



Use of the Double Bridle

Learn about the double bridle—the bits, how it works, how it fits and how to hold the reins.

By Gerhard Politz

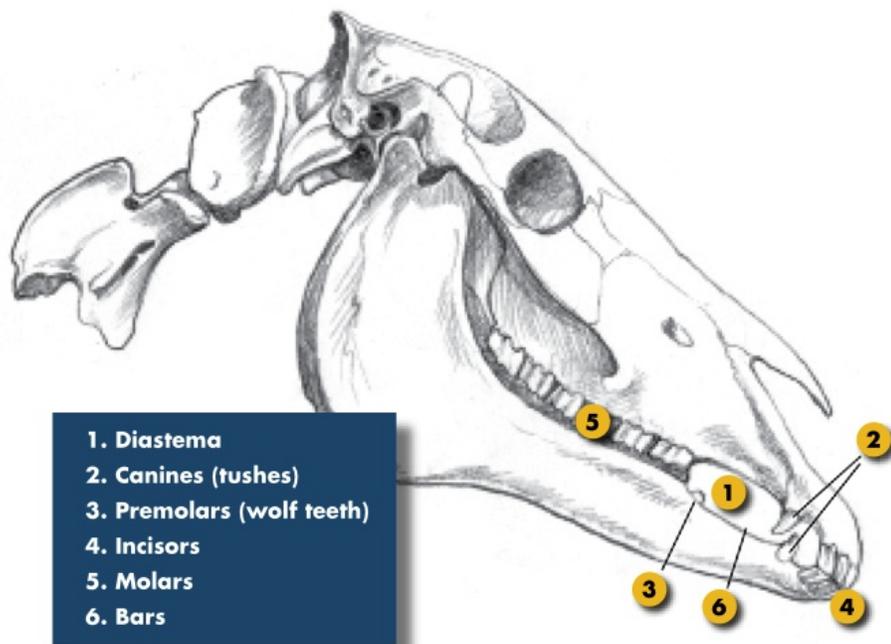
Illustrations by Sandy Rabinowitz

Riders working toward Fourth Level and beyond frequently ask the question, “When is my horse ready for the double bridle?” The answer depends on how your horse accepts the criteria of the Pyramid of Training. In particular, you must evaluate his development of impulsion and connection. Your horse must work onto a steady contact to the bit. He must flex and bend willingly and fairly evenly in both directions. Ideally, you should be able to feel your horse’s hind legs engaging with energy through his back and onto your hands. He must also be able to work with some degree of collection.

A question seldom asked by riders is: “When am I ready to use the double bridle?” The answer is: When you can keep your hands still and have learned how to ride half halts. That’s the simplified version, but it involves a bit more than that. You must be able to ride your horse resolutely forward, create impulsion as needed and establish an elastic connection. That’s already a tall order. You must also carry your hands correctly, holding your fists upright, thumbs on top and pinkies underneath—no “cocktail shaking.” Don’t hold your hands apart like you are riding

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ANATOMY OF THE SKULL



a bicycle either, as this will inevitably cause you to pull back. With such hands your horse will never truly be in front of the leg and on the seat. Improve suppleness in your wrists and hone your skills using each rein aid separately as well as together. Ride with closed fists and adjust your reins frequently. Learn to give a little with the outside rein without losing the horse's shoulder when riding bent lines. This is of crucial importance when using the double bridle, as the outside curb rein will otherwise get too tight, possibly causing the horse to open his mouth, cross his jaw, tilt his head or develop tongue problems.

When to Use the Double Bridle

Unfortunately, the double bridle is sometimes used for the wrong reasons. If you are having trouble getting your horse on the bit, you must not use the double bridle hoping to "get him to submit." The negative results of riding the wrong end of the horse far outweigh any momentary success. The side effects of the wrongful use of the double bridle may not be immediately apparent. In time,

however, the horse will become stiff in his neck and eventually his whole top line will be affected. Overall elasticity suffers. Some of the signs are: The walk will decline into pacing, the trot will become choppy and restricted through the shoulders and the canter will no longer have three clear beats. When the rider realizes that the gaits are deteriorating, he or she often uses stronger driving aids and longer spurs. As a result, the horse locks more and more onto the hand, causing the rider to hold the reins stronger in an effort to make the horse lighter. It is easy to understand how this kind of scenario resembles a weight lifting contest rather than the classical concept of riding a horse in collection and self-carriage.

Correct and skillful use of the double bridle enhances collection, because the leverage of the curb bit allows the rider to use very subtle rein aids, thus enabling the rider to instantly redirect the horse's energy back into his haunches through half halts. This correct technique encourages self-carriage and strengthens the horse so he can work "in collection" for sustained periods of time.

Fitting the Double Bridle

To understand the function of the double bridle, and the curb bit in particular, we need to examine the points of contact made in the horse's mouth and on certain areas of the head. The horse's skull clearly shows the gap between the incisors and the molars (see illustration, left). This gap, called the "diastema," is formed by the bony bars of the lower and upper jaws, which are covered with skin and sensitive nerves.

The diastema has unique characteristics for every horse. Several factors determine what kind of bits may be suitable for a particular horse: the width of the mouth, the width and length of the bars, whether they are fleshy or thin-skinned, the size of the tongue, the shape and condition of the palate and the shape and thickness of the lips. Stallions, geldings and, occasionally, mares have canine teeth—also called tushes. Both sexes may develop premolars—also called wolf teeth—which can interfere with the action of the bits. If this is the case, they should be removed by a veterinarian.

The size of the diastema is usually related to the size of the horse's head, although some warmbloods may have an uncharacteristically small gap and delicate lips, which must be considered when choosing the thickness of the bits. Bridoons are generally 13 to 16 millimeters (mm) thick. It is also acceptable—and some horses prefer it—to use a normal snaffle bit thicker than 16mm. Curb bits are between 16mm and 21mm thick. Use a bit gauge to measure the horse's mouth to determine the width of the curb. Add about 5mm on either side to ensure that the horse's lips are not squeezed. Too wide a curb can slant within the horse's mouth, causing an imbalance that makes an even contact impossible. The bridoon should be about one-half inch wider than the curb to avoid pinching of the lips. Place the bridoon high enough to create two or

CURB BITS

1 Standard curb bit with moderate port. Fairly mild bit. Puts more pressure on tongue, less on the bars. Tongue acts as buffer. Straight upper shanks. Short lower shanks.

2 Curb bit with wide port. Also known as "FC Special," it provides ample room for the horse's tongue. Unlikely to press on the palate. The pressure of the cannon is fairly evenly distributed on the tongue and bars. Tongue can act as a buffer. Upper shanks slightly turned out to avoid pressure on the bridoon.

3 Sliding Weymouth. Fairly mild bit. Provides mobility of the cannon. Suitable for horses that grab the bit. Encourages more play with the tongue. Straight upper shanks.

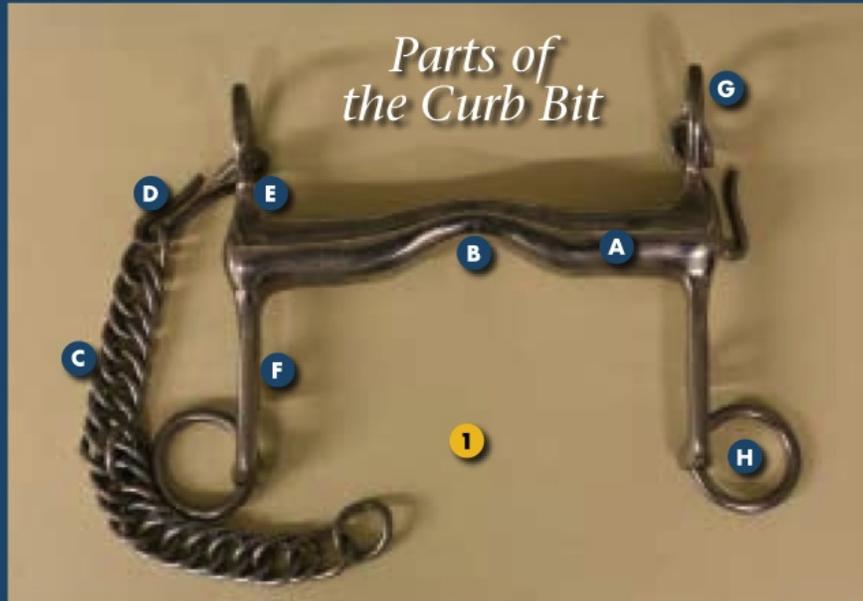
4 Schultheis curb bit with high port. Provides plenty of room for the tongue that is not too fleshy. Thickness of the cannon puts moderate pressure on the bars. High arch of the port could put pressure on a low palate. Upper shanks slightly turned out to avoid pressure on the bridoon.

5 Curb bit with long upper and lower shanks. Similar action as number 1 but more severe because of longer shanks, particularly if combined with a tight curb chain.

6 Schulteis curb bit with thin cannon. More severe than number 4. Straight upper shanks.

7 KK curb bit with a very wide and high port. Provides ample room for tongues of all sizes. Not much buffering effect. Acts more on bars. High port could press on low palate. Upper shanks slightly turn out to avoid pressure on the bridoon.

The FEI is considering a new rule requiring a minimum thickness of 10mm for bridoons and 14mm for curb bits.

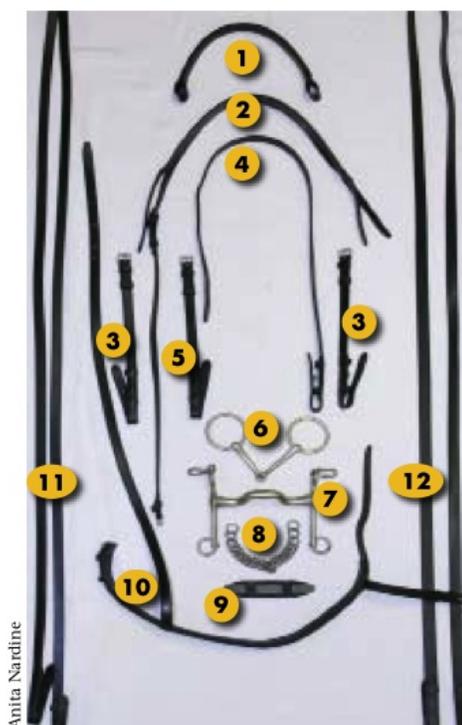


A. Cannon
B. Port
C. Curb chain
D. Curb chain hooks

E. Upper shank
F. Lower shank
G. Eyes for cheek pieces
H. Rings for curb reins



Photos by Anita Nardine



Anita Nardine

DOUBLE BRIDLE PIECES

1. Browband
2. Crownpiece
3. Cheekpieces for curb
4. Sliphead for bridoon
5. Cheekpiece for sliphead
6. Bridoon bit
7. Curb bit
8. Curb chain
9. Chain guard/cover
10. Noseband
11. Curb reins
12. Bridoon reins

three small wrinkles in the corners of the horse's mouth. The curb must be a little lower, keeping in mind that if the space between the bits is too generous, the horse's tongue can get caught between them, which could result in a major disaster. Make sure that the curb is not too low, either, as this may tempt the horse to play excessively with his tongue, making a steady contact difficult to maintain. If tongue problems become habitual, they are often impossible to correct. There is no absolute rule as to

the specific placement of the two bits. Do not be afraid of a little thoughtful experimentation, as every horse has his own preferences, and a small adjustment can often make a big difference in how he accepts the contact.

The curb chain secures the fulcrum action of the bit. The more you tighten the curb chain, the more severe is the leverage on the bars of the mouth, on the tongue, on the chin groove and, to some extent, on the horse's poll. Attach the chain first to the hook on the right side of the curb. Then twist it clockwise and attach it to the left hook. The chain must lie flat against the chin groove. Because the skin is very sensitive in that area, use a chain cover to minimize chafing. When purchasing a curb bit, check that the opening of the chain hook is pointing forward (see photos, p. 51). This makes it easier to flatten the chain. Avoid curb bits with hooks that point backward, as the bridoon rings may get caught in them.

Be sure the browband is long enough so it doesn't pull the bridle forward against the horse's ears. This will result in chafing and soreness, causing your horse to resist when you try to put the bridle on. Some horses are so sensitive in that area that, even if the bridle is a perfect fit, they resent the pressure. In that case, consider buying a bridle with a molded or padded crownpiece.

The cavesson noseband is used to prevent the horse from opening his mouth too much. You must also place it high enough so it does not interfere with the bridoon. Adjust it in such a way that your horse can softly chew the bit. As a general rule, you should be able to slide two fingers under the noseband on top of the nasal bone. A noseband that is too tight, even if padded, can put so much pressure on the nasal bone that your horse will have difficulty bringing his nose in front of the vertical. It is also inappropriate to leave the nose band so

loose that your horse's mouth is gaping. A gaping mouth—provided the noseband is adjusted correctly—is indicative of a lack of throughness. In this case, additional tightening of the noseband can be a temporary fix, but ultimately you must work on improving throughness.

Effect of the Curb

The effect of the curb bit depends on its thickness, the tightness of the chain, the length of the lower shank (a maximum of 10 centimeters is legal according to the U.S. Equestrian Federation *Rule Book*) and the length of the upper shank (no specification given in the *Rule Book*).

With most curb bits, the upper shanks are simply a continuation of the lower shanks and are pointing straight up. However, it is preferable that the upper shanks are pointing slightly outward to avoid any interference with the bridoon itself or with the bridoon rings. This adjustment can easily be made by bending the upper shanks in a vice (ask your farrier). When in use, the angle of the lower shank to the bars of the mouth should be about 45 degrees (see photo, p. 51). If the angle is less, the action is too severe for most horses. If the shanks are almost horizontal, the effect of the curb is practically eliminated. The curb will then act like a bar snaffle. This does not fulfill the purpose of the double bridle. The fulcrum action will also cause some pressure on the horse's poll.

The port of the curb allows the tongue to lie comfortably between the bars. The length and especially the thickness of the tongue are a guideline for what kind of port might work best. Each horse reacts differently to various types of ports. Some like the buffering action of the tongue; others prefer to have hardly any pressure on the tongue but like the pressure on the bars. As a general rule, the port should be wide enough to accommodate the horse's tongue and not too high. If a horse has



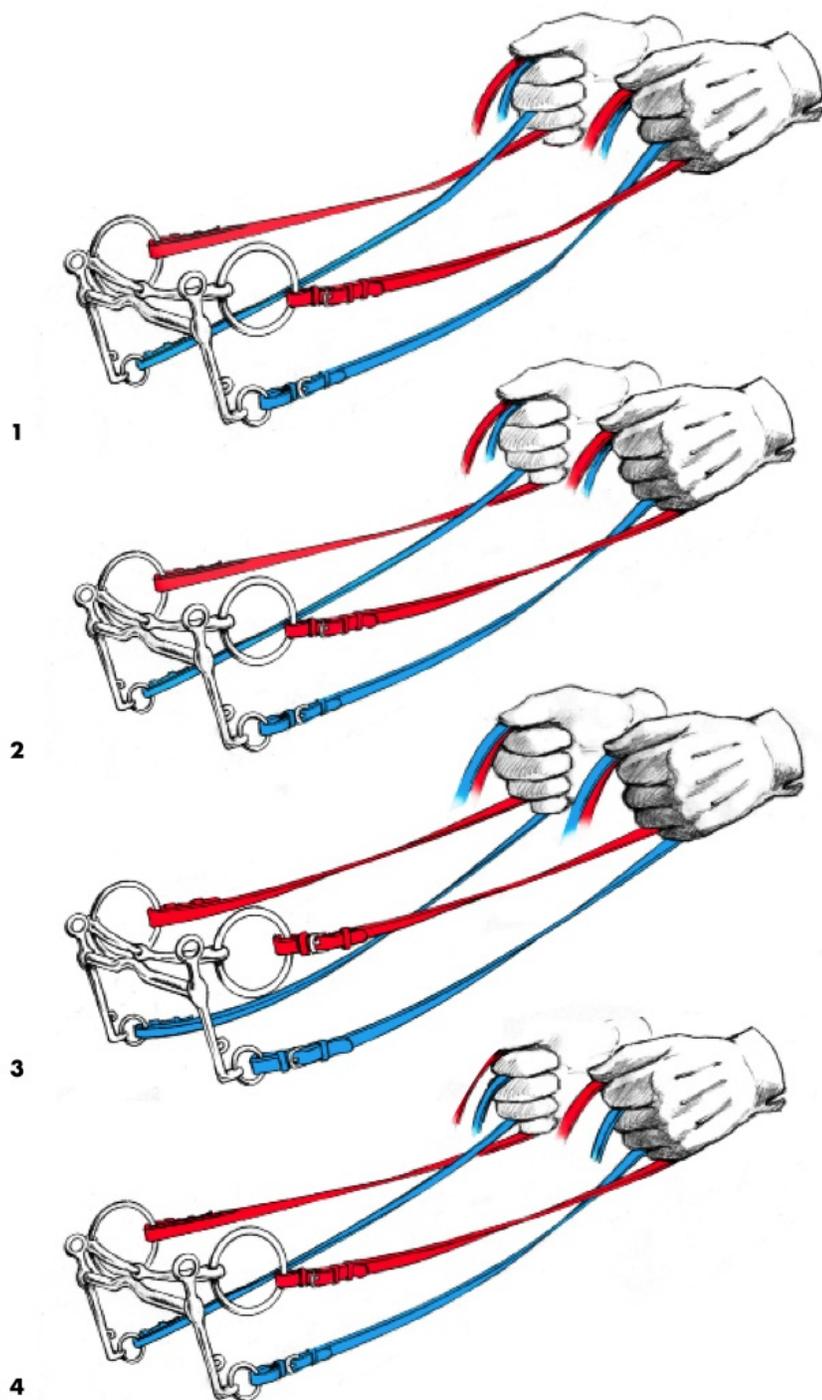
Anita Nardine

When in use, the angle of the lower shank to the bars of the mouth should be about 45 degrees.

a low palate it is not advisable to use a very high port, as it may press against the soft palate and cause him to open his mouth. Trying to prevent this by tightening the noseband may result in bruising of the palate, provoking much resistance from the horse.

Discoveries from ancient times have shown that metal bits were made of copper, bronze or iron. Nowadays, we have more options, including pure stainless steel and stainless steel and copper alloys, such as German silver, Aurigan® and Cyprian metals. Sweet iron and copper alloys are said to encourage salivation and to help make the contact more pleasant for the horse. Although uncommon, rigid plastic bits are also used.

In the past, when the Loriner (bit-making) trade was flourishing, bits were commonly hand-forged to suit a particular horse. There were no rules as to what was allowed or considered humane. Currently, the sport has regulations about biting that must be adhered to when showing and training. Before purchasing bits, make sure they are "legal." (See the U.S. Equestrian Federation *Rules Book*, DR 121, section 14, pages DR 17–21.) The rules are clear, and there are plenty of options that allow you to determine which bits are effective and kind for your horse.



How to Hold the Reins

Method 1: most commonly used

- Bridoon reins held like a snaffle rein between the pinkie and ring fingers
- Curb reins go between ring and middle fingers
- Both reins leave fist between index finger and thumb, bridoon on top
- Reins cross

Method 2: also commonly used

- Bridoon reins under pinkie fingers
- Curb reins between pinkie and ring fingers
- Both reins leaving fists between index fingers and thumbs with the bridoon reins on top of curb reins
- Reins cross

Method 3: a variation

- Curb reins under pinkie fingers
- Bridoon reins between pinkie and ring fingers
- Both reins leaving fists between index fingers and thumbs with curb reins on top of bridoon reins
- Reins do not cross

Method 4: another variation

- Bridoon reins under pinkie fingers
- Curb reins between pinkie and ring fingers
- Bridoon reins leave fists between index fingers and thumbs
- Curb reins leave fists between index and middle fingers
- Reins cross

How to Hold the Reins

When introducing your horse to the double bridle, especially if he has a sensitive mouth, it is sometimes beneficial to put his normal snaffle bit in the double instead of a bridoon. Do not actively use the reins of the curb until both you and your horse have become more accustomed to this new bit. Later,

you may choose to substitute the snaffle with a bridoon. Traditionally, the bridoon rein is a little wider than the curb rein. This makes it easier to distinguish between the two when adjusting them. It is also a good idea to use bridoon reins with leather studs, which help prevent the reins from slipping through your fingers. It is customary to have the loose

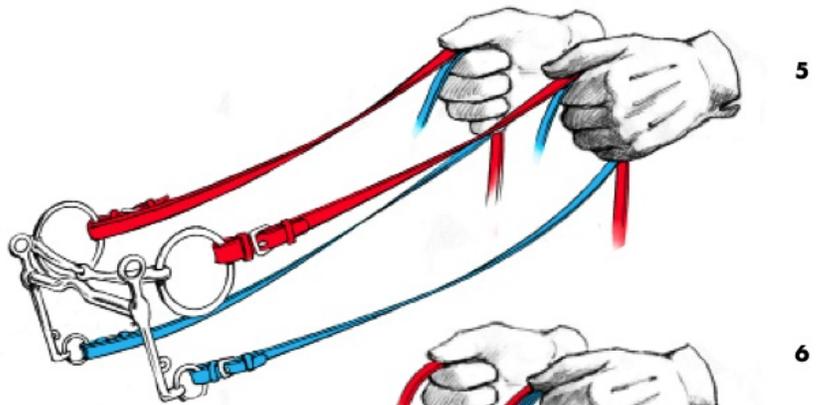
ends of the reins hanging on the right side of the horse's neck.

There are several different methods of holding the reins. Each one has a particular effect on the horse: how he accepts the bit, how it feels in his mouth (e.g., varying degrees of lightness), how he accepts half halts and his overall way of going. It is impossible to predict which

More Advanced Methods

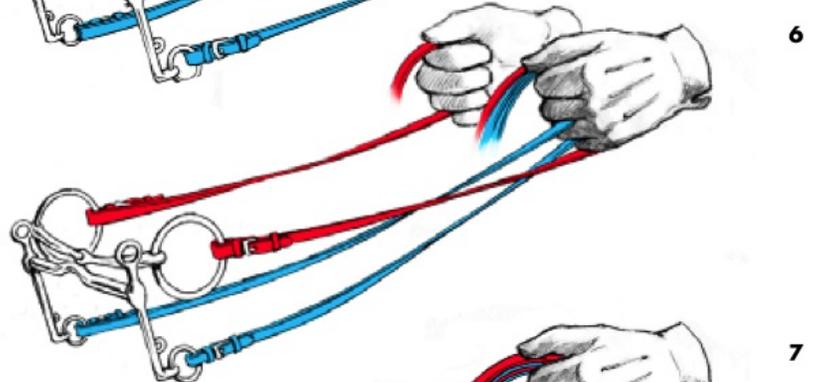
Method 5: the Fillis method

- Curb reins go under pinkie fingers, leaving fists between index fingers and thumbs
- Bridoon reins entering fists between index finger and thumb on top of curb rein, leaving fists by pinkie



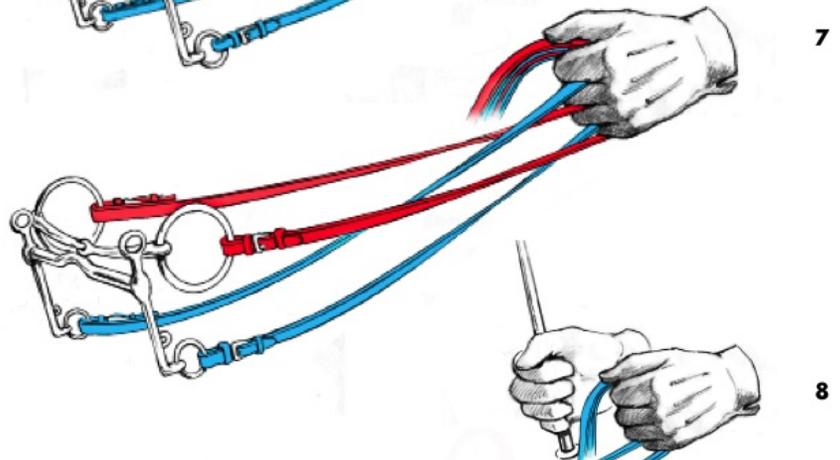
Method 6: three-to-one

- Left bridoon rein under pinkie fingers
- Left curb rein between pinkie and ring finger of left hand
- Right curb rein between left ring and middle fingers, with all three on top of one another and leaving fist between index finger and thumb
- Right bridoon rein in right hand between pinkie and ring fingers



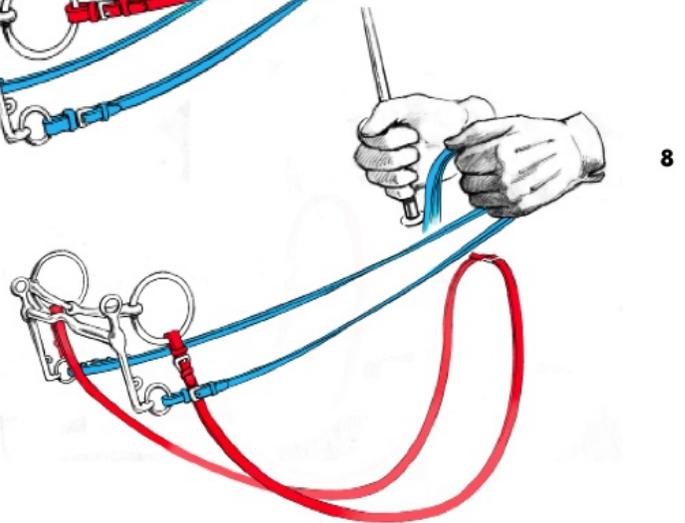
Method 7: four reins in left hand

- Left bridoon rein under pinkie
- Left curb rein between pinkie and ring fingers
- Right bridoon rein between ring and middle fingers
- Right curb rein under index finger
- All reins are stacked, leaving fist between index finger and thumb



Method 8: *auf blanke Kandare*

- Bridoon reins are on horse's neck by withers, knotted into safety strap of saddle or tied to mane
- Left curb rein under pinkie, right curb rein between ring and middle fingers; both leave fist between index finger and thumb
- Whip is held upright in right hand



method your horse is going to prefer. To a large degree this also depends on your riding abilities. It is not advisable to experiment with different methods of holding the reins until you become an accomplished rider with educated hands. How you hold and use your reins can make a big difference in your horse's responses to the aids and in his way of

going. As you become more educated in the use of the double bridle, you may want to make changes to suit your abilities and your horse's needs.

Both methods 1 and 2 (p. 52) are frequently used. Their effect on the horse is the same. Because they are also relatively simple, they allow riders to get comfortable holding four reins and to learn how

to use the rein aids correctly. During schooling or test riding, when preparing movements or giving half halts, the curb reins can easily become too tight. As a result, the horse becomes overbent or leans on the bit or both. This usually happens surreptitiously, and most riders are unaware that the dominance of the curb rein is the cause of the problem.

It is, therefore, necessary to shorten the bridoon reins often to keep the curb reins from becoming too tight. Because the bridoon rein is on top of the curb rein as it leaves the rider's fist, shortening it is relatively easy. If this does not sufficiently relieve the tension on the curb rein, pull it out a little from your fist by your ring finger. As a general rule, adjust your reins when you've completed one circuit of the arena.

In the beginning, it is common to be a little confused when learning these techniques. But, it is important to master them, so eventually you'll use them automatically. Some degree of virtuosity in handling the reins is necessary before attempting to use more difficult methods.

In method 3 (p. 52), the curb rein is on top of the bridoon rein as it leaves your fist and is easily adjustable. You can quickly increase or decrease tension on the curb as required at any given moment. This technique can be useful for a horse that requires a little more tension on the curb and is helpful for a horse that gets easily distracted, particularly when he wants to raise his head a little in order to look around. A bit of extra tension on the curb will usually succeed in refocusing the horse's attention on the rider. It can also be effective, for example, if your horse has a tendency to climb in the canter pirouettes. Turning your pinkie fingers upward and inward increases the feel on the curb to keep him round or, as a less subtle effect, you can quickly shorten the inside curb rein.

Method 4 is a variation of 1 and 2 (p. 52). In this method, all four reins are distinctly separate. Therefore, you can make adjustments quickly and unmistakably, because you can easily identify which rein you want to adjust. The primary tension is on the bridoon rein because you are holding it between the index finger and thumb. The curb rein plays a secondary role. Due to its position in your fist, it is nearly impos-

sible to get too tight a grip on it unless you intend to do so. You need to become quite versatile in order for your horse to benefit fully from this method. It happens to be my personal preference for daily schooling and competing.

Method 5 is the Fillis method (p. 53), named after James Fillis, an Englishman, who trained in France with François Baucher and later taught in Russia. Making adjustments on the reins *a la* Fillis is initially rather awkward. To begin, make sure that all reins have about the same degree of tension. The advantage is that the reins are separated by the size of the whole fist. This allows for great variability in applying the bridoon or curb by flexing or rotating the wrist. These movements can be very subtle and almost invisible but still have an instant effect on the horse. Some horses go very well with this method, provided the rider has the necessary skills. Because so few riders have these skills, this method is seldom used.

When you have become more experienced with the double bridle—let's assume by the time you are showing Prix St. Georges—you should consider trying the next three methods. Unfortunately, they have become somewhat unfashionable, because the trainers who can teach these techniques are few and far between. Unless you can find an experienced trainer, you simply have to muddle through at first. I assure you, however, that the rewards far outweigh any initial difficulties. The common denominator of these methods is that the influences of the rein aids are kept to the bare minimum. This forces you to focus on becoming much more effective with your seat, legs and especially your weight aids. It is a bonus if you have absolutely quiet yet elastic and flexible hands. Initially, your horse will probably not respond to your aids as expected, because both of you need to become accustomed to this "new" way of riding.

Over time, however, you will be amazed at the transformation in your horse.

If you work with the motto “practice, perseverance and patience,” you and your horse will achieve a higher level of communication through refinement of the aids that will open up pathways to riding as an art form.

Method 6 is the three-to-one method (p. 53), so named because the rider carries three reins in one hand and one rein in the other. Traditionally, this is used at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna. All their advanced horses are ridden in this manner. It is associated with truly “classical” riding. Your left fist, holding three reins, is positioned centrally just a little above the pommel. Your right hand, holding only the right bridoon rein and the whip, is positioned close to the left fist. This method of holding the reins makes it practically

impossible to use (interpret that as “pull on”) the left or right rein independently. By subtly turning the wrist, you can only flex the horse’s poll. You can use the right bridoon rein occasionally to keep the horse soft in the mouth. Bending the horse’s body must therefore be achieved by all the other aids. This requires a well-schooled horse and a well-balanced rider who can “ride from the seat.”

Method 7 is the classical four reins in-hand (p. 53). When you can ride your horse with the three-to-one method, he will have acquired a sufficient degree of throughness so you will have no problem riding him with all four reins in the left hand. Your right arm hangs quietly, relaxed straight down from your shoulder. This is a wonderful way to show that your horse is light on the aids and in self-carriage, with his poll the highest point and nose in front of or on the vertical.

Occasionally, riders demonstrate this method in FEI freestyles, where it can enhance the score for degree of difficulty. One such moment comes to mind: Kyra Kyrklund riding her Russian Trakehner, Edinburgh, in a canter zigzag with all four reins in her left hand. The horse bends willingly and easily into each new direction, performing fluid flying changes and staying in front of her aids—a truly classical and artistic moment!

In Method 8, *auf blanke Kandare*, the rider only holds the curb reins (p. 53). It is essential that the horse has been schooled to go resolutely to the bit. Since the use of the bridoon is eliminated, any rein aids can only be given with the curb. The leverage has a direct and immediate effect, so your hands have to be steady and supple. If you get too strong with your hands, your horse will become overbent. If the contact is

too loose, he can easily come above the bit. Finding the correct balance between these two extremes is difficult. Since you are only able to *flex* your horse, *bending* has to be accomplished with your seat and leg aids. Indeed, by schooling your horse in this manner, your focus will shift away from overusing your hands—something we all tend to do—to honing your seat, weight and leg aids. You will be pleasantly surprised how sensitive it will make your horse and how you will both learn to listen to each other.

Other than at performances of the Spanish Riding School, we don't often see this method. It requires a well-schooled horse that is totally through and on the aids and a rider with an educated seat.

Just like holding all four reins in one hand, this method originates from the military, in which a soldier had to salute by raising his sword. Nowadays, this is

symbolized by holding the whip upright in the right hand. Performing all the Grand Prix movements in this manner requires a high degree of sophistication from both horse and rider and, in my opinion, elevates riding to an art form. 🐾

LEARN MORE ONLINE. Read about the history of the double bridle in Gerhard Politz's companion article at DressageToday.com.



Charles Mann



Gerhard Politz immigrated to the United States from his native Germany in 1987. Since then, he has been training and teaching out of Flintridge Riding Club near Pasadena, California. He holds professional certifications from two countries: He is a British Horse Society Instructor (BHSI) as well as a German Berufsreitlehrer (FN). At his establishment near Stuttgart, Germany, he and his staff trained all types of horses through the levels to Grand Prix, as well as educating apprentices to become certified Bereitters. Politz has been involved with the USDF Instructor Certification Program since its inception and is one of the program's examiners. He has taught many Young Riders, who have won numerous gold, silver and bronze medals, both individual and team, at NAYRC. Politz is also a member of the International Dressage Trainer Club. He gives clinics and seminars throughout the United States.