while wearing a bit. It is essential for the horse to swallow all the saliva to enable him to breathe properly and to do so, he must move his tongue. When he swallows, the tongue goes to the roof of the mouth. The act of swallowing allows the horse to accept the bit and to chomp

softly, which in turn produces the relaxed jaw that enables good contact and soft control through the reins.

A tight noseband can lock the jaw joint, which makes it impossible for the horse to swallow comfortably whilst working. Muscle structures connect the tongue to the rest of the horse's body, so effectively this alters the motion through the entire spine to the tip of the tail. When there is tension in the tongue, there is tension all the way down the sternum and the shoulder along the bottom of the neck, when the goal is actually relaxation. Once there is tension in the sternum, a horse cannot raise its back and use its core muscles. This means that the horse cannot become properly engaged. If a horse cannot relax its jaw, it will have problems with proper head carriage, and the rider may then try to force the horse into position by pulling back on the reins or using artificial leverage devices.

Article 401 of the International Equestrian Federation rule book states, "By virtue of a lively impulsion and suppleness of the joints, free from the paralyzing effects of resistance, the horse obeys willingly and without hesitation and responds to the various aids calmly and with precision, displaying a natural and harmonious balance both physically and mentally." Is a horse wearing an overly tight noseband really free from the paralyzing effects of resistance? As riders can we truly be proud of our art when the way our nosebands are adjusted causes discomfort to our beloved equines?

The British Dressage Rulebook is very clear on the subject; "Nosebands must not cause discomfort". But what is comfortable for the horse? How tight is too tight? A noseband needs to be correctly fitted to the head of the horse and its conformation, including both bone structure and the mouth. Control comes from the correct application of pressure and comfort while the bit is in use.

Different nosebands should be fitted according to their purpose, but all must allow a certain amount of slack, depending slightly on the size of the rider's hand and the size of the horse:

- French or plain cavesson: The headpiece should be adjusted so that the noseband sits roughly equidistant between the prominent cheek bone and the horse's lips. Around the nose and jaw, this cavesson should be fitted so that, depending on the size of the horse and the size of the rider's hand, two fingers can be easily inserted between the noseband and the top of the nose. Cavessons should preferably be at least 2cm thick to help spread the pressure over a larger area and the addition of padding provides more comfort for the horse.
- Drop: These nosebands do not have to be pulled tightly to be effective. A drop should be fitted on the nasal bone, with the strap and buckle fastening below the bit in the chin groove. Care should be taken not to allow the top part to rest below the nasal bone - if it presses on the soft tissue below this bone it can impede breathing. In general, a drop noseband is fitted so that at least one finger can be placed between the front and the nasal bone.
- Flash: The upper cavesson has to be adjusted a little tighter than a plain cavesson to prevent it from being pulled down towards the end of the muzzle by the lower flash strap. The lower flash strap runs below the bit and under the chin groove. It is buckled so the remainder of the strap points downwards.
- Crank: Some believe that a crank should be extremely tight, to prevent the horse from opening or crossing its jaws. However, the traditional adjustment is

more suitable and at least one finger should be able to pass between the noseband and the horse at any point.

Going back to the British Dressage Rulebook, the bridles and nosebands that are allowed are as follows:

Preliminary and Novice Standard: Ordinary snaffle bridle

Elementary to Advanced Standard: Ordinary snaffle or double bridle

It is obligatory to use a noseband. Either a drop, flash or cavesson noseband must be used with a snaffle bridle. A cavesson noseband only must be used with a double bridle. Drop nosebands and flash straps must lie in the chin groove.

Grackle nosebands are permitted for eventing.

So, nosebands are compulsory, but would it not be fascinating at GP to have to ride part of the test in a snaffle with no noseband at all? This would certainly show up any suspect training. It is a very good feature of Interdressage that you are allowed to compete without one!

The old adage that 'less is more' has never been truer than when choosing equestrian equipment. In the words of Anders Gernandt, a Swedish Olympic rider and commentator; 'When a rider shows up with lots of gear on the head of the horse the equipment says a lot more about the rider than the horse'.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hJw6lx6luY&feature=share>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9tSrwR1Edc&NR=1>

<http://www.williammickle.com/multibridle-insideout.html>

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