

A Bit about Bits  
by Bonnie Martin

Take a peek around any long-time horse owner's tack room, and you'll probably see a wide assortment of different bits that are either gathering dust or still being used. Many people have more bits than they have horses. Look in any tack catalog, and you will see even more choices, frequently pages of bits devoted to English and/or Western styles of riding. There are bits for sale that carry the name and endorsement of well-known riders/trainers who supposedly either developed the bit style or use it, and wannabes in that style of riding often flock to the store to buy such a bit in hopes that it will work wonders for them with their horse.

There are lots of reasons for the big bit collections, some reasons stemming from the horse's need, some from the human viewpoint. Even people who like certain types of bits often have a variety within that type. Bits come in different sizes, with different mouthpieces, and made of different materials. Sometimes a horse has a preference that the owner searches to determine by trying different styles, sizes, materials, or mouthpieces. I remember one of my mentors talking about bits and saying that personally she didn't like aluminum bits, but she always kept a few around because every now and then she would run across a horse that preferred them and she wasn't going to argue the point. Her goal was to have a happy horse.

People who show often have a variety of bits for each discipline in which they ride. English pleasure bits are different than what the rules call for in a hunt seat class, and western pleasure classes have yet another set of requirements. And then, of course, those bits come in a variety of sizes, materials, and mouthpieces.

A common comment that I have heard people make which leads to acquiring more and more severe bits is that their horse isn't responding to a certain bit any more and they need to get a more effective one to get the horse's attention. Thus, in their barn, you might see a progression from relatively mild snaffle or curb bits to increasingly severe bits with things like twisted wire or chain mouthpieces and longer and longer shanks for more leverage. Rather than taking time and putting in the effort to train the horse correctly, these riders resort to harsher methods of control.

Not only is seeing a person's bit collection in their barn interesting, but it also tells a lot about the person's horsemanship. Finding a good assortment of snaffle and short shanked bits with gentle mouth pieces certainly separates those owners from the ones who sport a collection of gag bits, wire mouthpieces, and long shanked leverage bits. If I were interested in purchasing a horse from either kind of place, I know which horse I'd be more likely to consider just from the kind of bits I saw!