

What Do You Know About Nosebands?

- by Jennie Hakes

A noseband is a strap, usually but not always of leather, that completely encircles the bony part of a horse's nose and jaw. It can be functional or decorative or both. Ancient art such as Greek pottery shows that the noseband has been in use for thousands of years.

Where did this idea of a noseband come from? How has it evolved and why? What do we expect of a noseband, does it really serve that purpose, and what does it do physically and mentally to the horse?

And why is it only in recent history that nosebands carry so much importance, especially in the world of dressage? Browse any English tack catalog and almost every dressage bridle comes complete with a noseband. If you want something different, variations abound – dropped, Mexican, flash, grakle, crank, crescent, Kinton. This article will focus mainly on the use of nosebands for dressage, so keep in mind the goal:



Cavesson noseband

“The object of Dressage is the development of the Horse into a happy Athlete through harmonious education. As a result, it makes the Horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with the Athlete.” – FEI rulebook

A brief history of the noseband

Once upon a time our ancestors domesticated the horse. They learned that a horse's head was sensitive and used pressure on it to control the beast. The first bridles were essentially nosebands with one or two ropes attached. A noseband placed low on the cartilage, instead of the bone, could possibly make it easier to stop or slow down by limiting air (slightly pinch your own nose and breathe). Some nosebands had barbs on the inner surface. Even more control could be gained by putting the rope in or around the horse's mouth. Metal bits came into use by 1300 B.C.

In “On Horsemanship,” Xenophon of Athens (b. 431, d. 354) refined horse training and described in detail the metal bits he used. *“Let the horse be taught to be ridden on a loose bridle, and to hold his head high and arch his neck, and you will practically be making him perform the very acts which he himself delights or rather exults in.”* Xenophon does not mention nosebands in this treatise, though ancient Greek and Persian art depicts nosebands on war horses.



Persian War Horse (1600s)

In the 16th century, the Italians devised a severe long-shanked curb bit which, combined with a noseband – again often barbed - achieved control of their large, stout horses. Art from that time shows the trained mount in collection with a rounded back and face on the vertical. One touch of the reins leveraged a lot of pressure.

Fast forward, and the noseband was less important, even of no importance at all. Why? In the early 1700s, de la Guérinière, the founding father of classical dressage, taught that the horse must be trained without force, in a step-by-step logical progression that we might find familiar today. Regarding contact with the bit, here is a quote from de la Guérinière's treatise *École de Cavalerie*:



School of Versailles - early 1700s

"There are horses with no contact, others with too much, and others who are fully on the bit. Those who have no contact fear the bit and cannot suffer its contact on their bars, which makes them fight the hand and toss their heads. The horses with too much contact lean heavily on the hand. The horses with the best mouths have a contact on the bit; without leaning on or fighting the hand, they have a consistent, light, and moderate contact. These three qualities of a good mouth in a horse correspond to those of a rider's hand, which must be light, gentle and consistent."

There is no mention of using a noseband to help achieve this contact; it seems a noseband was decorative more than functional. Granted, a long-shanked curb bit was still used. In 19th century France, the stables at Versailles started using new riding principles that also encouraged kindness instead of force.

In the 19th century, Ernst Friedrich Seidler, a German trainer at the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, invented the dropped (aka "Hannoverian") noseband. The dropped noseband is still a part of their traditional tack, used on young stallions when in training with a snaffle bit, and in exhibitions when horses are worked in-hand.

In the 20th century, horses were used less and less for work, as in the military, and more and more for recreation. Showing became popular, and training became more refined with the appearance of different noseband designs. In the 1960s, the flash noseband came on the scene for show jumpers. The flash attachment kept the horse's mouth shut, while the cavesson still provided a place to attach a standing martingale. Dressage riders picked it up and today it is the most common noseband used with a single snaffle bit (double bridles require a cavesson).

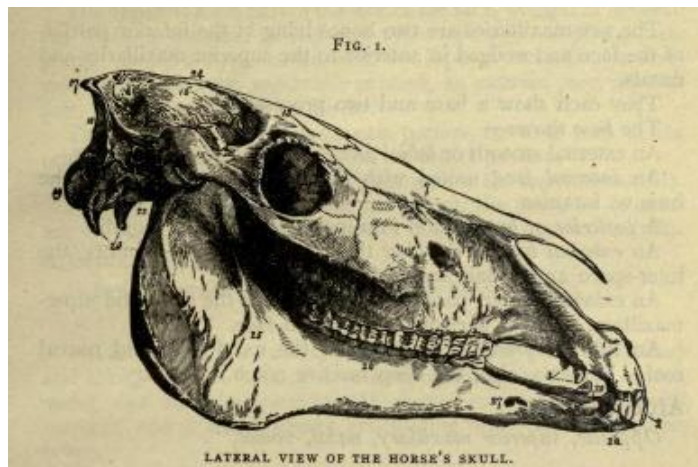
Purpose of a noseband

Which brings us to the present. Why do we use nosebands today? The obvious answer is that USDF and USEA recognized competitions require one. The rulebooks explain which nosebands are and aren't allowed, although they do not explain **why** they are required at all. Other than that, why do riders use them? Reasons include to -

- Keep the mouth shut.
- Prevent the tongue from going over instead of under the bit.
- Help a young horse accept the bit.
- Prevent "crossing the jaw" (opening the lower jaw and displacing it sideways).

- Increase bit pressure.
- Make the horse's face look prettier!

The horse's head



From "The anatomy and physiology of the horse", G. Dadd, 1850s

Since the noseband works by putting pressure on the nose, let's take a short tour of the equine head.

The head houses the brain. It is where breathing and eating begin, and where seeing, hearing, tasting, and thinking occur. The skull has 34 bones, most of them flat. Twelve pairs of cranial nerves connect the head and face to the brain. Damaged or malfunctioning nerves can affect the entire horse. Nose, lips, mouth, and tongue are the most sensitive parts of a horse's body.

The nostrils open into the skull's nasal cavity. When a horse takes a breath, he cannot swallow at the same time, and vice versa. This design is necessary so the horse doesn't send food into his lungs. We humans have similar apparatus (try to swallow while taking a breath).

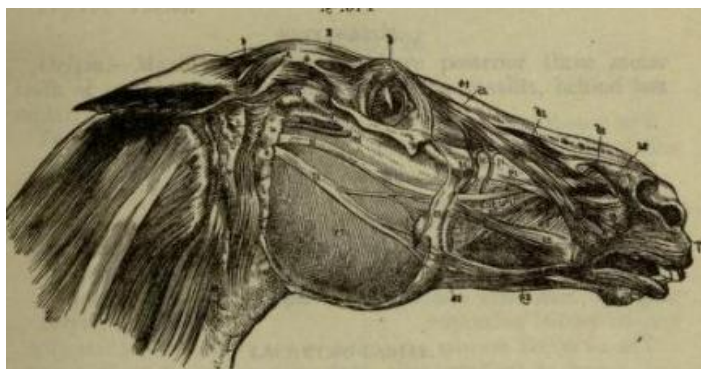
The horse's tongue is a strong muscle fastened to the floor of the mouth, anchored there by the hyoid bone and the lower jaw. Restriction or damage to the tongue could affect movement of the forelimb and poll, which are directly connected to the hyoid bone.

The skull of an adult horse has between 36 and 40 teeth. A horse's teeth are constantly growing. The teeth in front are called incisors and are used to nip off forage. The big gap, or diastema, between the incisors and the molars is where inedible or un-tasty forage is spit out (using the tongue and head-nodding); then the tongue pushes the good stuff against the molars on one side and grinds it by moving the jaws outside to inside in a sideways manner.

A horse produces up to ten gallons of saliva daily, but a horse's salivary glands are only activated when he chews. Injury to the oral cavity can cause excess salivation.

Do nosebands work?

We should always be ready to explain why we use a certain piece of tack, how we fit it, and how it affects the horse. A noseband works by applying pressure to sensitive areas of the face when a horse exhibits an evasion such as opening his mouth to avoid mouth pressure. Looking at the horse's head, there are several



From "The anatomy and physiology of the horse", G. Dadd, 1850s

places where pressure from a noseband can cause discomfort, both externally and internally.

Keeping the mouth shut. Our first question should be why is the horse opening his mouth? Is it a training issue? Is it a learned habit? Does he need dental work? A young horse might benefit from a noseband as he learns to accept the bit, but at the opposite end an older school horse might be trying to avoid the pain of an untrained rider's hands. Straps holding a noseband press on the jaws. If the upper teeth have sharp points, pain from that pressure can cause a horse to worry and open his mouth.

Controlling the tongue. The tongue is extremely sensitive. Pain and even injury to the tongue may occur when using a wrong, improperly placed, or misused bit. Horse tongues and palates come in many sizes; one bit doesn't necessarily fit all. The horse evades the contact - perhaps tries by sticking out his tongue or putting it over the bit - so we tighten the noseband, and what happens? Besides frustrating the horse even more, the horse's poll and front-end can be affected through the hyoid bone. About a decade ago, the "blue-tongue" video made the rounds of the internet. This is an extreme example of what happens when a too-tight noseband, much like a tourniquet, cuts off circulation to the tongue.

"Lipstick" or foam on the mouth. As we learned when touring the horse's head, a horse can only salivate when he is chewing. A horse gently chewing the bit is thought to show acceptance of the bit. Chewing is a sign of relaxation, desirable in a dressage horse. Strapping a horse's mouth so tightly that he cannot open it prevents licking and chewing. If the noseband is too tight, saliva might be coming out the mouth because the horse cannot swallow, or perhaps something has been put in the mouth to make the horse salivate before tightening the noseband. The FEI Rulebook describes how some bits "encourage movement of the tongue and salivation," and "mouthing of the bit and salivation," but the dressage test directives do not mention chewing the bit or salivation.



Flash noseband, foamy mouth

Crossing the jaw. When a horse "crosses his jaw" he moves the lower jaw sideways to avoid the bit. The cause could be too much rein pressure, the wrong bit, a bit placed too low or too high in the mouth, etc. Tightening the noseband might remove the symptom and cause a different evasion.

The rules

The FEI Code of Conduct for the Welfare of the Horse states: *"Tack must be designed and fitted to avoid the risk of pain or injury."* Article 428 on saddlery states that a noseband is compulsory, and that *"At any level of competition a noseband may never be so tightly fixed that it causes harm to the horse, and must be checked as per the Stewards Manual noseband protocol."*

The 1-finger rule. The FEI Steward Manual's noseband protocol says that the steward should be able to fit his or her index finger between the noseband and the horse's cheek. An obviously over-tightened noseband can be addressed in the warmup, otherwise the noseband is not checked until after the test.

In 2018, Equestrian Sports New Zealand dressage rules were changed to measure with one finger at the nasal planum, the reason being that a noseband can still be fixed tightly enough to cause harm using the side of the face measurement. Denmark also changed their rules in 2018 to measure at the nasal

planum but using a standard 1.5-centimeter gauge instead of one finger. Their reason was a scientific correlation of tight nosebands to mouth lesions.

The 2-finger rule. Under USEF rules, a noseband “must be adjusted to allow at least two fingers under the noseband on the side of the face under the cheekbone.” USEF also says this check is not to be done on the bridge of the nose; their photo shows that the flash part of the noseband must also adhere to the two-finger rule, but there is no written rule saying that all parts of the noseband must be checked. Neither FEI nor USEF say why the check is done in this way.

(Note: In “The Art of Riding,” by Lt.-Col. M. E. McTaggart (1951), under How To Fit Saddlery: “The noseband should admit two fingers between it and the horse’s nose and two fingers between it and the projecting cheekbone.” That’s covering your bases!)

Why one finger, why two fingers, why measuring at the cheek versus measuring at the top of the nose? Why not use a standard taper or digital gauge instead of finger, given that people have different sized fingers? In a noseband study released by researchers in Ireland and Australia (2017), 750 horses competing in Ireland, England and Belgium had noseband tightness measured with a taper. Disciplines were eventing, dressage and hunters. The result was that 44% could not accommodate even the width of one finger. Eventers had the highest incidence of too-tight nosebands, and flash nosebands were significantly tighter than others. Only 7% passed the 2-finger rule.

Conclusion

The consequences of a too-tight or poorly placed noseband include cutting off circulation to the tongue, mouth lesions, lessening of breath, pain from molars cutting the inside of the mouth, pain from a noseband placed too low (the more towards the end of the nose, the more sensitive the nerves), inability to lick and chew and swallow. The plusses of using a noseband must be weighed against these potential consequences if the noseband is not correctly fitted. If you are not sure why you use a noseband, try riding without it and note how your horse goes.

Science is being applied more and more to equine activities. Saddle-fitting is an accepted practice. It should be just as important to fit the bit and bridle to the horse based on the shape and physiology of the head. Some bridles such as the Micklem avoid potential pressure points that are on traditional bridles. We owe it to our equine partners to take care how our tack works and if it is hurting or helping them. If your horse could talk, what would he say?

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“Horses are my friends, not my slaves.”
— Reiner Klimke

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