

Thoughts on the Spade Bit: The Philosophy, Art and Practice

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I stood at the corner of one of the hundreds of booths that checker boarded a huge asphalt parking lot. I'd ridden along with my friend's parents to the sprawling Los Angeles swap meet. Leaning lazily on a folding table covered with cheap trinkets, I glanced down into an old milk crate. The sun slanted in past a crack in the booth and glinted on its contents. The crate was full, of what I now know to be an assortment of old California spade bits, misused and misunderstood, tossed aside as junk. The year was 1969; I was seven years old.

I had just begun the journey of my life, riding horses and studying them. I remember my impression of the bits then. Their silver work and design enthralled me, even at that age, but the mouthpieces, keen old spades, frightened me. With my limited knowledge I concluded they looked intimidating and severe.

It would be many years before I would meet "the spade" again: before I would painfully learn that the contents of that crate, so long ago, would have been worth enough to buy my house.

Just as I was new to the horse scene back then, so are many other people of different ages just discovering it now. Their response to the spade bit is very similar to my initial reaction.

The spade is not a bit for the beginner, either human or equine. It does not come with a set of instructions. Only the passing on from one generation to the next, the subtle verbal mention of what it is and how it is best used. There are no books that truly explain the delicate use of the



spade bit. I think perhaps, it cannot be put into words. It is an illusive world of "feel" and sensitivity.

If one of the old vaqueros were alive today their responses to questions about the spade would probably be vague and unassuming. A subtle nod or the slightest of hand movements might be offered. I sometimes wonder if the old vaqueros designed it that way, building it intimidating enough to scare off the novice. Many of the arts around the globe intrigue us but, cannot be taught in an easy step by step model.

Those who are drawn to the spade bit and its use find themselves enveloped in a unique world. As information is difficult to obtain, the student of the spade will find himself moving ever deeper into a vast and complicated culture. Many of the horsemen who have dedicated their lives to knowing the discipline are hard to find and even harder to get to know. Theirs is a world unruled by the clock. They take the time it takes to "make" their horses according to the horses' time table. Each step of training determined by the horses' response and mastery of the steps leading up to true bridle horse distinction. The road is long but the riches are great for the student of the spade.

Leverage? No, But Thank You

To understand the spade you must first understand what it is not. Most other shanked bits are what are known as "leverage" bits. The standard curb, the Texas born grazing bits, the Buster Welches and the new flexing "broken ports" are but a few examples of the low port leverage bits of our modern day.

A leverage bit works predominantly off of pressure on the curb strap. This is supported by the fact that leverage bits typically have a low port and are often coupled with a chain curb strap to increase the intensity of the pressure when needed. Since it is the pulling or in some cases yanking on the reins that immediately engages the curb strap or chain pressure, a port of any size is of little importance.

The horse trained and ridden in a leverage bit *is not taught* to carry the bit or have any sensitivity to its shape or configuration. They



Twisted wire leverage bit

most often just respond to the curb strap pressure. A rider's goal when using a leverage bit is to engage the curb strap as quickly as possible to achieve the expected results, that is to stop or at least slow down.

The vast majority of horse owners use leverage bits. The leverage bits are simple to understand; pull until they stop, and if that doesn't work, pull harder. For those who only want to dabble in horse ownership, those who do not want to completely submerge themselves in the unplumbed depths of horsemanship, the leverage bits are probably the best answer. They will require more effort and energy to operate but require less preparation, sensitivity and knowledge to learn.

The Platform

In order to understand the spade bit and the effortless manner in which it is used, a horseman first needs to understand the difference in how the vaquero of old and now the buckaroo of today uses his mount.

Different riding competitions today require various levels of training. In the vast majority of them, the rider need only concentrate on the riding of his horse. Riders sit in the middle of their mount ... and focus their attentions on their horse and his way of going. What usually adds difficulty to an event is the inclusion of other things a rider must handle or consider while riding his horse. Jumping over fences, working a cow or going down the fence are a few examples of this. The buckaroo has another element to contend with; his rope.

A buckaroo must ride his horse with quality and simultaneously be able to use him as a platform from which to throw. Polo players can appreciate this dynamic. The greater the horse's ability to maneuver and position quickly, the greater the chances of landing a truly great shot. A horseman who could make all of the adjustments needed with very little hand movement was a gifted horseman indeed. Small hand movements allow the buckaroo to keep his coils in order, his swing smooth and delivery accurate. Small hand movements cannot make a horse respond. He must be taught to listen and feel for the slightest of signals.



Cricket

The Signal

The spade is what is known as a "signal" bit. The long tapering port, complete with spoon, cricket and copper covered braces is configured in such a way as to encourage and allow the horse to "pick up" the bit in his mouth and "carry it."

Ironically, horses trained in this discipline are not to be yanked on. Their mouths are respected and protected; saved at all costs. The sensitivity of the spade bit horse is prized.

That sensitivity would not remain if the process of making a spade bit horse was severe. The truly great "velvet mouthed" spade bit horses have benefited from a long intricate series of training steps that have prepared them to carry the spade.



The old vaqueros started their horses in hackamores, then moved on to the two rein process involving a small hackamore known as a bosal that fits under the bridle and is used in conjunction with the bridle and then finally into the bridle alone. Modern horsemen have added a snaffle bit to the beginning training of a young horse and then move on through the traditional stages from there.

Horses are suppled and softened, trained in all maneuvers and movements that they will later be asked to perform in the spade. By the time a horse carries the spade, the bit's only purpose is to receive the subtle signals sent by the rider's hands. Note the soft thin leather curb strap used on the spade. It has little or no function. Messages are delicately telegraphed down the reins and to the shank of the bit where its slightest movement equally moves the long intricate port. The horse feels and responds to a message, not to pressure. While the many leverage bit user's hands scream their instructions, the spade bit horseman's hands softly suggest their requests.

Mechanics

Spade bits are no different than any product. There are good ones and there are bad ones. Horsemen sift through them in search of the bits that have the qualities horses respond comfortably to. A bit maker must make a bit not only beautifully crafted but it must be *a bit horses like*. The greatest of bit makers can do both.





Ed Field bit



Les Vogt bit

Balance is something often talked about and it encompasses many things. Many think that means left to right, that is one side of the bit is the same or in balance with the other. Though this is obviously important, real balance is speaking to the design of the bit and how it balances *in a horse's mouth*. This is really a *front to back* balance.

Many things influence whether or not a bit will be one horses like. Are the length and thickness of the cheeks complimentary to the size, shape, placement, and angle of the mouth piece. Is the shape of the cheek (i.e. where in its design does the majority of the weight of the iron lay) suitably placed.

The old makers, back before the automobile, hand forged and hammered the cheeks to differing thicknesses in different places loading the weight exactly where they wanted it. Some claim that horsemen lucky enough to have access to the older models made in this way will notice a difference in the softness and vertical flexion of their bridle horses. The same horse ridden in a newer model with cheeks of uniform thickness (originally stamped out of newly available car frames) will feel heavier and duller in their hands.

Another point to note is the placement of the braces; specifically where they tie into the cheek. The length, width and angle of the mouthpiece helps to determine whether or not a horse will pick it up and carry it. Braces should tie into the cheek not just above but slightly behind the bar of the mouthpiece, thus increasing the surface area of the bit and making it more easily carried. Braces set this way will come into contact with the tongue independently but simultaneously from the bar. Surface area distributed in this way helps to disperse the weight of the bit more evenly across the tongue. Even disbursement of the weight means that no area of the mouth will receive a concentrated dose of pressure. Remember that the spade is a signal bit not a leverage bit.

Tongue Relief?



Leverage bit makers came up with a design they called "tongue relief." This is really a misnomer. The novice would assume that the word "relief" implies a certain lessening of the pressure or severity of a bit. The opposite is really true. Tongue relief amounts to a gap left in the bar of the mouth piece. That gap rests on the tongue and makes it more difficult for a horse to use his tongue, or "brace" with his tongue, to keep the pressure from reaching the sensitive bars of his mouth. The true spade has a straight bar in the mouthpiece with no tongue "relief."

The spade bit horseman is not overly concerned about a horse bracing against it. He does not advance his horse into the spade until all the brace and resistance has been worked through and solved during the long preparatory training steps taken on the way to the spade.

Brace or resistance in the spade is a red flag to the bridle horseman. It serves as an indicator that inconsistencies exist. A review of the training steps is required to find out where the deficiencies lie. A bridle horseman will often step back down into the two rein or hackamore to check, fix and double check the thoroughness of his training practices.

Ballet

The disbursement or diffusion of pressure is what helps the spade bit horse find the correct place to carry himself. When the horse is carrying himself in a balanced relaxed fashion, no matter the speed, the spade will feel good to him if it is designed properly and all the angles are right. If the horse leaves that zone and falls apart or loses its correct way of going, the spade will be less comfortable to carry.

Good bridle horses will search for that comfort zone and in so doing correct their way of going and enjoy the ease with which they can travel and work in that way. It is not unlike the ballerina who walks with a book on her head. The book is not painful, it merely reminds her to maintain a posture required for the dance.

The Horseman's Responsibility

It is no surprise that in the age recently passed, when social trends seemed bent on dodging responsibility, that the spade bit and its use would fall from favor.

The use of the spade bit brings with it a measure of responsibility. Users must handle their mount in a manner that protects and preserves their horse's mouth. Romal reins with accompanying rein chains for balance and presentation are needed. Horses should be managed in a way when bridled to prevent bumping the bit into objects or hanging a portion of the bit on a fence or similar snag. There are some tasks in a buckaroo's work when the spade may not be the best choice. Teeth need to be maintained to allow horses to carry the spade with comfort.

All souls criticize that which they do not understand. These notes are not an effort to get everyone to jump on the spade bit band wagon. The spade bit is not for everyone or for every situation. The band wagon is not very big; but oh what beautiful music it plays.

Bon Voyage

The spade bit is not a piece of equipment, it is a philosophy. To use it and use it well an entire school of thought must be sought and explored. For those interested in doing just that; welcome to the journey of a lifetime. A human life can barely encompass all there is to know about the mysteries of the discipline.

Yes, there are many who use the spade with little or no understanding or appreciation for it. But then, you can kill cockroaches with a violin - yet that is not how the violin might best serve us.

A truly great ride on a finished bridle horse is regarded as a precious gift from above; but the rider must be made as equally sensitive to the spade bit as the horse is for both things to work together. The numb or heavy handed have no business on a fine bridle horse and some would argue that they would have no business on any horse.

So while the leverage bit user only wants to get from point A to point B; to the spade bit horseman it's all about *the ride*. It's the difference between jumping into the pool and climbing to the highest cliff and executing the perfect swan dive. Both ways get you wet, it's just about what you want to experience on the way.

To engage in a discipline that requires and promotes feeling and sensitivity is a noble thing. To feel deeply is to live fully; a goal we would all do well to achieve before the last song is sung.

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