

Get a Better Stop Without a Bigger Bit by Bonnie Martin

A common statement I've heard many people make when their horse isn't stopping well for them is that they need a different bit. That usually means they think they need a bit with a longer shank, more severe mouthpiece, addition of a noseband to keep the horse's mouth from gaping open, or the use of a tiedown to keep the horse from throwing its head up in avoidance of the bit. Or, it might mean they want a combination of all of the above if they have already tried other bits with little or no success. It's not fun to ride a horse that won't stop when you want and need it to, so it's not surprising that folks are looking for more effective methods.

A progression up the ladder of more and more severe control might seem to work for awhile before having to move on yet again, but the stop will never be a pretty one with the horse and rider in unity because it comes from force and pain instead of training.

How is it that some horses can be ridden all their lives in very gentle gear and stop easily without throwing their heads in the air and sometimes even stop without an obvious cue, without the rider having to haul back on the reins? Some might claim that it is just because that particular horse is not as "hot" as theirs. Others will recognize that it is the training that both the horse and rider have that makes the difference. You see, it's not just the horse that needs to be trained. Riders do too if they expect to have a horse that gets better and better instead of worse and worse.

No matter the horse one rides, the stop can be improved with a little knowledge and a lot of practice. Contrary to what the "get a big bit" advocates think, it is not the bit that stops a horse. It is the mind that does.

If a rider can be consistent in asking for a stop at the right time in a horse's stride, and if they practice asking from a walk before moving to the trot and practice from the trot before moving to the lope or canter, the horse will learn to recognize cues and stop easily when asked with its balance to the rear instead of jolting to a stop on the front legs. The stop will not only look a lot nicer, but it will be a lot more comfortable for both horse and rider.

What are the cues? Some like to lift, not pull, the reins slightly as a pre-warning that something is going to change. Then, the rider stops riding, meaning that you let your body relax instead of continuing to move with the horse. I like to exhale a big breath at the same time I relax in order to keep my body from tensing up. In the beginning (remember it's at the walk), these cues won't mean anything to the horse, so after relaxing, gently use one rein to bend the horse around to the right or the left and keep the steady pressure up with that one rein until the horse comes to a complete halt and is soft instead of pulling on the rein. At that instant, be sure to release all pressure and let the horse stand and think about it for a bit. Many horses will lick and chew when they are beginning to understand what you are trying to communicate. That's a good sign, and they will try sooner the next time.

Giving the cue to stop at the appropriate time in the horse's stride is also important. With four legs to deal with, they need to get the stop message at a point where the correct stopping feet, the back ones, are in a position to respond. If they are asked at the wrong time, there will either be a delay in the stop, or it will be a rough stop with weight on the front end instead of the back end where it belongs.

This means that the rider needs to know where the horse's feet are in its stride so that they can ask for a stop as a back foot is getting ready to leave the ground. It's not a hard skill to learn where the feet are in a stride, but it is one that many people have overlooked learning. Taking the time to learn this will help not only in stopping your horse, but in asking for all kinds of transitions because it will help your horse understand what you mean instead of just yanking them to stop or kicking them to go. A good riding instructor can speed the process of helping you learn where the feet are, or a friend watching the horse walk can call out when a particular foot is ready to leave the ground and you can concentrate on what it feels like in your hips and legs.

Taking time to learn this may take awhile, but once it is learned, there's no more fighting to get your horse to stop. You won't have to keep escalating up the ladder to a more and more severe bit, and you will have the satisfaction of having a horse that responds in harmony with you rather than from fear of pain to its mouth.