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You want to buy your child a horse

This is a scenario that takes place daily throughout the country. I think it is an excellent idea, but there are some problems that arise when this takes place.

The statement I hear a lot and wish I would never hear again is “I want to buy my child a young horse so they can learn and grow up together”. This idea probably works one out of one hundred times. The problem with this is that neither the child nor the horse knows anything. So it stands to reason that neither one of them learns anything. Because of this, a few things can happen: 1) the child may get hurt because of their lack of knowledge as to what to do in certain situations; 2) the child gets frustrated because of lack of success or enjoyment and quits riding all together; and/or 3) the horse gets frustrated and develops bad habits because the child lets the horse get away with things. Basically when this scenario takes place, everyone becomes unhappy, the child, the horse, and the parents.

I have a few suggestions to try and prevent the previous scenario from happening.

- If you are not knowledgeable about selecting a horse, get someone that is knowledgeable to go with you
- Know who you are dealing with, try to find a reputable person, there are many “horse traders” out there and some will take advantage of a less knowledgeable person
- When you have identified a horse that you want to look at, show up unannounced to look at it. You want to see the horse in its natural state, not

after it has been rode down or even in some cases it may have been given some performance enhancing drugs (this goes back to what I was saying about a reputable person)

- Always make sure that the horse is healthy. The seller should be willing to guarantee a negative coggins test and usually a soundness exam. You should take the horse to your veterinarian and have him perform a soundness exam. This may include x-rays of the horse’s legs. This may sound like a lot of extra expense but down the road it might pay off. A cripple horse is not worth much to anyone.
- It really makes no difference what discipline you are interested in, I suggest you buy your child an old, trained horse that knows what it is doing. This makes things a lot easier on everybody involved. For example, if your child wants to learn to rope, he or she will have a tough time just learning how to throw the rope in order to make the catch. If they have to worry about getting the horse to track the calf and get in proper position, they will have too many things to do at once, so not very much will be accomplished. On the other hand, if they have an older horse that is trained to get in position and track the calf, all they have to worry about is how to deliver the loop. This works the same in all disciplines. It is always better if the horse knows more than the child.
- One thing that should be of the utmost when purchasing a horse is safety. Try

to purchase a horse that fits your child's level of skill and maturity. I'll never forget going to youth rodeos when my children were young and seeing six year old kids strapped in the saddle on big sixteen hand barrel racing machines coming down the alley on their hind feet with the kids crying and the parents holding up livestock panels across the alley to stop them when they ran out. They might have made a nice run, but the safety of the child is more important in my eyes. This situation was not fun for anyone. I won't tell you what I told my wife to do to me if I ever did this to my kids.

I am sure there are other factors you can consider when purchasing your child a horse, but always remember there are people out there that are knowledgeable and willing to help you make your decision.

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Selecting the Right Bit for Your Horse

Horseman communicate with the horse by using various signals; the hands, through a bit, the voice by saying whoa, clucking or voice commands, the seat by using balance, rhythm and position in the saddle and the legs with cues to the shoulder, belly and hip. In each case these aids are used to communicate with the horse either as a cue for a learned response, pressure to increase responsiveness or punishment for not responding to the lighter cues. Therefore, the bit is only one piece of equipment that is associated with communicating with the horse.

The three keys to bits selection are hands, pressure points and signal.

Firstly, the hands are the most important aspect that determines the horse's response to the bit, the severity of the bit and to the certain extent the use of the bit. The more severe the hands

are, the more severe the bit is regardless of how it is made or type of mouthpiece. Riders who learn to use proper pressure and release techniques will find responsiveness to very mild bits, whereas poor riders will get poor response regardless of the severity of the bit. Good horsemen can illicit more response using a piece of baling twine in a horse's mouth than a poor horseman can with the most severe bit in the world. The second key in selecting a bit is looking at the various pressure points and severity of each bit. Each bit has various aspects that determine its leverage, location of its pressure areas, and responses from different horses. The third critical concern in selecting a bit is looking at the signal that the bit provides. Each bit creates different kinds of signals. Loose or fixed shank, broken mouthpieces, differing pressure points and tightness of the curb chain all create signal for the horse. Ultimately the horse will learn to respond to the signal and/or cue as opposed to the pressure.

There are 4 main pressure points applied by various bits. The pressure points are the poll, the nose, the chin and the mouth. Gag bits and bits with a fairly long purchase will put pressure on the poll of the horse and encourage the horse to lower his head. The nose is the pressure point used by hackamores, side pulls and halters which put pressure directly on the nose and is a very natural pull for the horse. The chin is the pressure point impacted by the curb strap. Bits that have curb chains apply pressure to the chin and are considered to be leverage bits. The primary pressure point for most bits is the mouth. In the mouth there are 4 different areas that may be affected by various bits. The lips are affected by gag bits or by a bit that has a long purchase. These bits pull the bit upward and put pressure on the lips. The bars or gums of the horse are pressured by most leverage bits. Bits with straight mouthpieces put more pressure on the tongue which is the most sensitive tissue in the mouth. Bits that have a very high port, such as spade bits, put pressure on the roof of the mouth. Horses that become insensitive to certain bits

may be more sensitive to others which apply pressure in slightly different areas.

A number of different metals are used to make bits including sweet iron, stainless steel, copper, brass, aluminum and various composites. Generally, horsemen want a horse's mouth to remain moist and relatively sensitive. That is accomplished primarily with copper and sweet iron type bits. Copper and sweet iron bits tend to make the horse salivate and so the mouth is moister and generally the horse will slightly more responsive. Stainless steel will remain more attractive and may last longer but is slightly drier to the horse's mouth. Brass, aluminum and other composite bits in general do not cause salivation and therefore the horse's mouth is slightly drier. In general, sweet iron and copper bits are the most desired by good horsemen.

There are 3 basic types of bits. The hackamore/bosal is general considered a colt starting/breaking bit and its primary action is on the nose and to a lesser extent on the jaw. The hackamores are used to pull the horse's head side to side and do a lot of the basic training necessary to teach the horse to be responsive. The second type of bit is a snaffle. A snaffle is a bit that has a rein attached directly to the mouthpiece and it allows the rider to pull the horse's head side to side, up and down and is basically a training bit. The third type of bit is a leverage bit or curb bit. Any bit that has a curb chain on it regardless of the type of mouthpiece, broken, once, twice or solid is considered a leverage bit. Even bits with broken mouthpieces which are typically called snaffles or actually leverage bits if they have a curb chain attached.

One of the most important considerations when selecting a bit is the amount of signal it creates for the horse. Ideally the horse should respond to the signal from the bit as opposed to the pressure that is ultimately applied if the horse doesn't respond. Signal is created by 5 different things. The weight of the bit allows the horse to

feel the bits movement. Therefore every time the bit moves the horse has a different feel from the weight, so weight can in itself create signal and response from the horse. The balance or release point is important for the horse to be able to understand the pressure from the bit. The quicker the bit releases pressure when the reins are loosened, the greater the horse understands it and the greater signal the horse receives from the bit. Loose jaws or cheek pieces on the bit also create signal, they allow the horse to understand the different feels from pulling one rein at a time or both reins in combination. There are a lot of loose jawed bits with all types of mouth pieces. The fourth aspect of creating signal is the mouth piece. The mouth piece maybe broken, once or twice, may have ports or be solid. All of them create different signals for the horse because they put pressure on different parts of the mouth. Lastly, the curb chain creates signal. The looser the curb chain, the more signal the horse gets before bit pressure is actually applied. The ideal situation is to have a bit where the horse can feel and understand exactly what you want prior to pressure being applied. Also, as soon as the horse responds, pressure should be released not only from the bit but from the signal of the bit. Having a bit that creates signal for the horse is very important to good horsemanship. The exception to the desire for signal in a bit is the horses that should respond to external stimuli such as cutting horse. The cutting horse's signal comes from watching the cow and the bit is used for punishment if the horse fails to respond to the cow's movement. Extremely well trained horses may work off of other aids as opposed to the signal or pressure from the bit. In those cases, riders may want a bit that sends very little signal. If the horse doesn't respond to that external stimuli the rider may want a bit that grabs the horse quickly to encourage them to pay attention the other signals.

Selecting a bit for horses basically a matter of fitting the horse's training level and needs of

the rider to the bit that is appropriate to that level. In general horsemen use a hackamore or snaffle when they are going to use two hands on the reins and to have a direct pull on a horse's face. Horsemen would be working primarily on lateral flexion. Horsemen will move to a curb bit when they are going to use primarily one hand with indirect pull to work more on vertical flexion, stopping, and neck reining. The severity of the bit is basically depended on the hands of the rider. Horsemen can pull hard and saw with your hands and make a snaffle bit very severe or use a very severe bit with soft hands and make the bit very humane. The severity of the bit is influenced by the size of the mouth piece, (the smaller mouth piece being more severe and larger mouth piece being less severe), the shape of the mouth piece (the straighter the mouth pieces put more pressure on the tongue), and the length of the shank, (longer shanks creates more leverage and severity) Severity is also created by the leverage ratio. The typical bit has about a 1 to 3 ratio of the purchase (which is the part of the bit above the mouth piece) and the shank which is the part below the mouth piece. The typical ratio of 1 to 3 can be decreased for more mild bits to a 1 to 2 ratio or increased to a 4 to 1 or even 5 to 1 ratio for more severe bits. Additionally, the tightness of the chin strap influences leverage and severity.

In selecting a bit for your horse consider whether you are training, showing, or pleasure riding. Also consider how your horse is responding. If you are using the proper training techniques and the horse is just not as responsive or as light as desired, a little more severe bit may create the appropriate result. In some cases the horse may be accustom to a bit and just does not respond to it. Occasionally new pressure points are needed to increase the horse's lightness and responsiveness. That can be accomplished by changing from primarily from gum pressure to lip pressure or tongue pressure or even to the top of the mouth with a high port bit. Remember the key to the effectiveness of all bits is the rider's hands.

Horsemen with good hands learn the proper techniques of pressure and release will create light responsive horses regardless of bit. In general horsemen should select a bit that is appropriate for the horses training level.

Most good horsemen will start off with either a side pull or a snaffle so that they can pull on the horse's face independently with each rein to create lateral flexion and start teach the basic maneuvers. In the normal progression of training of horsemen will go to a curb bit with a broken mouth piece typically called a Tom Thumb or Argentine snaffle. Although it is called a snaffle bit it is actually a curb bit because it has a chin strap and leverage. As the horses training progresses a slightly longer shank may be used as the horse needs to be more responsive. Horsemen typically progress to a broken mouth piece with a keeper in the middle that restricts the movement of the mouth piece. It becomes almost like a solid mouth piece but it has some minimal movement. A horse should be essentially trained when you go there into the solid mouth piece bits. The type of bit used at that point is determined by the pressure points needed to get the desired response. Longer shanks, narrower mouth pieces and bits with tongue pressure are final bits typically used on trained horses. Ultimately if a horse needs training you should back up in bit type and severity in order to use two hands and train the horse. Solid mouth piece bits and more severe bits should only be used on extremely well trained horses.

There are numerous types and kinds of bits available to horsemen but the horsemen's skill and knowledge in using his hands to create pressure and release will determine their success with any type of bit. Buying a new bit and increasing the severity of the bits should never be substituted for good horsemanship and training.

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Avoiding Feed-related Problems in Horses

A properly balanced diet is essential to maximize a horse's health and performance. Conversely, feeding mistakes can cause serious health problems and even death. With corn prices on the rise, many horse owners are re-evaluating their grain supplementation practices. The following are some general recommendations to follow when developing a feeding program for horses. Remember, each animal and each farm is different, so it's always best to consult an equine nutritionist or veterinarian for specific recommendations.

- **A balanced diet doesn't always have to include a grain supplement.** A horse's digestive system is made to have forage (grass or hay) as the main ingredient in the diet. If good-quality forage is available, most horses do not need corn or other grain supplements. Horses that are exercised frequently, are growing, are lactating or are underweight may need some supplementation. But too much energy in the diet due to overuse of grain supplements can cause over conditioning and even obesity, both of which lead to other health problems. Even some high-quality hay, such as alfalfa, or pasture may need to be limited to avoid too much weight gain. Always have hay tested for nutritional content to determine how much to feed and if grain supplementation is necessary.
- **Feed to avoid heat and cold stress.** Hay, especially grass hay, produces heat when it is digested. In times of cold stress, provide more hay. In times of heat stress, feed the highest-quality hay available, so fewer pounds are needed, thus reducing the amount of heat produced during digestion. Again, have hay tested and talk to a nutritionist or professional before making changes to the diet.
- **Keep feeding consistent.** The most common cause of digestive upsets in horses is a change in the diet. Any change in feed amount or type needs to be made slowly over a few weeks. And unlike cattle, which have a large first stomach, horses have a small stomach, so they need to eat small amounts frequently. In general, hay should be fed free choice. If needed, grain should be limited to ½ pound of grain per 100 pounds of body weight per feeding.
- **Minerals are essential.** Different mineral supplements are needed for different soil types and different parts of the country. Matching a mineral supplement to the specific local area is important for horses grazing pasture. But a different supplement may be needed if hay was harvested in a different area or state. When having hay tested, make sure an analysis of mineral content is included.
- **Avoid toxicities.** Horses are very sensitive to molds and their toxins. Although many grain supplements are labeled for more than one species of livestock, some grain supplements suitable for other livestock should not be fed to horses. Feeds such as "screenings" or "fines" have a higher mold content than whole grains. These may be harmless to cattle but should not be fed to horses. Cattle, sheep and goat feed may also have some chemicals added, such as monensin that can be toxic to horses. In general, only feed horses supplements that are actually labeled for horses. Other ways to avoid mold problems are: 1) store only a few weeks' supply of grain at one time and clean storage bins between loads, especially in humid summer months; 2) store hay inside or at least covered, especially if round bales are fed; 3) feed only the amount of hay horses will actually eat to avoid having old hay build up on the ground.

For more detailed information on proper nutrition, including nutritional requirements and potential feed related diseases and toxicities, see other articles at www.lsuagcenter.com. See also "Basics of Feeding Horses: Reading the Feed Tag," University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Publications (<http://www.ianrpubs.unl.edu/epublic/pages/index.jsp>).

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Advancing Our Horse Skills

It is easy to fall into the frustration trap when it comes to improving our horsemanship skills. We go to clinics, read magazine articles, watch RFD-TV, and try to improve, but it seems that progress is too slow. The fact is, there is a slow progression in horse training. There are many reasons for this, but most have to do with conflicts, distractions, or priorities as a parent, spouse, wage earner, student, etc.

I'd like to examine what keeps us from learning, and what we need to be better learners, and trainers. Even if you only feed your horse, you are training it each time you feed. Any interaction with the horse establishes you as a leader, or just a feeder.

Horse training requires knowledge, time, patience, dedication, skill, consistency, and goals.

Knowledge- You have to know what you are trying to accomplish. If you don't understand horse behavior, you won't know how to tell if your horse is doing good, or treating you like a dope on a rope. You have to find ways to continually increase your knowledge.

Time- You need hours to make horse training work. Be realistic. If you don't have time, you can't make it. Work, school, and family will have to come first for 99% of us. Maybe "now" is not the right time for you.

Patience- Nothing comes easily for most of us. Some folks have natural ability, and they seem to be able to get along very well with their

horses, and accomplish a lot. Many of those people do not make good teachers because they can't understand why the rest of us don't "get it". Patience is needed for reaching people and not overwhelming them with concepts they can't understand. Patience is needed for reaching horses that actually are trying to figure out what the heck it is that we want.

Dedication- How badly do we want to make progress? Are we willing to get up early, ride late, study, go to clinics, and work through the setbacks?

Skill- Sadly, some folks never get to be great riders, trainers, breeders, etc, simply because they don't have the skill. But maybe, they are great teachers, musicians, craftsmen, accountants, engineers, farmers, secretaries, and leaders in their own fields. We all have to accept our limitations, but we can work to improve skills in those areas that we enjoy, despite our lack of natural talent.

Consistency- Without consistency, horses or people don't learn. If they do, the lesson is short-lived. We must be consistent if we expect to make improvement. There might be setbacks, such as physical injuries, new jobs, life changes, hurricanes, or other things that disrupt our routines for extended periods. But we must get back to the schedule we set for ourselves if we expect to make progress and reach our goals.

Goals- What are our goals? Do we just want to enjoy a simple ride in the pasture, or the woods? Do we want to start our own horse? Do we want to be someone who teaches others, such as 4-H leaders? Do we want to compete and win awards? Do we want to train for pay? Whatever our goals are, simple, or extraordinary, we will improve more if we give them thought, and realistically map out a plan to pursue them. If we are content to ride once in a while, and enjoy just being with our horses, that's fine. It's our goal. Think of your long-term goals. If you want to be able to enjoy riding, take steps now to take care of yourself. Noted horseman Jack Brainard was recently on a Chris Cox segment, and he's still riding at 87!

Before I end, let's focus on the positive side. We have more opportunities than ever before in history to learn, to improve, and to enjoy our horses. We have more leisure time than ever. We have technology that brings horse training to our living rooms on almost a daily basis. We have access to more trainers and clinicians who want to teach us all of their secrets. We have better information about the psychological aspects of training. We have better health care for our horses, better nutrition, and better transportation possibilities. We have access to more arenas and covered facilities than ever. Horse training is changing. Abuse is decreasing, and when we see someone who still uses a big stick, he quickly loses our respect. The clinicians are making a difference. We are all becoming more aware, and we are proud of it. So, all in all, we are only beginning to understand the exciting world of horses. We have the tools to be better than we were yesterday. It's up to us.

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Two Texas Horses Test Positive for EEE; Horses Need Protection Against Mosquito-Borne Diseases

Texas has joined at least five other states this year in reporting cases of Eastern Equine Encephalitis infection in horses. In Houston County, in the southeast corner of the state, a horse with clinical illness has tested positive for the disease, and in the north central Texas, in Denton County, a vaccinated horse also tested positive and exhibited clinical signs of disease. EEE, which can be transmitted to humans by infected mosquitoes, also has been reported this year in horses in Georgia, Florida, Maine, Tennessee, and New Hampshire and in Ontario, Canada.

"Infected horses are a 'sentinel' or warning that infected mosquitoes are in the area, and

measures should be taken to protect humans against exposure to the dangerous pests," said Dr. Andy Schwartz, state epidemiologist for the Texas Animal Health Commission (TAHC), the state's livestock and poultry health regulatory agency. "Protect yourself and your horses with a mosquito spray containing DEET, get rid of stagnant water, and avoid being outside at night, when mosquitoes are more active."

"Horses with mosquito-borne encephalitic viruses, such as EEE, Western Equine Encephalitis (WEE) or West Nile Virus (WNV), may stagger, appear confused, and act erratically. Owners should contact their veterinarian immediately, if their equine animals exhibit clinical signs of these diseases. About half of infected animals may be saved, with the appropriate supportive care," said Dr. Schwartz. Although EEE, WEE and WNV are not regulatory diseases, they are reportable to the TAHC and to the Texas Department of State Health Services, due to their potential to cause human disease.

"Vaccines are readily available to protect equine animals against mosquito-borne encephalitic diseases, but they must be given according to the manufacturer's" directions, and it takes at least a week to 10 days after vaccination for protective antibodies to develop. Booster shots also must be given as needed. Heed your veterinarian's advice," he said. "As good as vaccines are at protecting against infection, there are rare times when a vaccinated animal will still contract disease. That is no reason to avoid vaccinating your animals."

Dr. Schwartz noted that, in 2002, when West Nile Virus was first detected in Texas, 1,699 equine animals were stricken with infection. West Nile vaccine has helped cut those case numbers from 716 in 2003 to only two cases in 2008. "Vaccinating against mosquito-borne diseases has to be a part of routine equine health care," he said. "Don't stop, just because case numbers drop."

Horse Tips

- ❖ **The heat periods of a mare recur at approximately 21 day intervals and the duration of heat averages four to six days.**
- ❖ **The average gestation (length of pregnancy) in a mare is 336 days or a little over eleven months.**
- ❖ **A mule is a hybrid, a cross between two species of the equine family, the horse and the ass. Like most hybrids, the female mule is seldom fertile.**

If you are interested in receiving this newsletter, please contact your local LSU AgCenter extension agent or email me at cweisgerber@agctr.lsu.edu.

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