

How to use a Pelham bit: a quick course in using double reins

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When people ask me which I bit I use most often on my horses, I generally say "the one that works" and then follow up with – "for many of them, the mullen mouth Pelham seems to be the most effective." I use this bit because it is stable in the horse's mouth, fits the generally shallow mouths of Fox Trotters, and has been most acceptable to the majority of horses I have ridden. For other horses, especially ones with larger mouths, the true Weymouth or full double bridle is a preferred tool, but, with horses, it always pays to be flexible and use what works best for that specific horse.

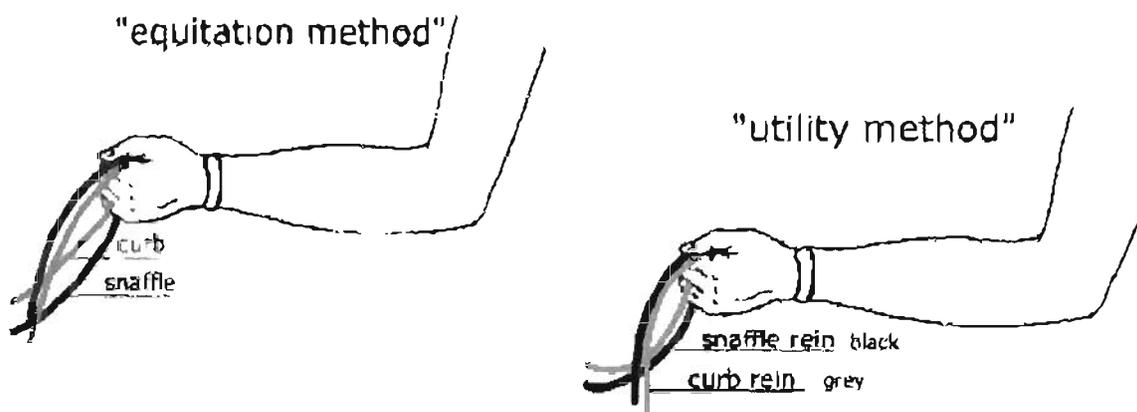
The Pelham bit can be a little intimidating, since it is used with two sets of reins: one for the curb action of the shank; and one for the snaffle action of the ring. Why on earth would I recommend such a complicated piece of equipment, when those who have heard me at a clinic know I am a great believer in keeping things simple? I use it because it a very good tool for positioning a horse's head and neck to put him in the body frame necessary to perform the easy gaits. It is also useful for teaching a horse to make the transition from the snaffle which is used in early training, to the curb, which is required for showing by most breeds. I prefer to use a Pelham with a mullen (curved) mouthpiece and 5" shanks, although they are available in other mouthpiece styles (broken, arched port, etc.) and different shank lengths (from the 3" Tom Thumb to 7"). The mullen is milder than these other mouthpieces, since it puts no pressure on the palate. While Dressage purists disdain the Pelham because it does not give such clear signals as the true double bridle, I have found that it works well for most training and ordinary riding for gaited horses.

HOW TO HOLD THE REINS

Holding on to two sets of reins can be confusing at first. Remember that one set is for the curb effect (leverage pressure on the horse's jaw) and the other is for the snaffle effect (direct pressure on the lips, bars and tongue). The curb effect will cause the horse to tuck his nose and may either raise or lower his head and neck, depending on how high you hold your hands. The snaffle effect will make the horse put his nose out and will lower his head and neck if used with low hands and downward pressure from your fingers, raise it if you ride with high hands and pull back on the reins.

Some trainers find it useful to ride with the snaffle reins in one hand and the curb reins in the other. Another method of holding double reins is to keep the snaffle reins separate, one in each hand, and to hold the curb reins together in the left hand along with one snaffle rein. This works well on a finished horse that can be ridden in a curb alone, but I have not found it very useful for training gaited horses. I prefer to ride with one snaffle and one curb rein in each hand, a method most commonly used with hunter/jumpers and park horses of any breed.

Many trainers recommend that you ride with the snaffle rein above the curb in your hand, just as the reins are attached to the bit. I prefer to cross the reins, British style, so that the snaffle rein is below the curb. (see illustration) This arrangement works best for me because I do most of my riding with contact on the snaffle rein, and can take stronger contact with it held lower in my hand. I can use the strength of my whole hand, applied by closing my hand and flexing my wrist down, on the snaffle rein with it low in my hand. I then use only the strength of my fingers on the curb, never pulling on it with a closed



You will notice that I show two ways of holding crossed reins. The first is the accepted, "equitation" method that is used by most people who ride with double reins. The second is what I call the "utility" method. Because I have rather weak little fingers, and because I like to ride with contact on the snaffle and no contact on the curb most of the time, I have discovered that by splitting the reins so that the curb passes between the ring and middle finger instead of the ring and little finger, I can use two fingers on each rein, opening or closing them depending on how much pressure I want to use on the curb or the snaffle. This method of holding the reins is more comfortable for me and more useful for what I am trying to accomplish with the bit, but it is not recommended by any standard method of equitation. You can use whichever method is most comfortable, as long as you know that if you ever show in double reins you must use the "equitation" method.

HOW TO USE THE REINS

Now that you have a hand full of reins, what do you do with them? I usually start out with contact on the snaffle rein only, to feel out the degree of responsiveness I have with the particular horse, and the type of gait he is giving me. With a young horse that is just out of training in an ordinary snaffle it is important to continue with that rein in the Pelham so that he will not be confused by the sudden use of the curb. I keep contact with the snaffle rein by closing the lower part of my hand over that rein, letting my upper fingers (index and middle) open slightly on the curb rein, so that there is slack in the upper (curb) rein, and a bit more tension in the lower (snaffle) one. This will usually make the horse travel with a lowered head and neck, nosing out a bit. If he travels with too low a head for the gait I want (say a running walk or a corto), I will take up a little on the curb rein by tightening my index and middle fingers so that they are again gripping the upper rein just a little. This will raise the horse's head and make him tuck his nose just a bit more than the snaffle did. You can play back and forth between the effects of the two reins to get the exact head and neck position you want for the gait you want. Horses will have individual reactions to the use of the reins, so you will have to experiment to see what works best on your particular horse, then keep him where you want him with that effect. Just remember that with most horses the curb will cause a "collected" position with the nose tucked and the neck arched,

and the snaffle will cause a more "extended" position with the nose out and the neck stretched out and down.

If your goal is to train your horse to go in a curb alone for show, use the Pelham to transition from the training phase of the snaffle to the curb. You can do this by riding mostly on the snaffle rein at first, gradually increasing the pressure on the curb until half the contact is with each rein, then slacking off on the snaffle and increasing the use of the curb rein alone. This process takes some time, at least three or four weeks of steady riding, and is most effective if your curb shank on the Pelham is no more than 5" long. Your horse will then be accustomed to the curb action and be ready to show in a curb with the same shank length. If you feel you need longer shanks, remember that the longer the shank, the more exaggerated the effect, and the more your horse is likely to over-tuck and bend in the middle of his neck. You will need to use lighter contact with the longer shanked bit than you did in the Pelham to maintain the same effect.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

At first you may find using the Pelham awkward, but if you keep using it you will find that it is a useful tool for training your gaited horse, especially for making the transition from the basic snaffle to the exclusive use of the curb that is required by most show rules. It doesn't take much more dexterity to use double reins than it does to use a touch-tone phone; it is easier than typing or playing a musical instrument. Try it and you may never want to go back to the limited possibilities of riding with only one set of reins.