

# Demystifying the Curb Bit

## English with Peggy Alderman

By Stephen Kinney



Saddle seat trainer Peggy Alderman and Bada Bing.

**P**eggy Alderman has cut a swath through the division of Morgan English Pleasure. Riding first Equinox Tempo and, more recently, her homebred, Bada Bing she has won the English Pleasure World Championship six times. A record!

She is also somewhat unique among Morgan trainers. Semi-retired she only works horses owned by herself and her husband at their Salem Farm in North Clarendon, Vermont. This affords luxuries of time. It also means the horses she trains have rarely been in anyone else's hands, something many trainers would consider a benefit. She acknowledges that, with only 12 horses in the training barn, she's been able to devote her time and thought to a greater understanding of "body work"—which would include vet, massage and chiropractic, as well as dental work.

We turned to Peggy, a trainer in the saddle seat, fine harness tradition, in our quest to unravel the mysteries of the curb bit, as she is a thoughtful analyst of things equine and technical (her other specialty is the highly technical roadster discipline). She made some quotable points: "There's a lot of bit issues that are not mouth issues"; "Tight curb chains make tight horses"; and "I'd be disappointed if my horse finished my class with the same headset he started with."

"Which leads me to my number one point," she says, "Which is what do you really want from a curb bit? In my opinion, you want to start with a horse that you teach impulsion. An ideal horse is pushing forward into the bit. There's a firmness there and it's an entirely different feeling than a horse that's grabbing a bit. I don't like a horse that's bridled so that you never touch

Continued on page 34

## Western with Judy Nason

By Abbie Trexler



Western horsewoman Judy Nason and FCF Montego Bay.

**J**udy Nason is as versatile a horsewoman as the breed she serves. She's been known to ride the hair off an English horse. She is an articulate instructor who has mentored many horsemen in her turn. But, in the sometime mysterious meanderings of business development, she's become a niche trainer of Western pleasure horses.

In that role she is known for mounts that are definitive of the word "fancy": Pondview Portrait, ER Treble My Command, Wisperwin Highflight, Corrick, Burkland Nicholas, Treble's Tanqueray, FCF Montego Bay, to name a few.

Judy's Western horses are in the California tradition. There's plenty of silver. The horses frequently carry a high port. She is a rommel rein show woman. And, long before it was a brand, she referred to her Western mounts as "dressage horses ridden one-handed."

It is little known, but worth mentioning, that not only Judy, but most of her riders, show in jackets and chaps custom made by Judy in her spare time. It is in her nature that she exercises authority over the total "look" of the product she puts in the ring. It's become known as a Judy Nason look.

We had occasion to sit down with Judy for this issue in our pursuit of clarifying the use and the traditions of curb bit horsemanship. Her analysis of the purpose of the shank is in the answers that follow in this interview:

**As a preface I wanted to note that you've spent time with Chris Cox and his form of horsemanship. How has that changed how you work with your bridle?**

What became clear to me was that I had always wanted my horses to

Continued on page 44

Photo © Howard Schatzberg



PEGGY ALDERMAN

## Demystifying the Curb Bit

Continued from page xxx

the curb. To me that is like tying your hands behind your back. To me, that horse should be so comfortable with the curb, that he doesn't hesitate to push onto the bit and that enables you to do all the things that you can do. If your idea is all that you want your horse to do is drop his nose down, then you're going to go to more pressure. Whereas if your goal is to make that horse comfortable enough to push onto that bit, then mentally, as a trainer, the thing to do is to go to less pressure. So the older I get the shorter my shanks get.

"I should qualify all of this that these are my observations," she adds.

What follows is our conversation with Peggy on the topic of the English curb bit and double bridle (and many variations on the theme):

### **In a double bridle, describe the function of the snaffle bit and the curb bit:**

I would say, if you want to generalize, when it is used in a full bridle, the snaffle bit lifts the horse and brings it back with the topline. It will lift and open the shoulders. To me there's underline—bringing the hips and the poll closer. Then there's topline, which lifts the horse and opens the shoulders. The snaffle will lift and open the shoulders. The curb is going to work more on the poll and your underline and maintaining your hind end engagement.

### **That's an interesting distinction. Most horses train in a snaffle bit. Western horses show in a curb only. What is the function of the double bridle?**

To marry the two together. I call it the wheelie on the bicycle. You don't lift the handlebars, you push them up by pedaling, but you balance the bike with the handlebars. That's what we ultimately look for. The bridle is your handlebar. Your seat and legs engage the hindquarters and your bridle frames the horse.

### **There's a common assumption that the snaffle employs direct contact and the curb is a lever. Do you agree with this?**

Yes. But I'm having trouble with the term "direct contact." There is certainly direct contact with the curb if it's properly adjusted. It's not that they drop behind it and don't use it—they do push up onto that curb. To me, ideally, there's contact with both. If you don't have steady contact with it, then you have to have that adjustment period when you initiate contact with it. I'd rather see them pushed onto it and working with me—I don't like to lose my curb contact. To me, it's not about them giving and dropping behind. It's about them pushing up onto it and I can bend them at my will.

### **You're talking about not wanting to have interruption of aid, various "notches" or signals.**

Yes, and that's what makes things look more fluid. It's not like pieces and parts. It may be that when you're first schooling them. Then you may have to break it down. But ultimately, you're looking for something that's totally fluid. You're not pulling pressure and



*Bada Bing shows great balance in this victory pass photo: note the equal pressure on both reins; open shoulders and engagement from behind; position of Peggy's calf muscles as "every bridle adjustment must have a corresponding leg adjustment"* (Photo © Howard Schatzberg).

getting a result. It's not robotic.

### **In a finished Western horse there is only the curb. In a finished English horse there are two bits. What is the ideal ratio between snaffle and curb when handling double reins?**

If there is an ideal, it's light contact with both. Depending on what's going on with a horse, then you change the ratio. My horse is coming down the rail and I'm starting to lose him a little behind, I would ever so gently draw on my curb and use my legs to push him up under. You never ever do a bridle adjustment without a leg adjustment. If you're going to use your legs, you've got to use your bridle and if you're going to use your bridle, you've got to use your legs. They're used together. You're going to push the hindquarters underneath and change the focus to the curb so he knows he needs to condense his underline. And then, the same thing with the snaffle: You're coming down that rail and you're feeling so good that you say to yourself, "Wow, I'm going to ask for two notches higher." So you take that snaffle and you can open the shoulder, the knee comes up higher and the head comes back farther. Your hindquarters are working so perfectly that you can do that.

### **You've answered the next question which is under what circumstances do you vary that ratio. And you've said its not a fixed ratio, it's a response...**

...to what the horse is doing. I'm talking ideally, when they're



PEGGY ALDERMAN

## Demystifying the Curb Bit

perfectly broke, that's what's going on. And that's kind of how you keep all the energy going. It's always a little bit "tuck under, raise up, tuck under, raise up"—you're feeding that wheelie. That's how you get them to raise way up.

### You're micromanaging them every step of the way.

Yes. And it looks like you're doing nothing. Because it is fluid. Nobody sees you make the adjustment. It is all fluid.

### How do you go about breaking your youngsters to curb bits? Do you long line or do ground work in a curb or double bridle? Do you ever ride "on the curb" alone?

I do a lot of groundwork with them, particularly the older I get. I can't take the risk of just riding them. I used to do that. I have a Liverpool that I longline them in. It's a straight bar, loose shank and I line them in that. I can put my line right to the side, so it's just a bar bit. Once they're warmed up and doing it properly I just slide the rein down to the half cheek. There's a curb chain, very loose and I rarely have any trouble with them. They're used to giving with a snaffle.

I do long line them with their double bridle.

### How does that work?

I do it a little different. I slide a side-check down through their browband to the snaffle and then line them off the curb. First I'll line them off the snaffle, get them going and then I'll line them on the curb.



Another picture Peggy likes, this time of *AFF The Stalker*, showing use of both reins and the horse "pushing up" against the curb bit

(Photo © Howard Schatzberg).

### So when is the horse ready to wear a double bridle?

Even when I think a horse is ready to progress to the double bridle, I don't start them until the dentist has been there. It's absolutely essential that they have proper dental work before you attempt to bit the horse.

A lot of people don't realize that a horse with his nose out straight, might have an even bite at the front, but what happens when they flex at the pole is that his overbite slides forward. (She illustrates with her hands). A horse is going to look more parrot mouth with his head down by his knees than he is with his head up. It will slide forward as he lowers and drops. If there is anything impeding that slide, it is impossible for your curb bit to work correctly. You're going to encounter a tremendous amount of resistance.

I'm fortunate because I can take my time with horses. I'm not crazy about showing two- and three-year-olds. I quite often wait until they are four to break them to a full bridle until all that stuff in their mouth gets done. People underestimate the consequence of poor dental work.

### What specifically has to happen in that age group for dental work?

You've got to get rid of the wolf teeth, get your bit seating done, tusks are usually taken down on male horses. Starting as early as late two- and three-year-old they start popping off caps, so they get irregularities and obstructions. It can happen very quickly. When you get an older horse with a settled mouth, you do them in March and you know you've got a window of four to six months before they're going to have difficulty again. Whereas a three-year-old you can have them done in April and need a dentist in May. So that's the difference.

### So, then you're ready for the double bridle?

No. I would add another caveat. The other thing people don't always make a connection with is soundness, how dramatically that will affect the mouth on a horse. Most horse trainers know that one of the first signs of sore hocks is resistance to the curb bit. That's your absolute first sign that your horse is starting to get sore in the hocks. When you do body work there's a direct connection between the poll and the SI (sacroiliac) joint. The SI joint is what allows the horse to flex in the back and get his hocks underneath himself. So they're totally connected. Same thing if you've got a tight SI joint it locks up the poll. It's a biomechanical function. Those two joints work together. Which is why if a horse engages from its hind end they also lighten up at the poll. It works together. A lot of SI joints go out of place because of sore hocks. They're sore in the hocks, their SI goes out, and their poll locks up. You've got a dynamic where they can't physically do it.

Sore feet contribute to a lot of mouth movement. Horses suck their tongues back and more. What a lot of people attribute to breathing problems is actually soreness underneath. The horse is expressing anxiety through their tongue—not unlike a person would.

All of these things fit into this dynamic. When you think about curb bits you ideally want to fix all these problems. If you can't, you have to accommodate.



PEGGY ALDERMAN

## Demystifying the Curb Bit

You are making an observation that I would have shared in my career as a trainer, that most so-called behavior problems are really problems for veterinarians, acupuncturists, massage therapists... They're physical. Absolutely. A horse is an accommodating animal. I think I can count on one finger the horses I've had that I thought were born bad, that there was something mentally wrong with that horse. The rest of them you can pin point. These are subtle things. They interact. Particularly if you've got a horse that's mature and doing well and suddenly becomes a problem with a curb, that's a dead giveaway that you've got a physical problem going on.

There are a lot of bit issues that are not mouth issues.

**You're making that obvious now. Nonetheless, let's get back to the mouth. Talk about how the curb works.**

A lot of it is trial and error. I'll give you an example. I had a horse that was so touchy on her curb bit, I went to shorter shanks, fatter bits, I never wrap a bit, but I went to wrapping hers. In a snaffle bit, she was gorgeous. Nothing was helping. Her teeth were good, her soundness was right. The dentist said to me, "She's got an extremely tight bite." The average horse has about two inches of space from the tongue to the palette. She had nothing. So I had to go to a very thin bit, which is the opposite of what you think because usually thin means more concentrated pressure. But I went to a thin bit and she immediately wore that curb. It took a dentist to make it work. I couldn't figure it out.

The curb operates on a number of pressures. The first and most obvious are the tongue and the bars. The bars are the space between the molars and the incisors. The mouthpiece can't be so high that it's banging the molar teeth. If you get it low, it's going to be aggravating.

The other pressure point is poll pressure. As the bit pulls back, the top of the bit shank goes forward and that gives you a little bit of poll pressure. The shorter distance you have between the mouthpiece and the top, the less poll pressure you're going to have. If you have one where the mouthpiece is more in the middle of your shank you're going to have more poll pressure.

When you fit it you have to look at tongue pressure. These horses that have purple mouths, they don't have enough tongue release. The bit is pressing down and cutting off the blood flow to that tongue. That horse needs a little more relief in the port. A straight bar bit is even pressure. The higher the port, the more tongue relief you get. And then there are a lot of more subtle things.

The other interesting one is palette pressure, which doesn't figure a lot in my horses. I do have one correctional bit that will go up into the palette. We're talking about the old spade bits now. They operate on palette pressure. If you get into a higher port bit you will affect that. That's where you want them to have an educated mouth. It's not something you dream of putting in a colt. It's not something you'd put on a horse you want to go forward hard. That's why we don't use a lot of palette pressure in our saddle seat horses. Unless you've got a horse with a very tight bite, like that mare I mentioned, any port up to two inches is going to have a merely negligible effect on the palette.



*Peggy praises this photo of her husband, Phil Alderman, on Bada Bing for its equal use of both reins and the resultant joint response of flexion at the poll and elevation (Photo ©Debbie Uecker-Keough).*

The other pressure point, of course, is the curb chain on the jaw. The amount of pressure comes from the tightness of the curb chain and the length of the shank.

So those are the rules of pressure that one curb bit will effect. Your horse tells you when they are uncomfortable.

The other thing I wanted to address is that many people, when they encounter a problem with a curb bit, tend to go to something stronger. The reality is that you need to go to something lighter, less pressure. The resistance you are getting is from too much pressure.

**There's an old adage that most trainers have hundreds of bits and only use two of them. What do you have among your bits for mouthpieces? Do you have a wide variety?**

Yes. I've got stuff I might use only once every ten years. I'll go, 'I know what this horse needs,' and I'll dump my box out and fish around and I'll find it. I would say most of my bits are fairly moderate. Two inch port or less, fairly wide, lots of tongue room, short shank.

**Do you wrap your mouthpieces with Sealtex?**

Never. Almost never. I used to, but I don't believe in it. I like a sweet metal. You need to find the bit that is smooth and well made because the bit needs to rotate front to back in the horse's mouth. With rare exception there's going to be some motion in the mouth. Latex is going to rub or hang up on the skin, on the bars. I find it hard to be slick with Sealtex. It's not a cushion thing. It's about saliva and moisture. I use a lubricant with young horses or with



PEGGY ALDERMAN

## Demystifying the Curb Bit

horses that don't have enough saliva. I think the SealTex takes away from the function of the curb bit.

**You've described yourself as using moderate bits. What would cause you to modify the port you use in a horse's mouth? What kind of reactions would you be getting from a horse that would cause you to look around?**

If they're touchy or they're resistant or they cross their jaws, or their tongue sticks out. All of these are indications that they are not comfortable in their mouth. That's when you start looking. One horse that I had a much higher port on was a horse that just wasn't happy with his tongue-tied. That created more problems than not. So I used a higher, correctional port with a roller and he could not get his tongue up over that. If you have a horse that is purple tongued, you've got to go to a higher, wider port. That's your indication you have too much tongue pressure. I've rarely had to go to an extreme port to get enough tongue release, just go a little higher than what they had in them.

**Do you fit a snaffle bit in a double bridle in the horse's mouth the same way you'd fit a single snaffle for training purposes? Is the tautness of the horse's lips the same?**

I sometimes leave it a little looser. It helps it not get caught up in the curb so much. I fit them and then I pull and see how it works with the curb. It's similar; I wouldn't say there's a tremendous difference. I mean, I fit snaffles differently when they're just snaffles in different horses. Some like them a tad looser, some like them higher up or they're getting at them with their tongues. I guess the answer is to try to adjust them to the comfort of the horse.

**When you start with a three-year-old or four-year-old with a double bridle, how do you determine what port you are going to put in its mouth?**

I mean I have my standard go-to bits. I tend to deviate from the bits I like when they're not working; otherwise I break them to the bits that I like. Which tend to be Tom Bass.

**What does Tom Bass mean?**

It means a bit developed by Tom Bass, a saddlehorse trainer from the 1800s. He was a great horseman who was renowned for his "high-schooled" horses. I kept this book out to show you. I tend to have a moderate port. I like the Tom Bass mouthpiece; it's a little bit thicker over the bars and narrows slightly over the tongue and has a pretty good balance on a horse. That's my go-to bit. If a horse doesn't wear that well, I start to look at why and go to a modified bit.

**How tight is the curb chain. Is there an ideal ratio between the horse's lips and the curb shank?**

I tend to start them with very loose curb chains and as they start to push into that bit I'll tighten slightly. I want to encourage them to go onto that bit. I think the leverage aspect of the curb bit is perhaps its most significant pressure and you have to be very

cautious that you don't hurt them with that, because then you're going to get that sticky, touchy horse. So I always start in the last link and then kind of do it into a moderate. I rarely move out of the moderate. Sometimes when I'm finishing them I'll fine-tune that. If I feel I'm losing the finesse between their hind end and the poll, that's when I'll tighten it.

**Do you think there's a wide range of opinion on this?**

Yes. I'm way more dressage-y than your average saddle seat trainer. There are many trainers out there with different concepts who are very good at what they do.

**You see a lot of bits adjusted where there is almost no angle between the curb shank and the lips. It's more or less the same line.**

That's the thought process of the barrier. His head is going to be here and it's not moving. To me you start at the back end of the horse and go to the front. It's that wheelie. To start their training by saying this is where they're going to wear their head and then I'm going to make the rest of it work, to me doesn't work. I think you achieve the nose in, but is that horse the best he can be? I don't think so. I think he's tight. I think tight curb chains make tight horses.

**The Western horse in self-carriage follows an assortment of body language and leg cues for direction. Is the same true of a saddle seat horse?**

Absolutely, maybe even more so. Because nobody cares if we move back three inches in our saddle. They frown on that kind of excess body movement in Western (laughing).

**Do you "neck rein" your English horse (I include steering with body language and leg aids in the term "neck rein")?**

Yes. The term's been used so much that I actually call it neck reining. But it's not really. What I do is that I train all my horses, a lot, to work laterally, all my horses side pass, they can also trot sideways as they trot forward-half pass. I don't consider them finished until they can do that. If you need to collect your horse, you need to move them laterally. Here's my analogy. If you've got a tennis player and they're ready for the ball, they're going side to side on the balls of their feet. So they have the ability to move quickly in either direction. That's getting them balanced in the middle. When I go around a turn, I almost make them sidestep around the turn a little, so that way they come out of the turn and they're still raised up.

**Sure, they're swinging on their haunches.**

That's a good way to describe it. All my horses turn, in all their gaits, from their hindquarters. So the rein work is keeping that head and spine in alignment. It's more about keeping them straight in the spine so we don't lose that collection we've been working on.

**You've been characterized as a horse trainer with ability to "high school" a horse. Would you talk about how you achieve it?**



PEGGY ALDERMAN

## Demystifying the Curb Bit



The Liverpool bit used for longlining purposes as prelude to a horse wearing a double bridle.



In the left hand the Tom Bass bit; in the right an example of the shorter shank.



Bridles in the tack room at Salem Farm demonstrate a very moderate selection of mouthpieces



Some of the back up or correctional bits that Peggy says get used once every ten years.



Peggy making an adjustment to the curb which influences the "underline" of the horse (Photo © Howard Schatzberg).

Human dancers can do things I've never ever dreamed of. It's because they've trained and they've developed. I think these horses are the same. It doesn't come just from shoeing. It comes from physically pushing and raising and when you open the shoulders, that's when the knees come up. If you can't open the shoulders as a rider then you're only getting half from your horse. How do you do that? I go back to my wheelie thing. You do that from impulsion and from collection. I totally get into them. I don't like to ride a horse that I can't push this hip, touch that leg, use both bits. I strive to have a horse I can work with. So I spend all my schooling time getting them pliable, supple, soft, used to my aids.

**Would you agree with the characterization that you are someone who is capable of getting high school action from horses? I've written this about you.**

Yeah, I guess. I know what I do is a little different. I think what you're calling high schooling is that my horses have the ability to move laterally. When you add the lateral aspect, along with the forward impulsion, it gives me a lot of tools to ask my horses to do what they do.

**I'm going to make a distinction here. I perceive that there are a lot of show horses that are really snaffle bit horses ridden in a double bridle. What you describe is using both bits.**

I don't consider them finished if you can't use the curb bit. Just the fact that they'll stay put, that's not the horse that I want. I don't care about them staying put. I care about them using it, being soft and responsive to the bit. But headsets change. Sometimes to the better. Sometimes they're here and doing good and suddenly they're farther back. 'Let's pick this party up,' you know. I'd be disappointed if I finished my class with the same headset I started with. I want to keep getting stronger throughout my class. ■



## JUDY NASON ~ *Demystifying the Curb Bit*

Continued from page 32

give me space and to be moving away or around me. I happened to be at the Equine Affaire when some of the top clinicians were there, when natural horsemanship was becoming really popular. Chris Cox was there, and what intrigued me about him was that he rode the way I do, with his feet underneath him and a soft hand. Come to find out he grew up riding pony club hunters so he rode with his feet underneath him, and he is very compassionate to horses. I understood more clearly about leadership—giving the horse direction.

Because I had these instincts, and then I could understand why my instincts were there, and I could take it to another level and teach it. I learned some techniques to get a horse to be more segmented in their body. In other words, I learned that the front end of the horse could be segmented from the middle of the horse, and from the haunches. And I always wanted to be able to maneuver my horse with my legs and my balance, as much as I did with my hand. I didn't want to have a horse heavy or dependent on my hands. If you lose that, you're limiting your resources, so to speak.

Particularly for Western, I could get my horses even softer. I could get them to break loose in back of the shoulders. I could get them to drop a hip and step under, I became more adept at that, and I took it in moderation and where necessary. I was able to get my horses more coupled up quickly, and sometimes all it comes down to is teaching a horse to counter bend—you tip their nose to the right and push their shoulder to the left to open that front leg. And then you get a horse to cross their front legs and then you get them to do it behind, and then they're rolling at their waist, which is right in front of their hips. And then they're starting to develop their topline. It opened a lot more doors for me, whether it's sitting on one horse or another. Now I really know where that ribcage is and I know the instant it's not right where it needs to be.

**It's like you've added another dimension to your training.**

Sure. I teach it to my first time riders, even the little kids. I always taught to sit down when you wanted the horse to stop. Now, I take it to another level and you tuck your tailbone down a little bit, soften your belly button, and your horse puts their balance to the heels of their feet. So they can step under and slow, instead of bracing with their hind feet. So you've got a horse that now transitions down without putting their head down. That way, you teach riders that the last thing they do is touch their mouth, You start from the balance point, which is their feet, and their body, and then the reins are just to finish it. It gets a little complicated, but I try to simplify it.

**As a trainer of Western pleasure horses describe the function of a curb bit.**

It's purpose is to get the horse to balance in a rounder frame. For me, for Western horses, a curb bit guides the horse into a round, collected balance that you can't necessarily get with a snaffle. It causes them to arch and stretch their neck up out of their withers—that's the purpose of it.

**Tell me about the function of a curb chain/strap.**

That complements whatever mouthpiece is in the curb bit. It helps



*Judy and Nemour's Royal Beauty at New England Regional. This mare steps underneath herself well and is beautifully balanced on the bit* (Photo © Debbie Uecker-Keough).

to balance the action or the intensity of the mouthpiece. If you have a leather strap, you will be causing less impact to the horse. With a leather strap, the horse may be more equipped to better appreciate the mouthpiece. In other words, if you have a higher port mouthpiece and a leather strap, the horse is not going to be confused as to whether he wants to come away from the chain or respond to the pressure of the mouthpiece. Once the horse is responding to the leather strap by leaning on it, then you are ready to move to a curb chain to get the horse to carry the bit, rather than lean on it.

**So the leather strap would be part of your progression to finishing a curb bit horse?**

Yes. If I move to a higher port curb on a horse that has not yet worn one, I will always use a leather strap because I want to know if it's the chain or the mouthpiece that the horse responds to. I'll tend to bridle a little harder with a mouthpiece, and a little more conservative with a curb strap. I've had more horses that want to avoid a curb chain than I've had negative response to a mouthpiece.

**What's the adjustment on the curb strap or curb chain?**

I want the bit to rock back from straight down about an inch before the horse is responding. I do want to have that float of an inch. If you don't have any float then the horse drops his head, you soften your rein pressure, and there's no release. So about an inch and they start to tuck their chin in, to follow it, and that's what I'm looking for. If you have to tighten your curb strap on the horse so there's not enough swing to the bit, it's time to progress to the curb chain so the horse is more aware of pressure and rewarded by release.

**Do you wrap your mouthpieces in Sealtex?**



JUDY NASON

## Demystifying the Curb Bit



Corrick is shown here as a three-year-old, left, and as a five-year-old, right. Note his increased muscular development, and how his reach from behind and stride have expanded, and his confidence in the bridle as he's aged (Photos © Howard Schatzberg and Bob Moseder).

Western horses are not allowed to have a wrapped curb chain to show with, because the option is to have a leather strap instead of a chain. If I have a horse that wants to brace their jaw, I might wrap their mouthpiece. If you introduce a horse to a bit, sometimes they'll clamp down on it. So I've used to fatten the bit so that the horse can't actually clamp down on it. If you use it with a horse that might want to lock down on one side, we'd wrap it to make it thicker so the horse can't close their jaw as easily. There are different applications for it.

### **In a finished Western horse there are two choices for reining, rommel and split. What determines which style you use?**

I think it comes from a comfort level. I am from the English world, and self-taught into the Western. For me, riding with rommel reins is more natural, because the rein comes up from my little finger and exits my hand at the thumb. That's how I always learned to flex my hand, and I have more manipulation with my wrist and my hand, and I feel more connected that way. With a split rein, your hand is flat, it's a whole different use of your arm and your elbow, and you should not pick your hand up. My use of a curb bit requires lifting your hand up and drawing the horse's chin down. So I prefer rommel reins and will teach a horse and rider to deal with that as much as possible. It's also something that's very stylish.

### **You talk about how the rommel makes the curb bit function. It makes so much more sense that a Morgan would function better in a rommel because their neck comes up, not forward.**

Yes, their neck comes up out of their shoulders, up and over. So because of the action of the bit from lifting your hand and the way they're hinged at the poll, you're going to get more connection through the rommel.

### **The Western horse in carrying a curb bit follows an assortment of body language and leg cues, not just reining aids. Talk about that.**

I try to teach my riders and my horses how to achieve self-carriage. I want to get my horses track up from behind, well underneath me so they tip their pelvis, and they'll start to round their back up a little bit and I can follow through. Then they start to round their neck out of their shoulders, lift in their shoulder area, and all of a sudden your horse is off the bridle, light, and in self-carriage. Then, you're simply balancing the horse, and lightening them off their front end by raising their shoulders up, and they're rounding their back right behind their withers. Too many people concentrate on getting their necks low, and so they get them heavy on the front end, and you can end up with mixing strides and what we call, "mystery gaits". It's the center of the horse that needs to come up. The horse is built to carry 60 percent of their weight over their front end. They're just built like that. So we have to shift that to the point where it's almost the opposite. A lot of people tend to ride a little forward because they want their horse's head down, and they don't really feel that the headset comes from the balance of the hind end. If you ride with your pelvis tipped back and your hips forward, your horse is going to do the same thing. If you get on your hands and knees and hollow your back, your head would be up. But if you round your back, your head would be down and your butt tips under. That's when the horse gets a lot of suspension in their back, and it takes a lot of the torque off their joints. Then they start to use the spring of their shoulder joints, and their ankles, and their hips, and their ankles behind, and they're springing in the hocks instead of pushing from the stifles.

### **So self-carriage does not come from the bridle, or from the bridle alone?**

One complements the other. Sometimes you're inviting them to get light in the front as you're driving them forward. But it should get to the point



## The Working Tools to Transition from Snaffle to Curb

“These are not necessarily in the order of how I would train the horse,” says Judy. “Each horse is different.”



**Pelham**

“This is a loose-shanked Pelham, and I use it to transition from a snaffle or a kimberwick. I’ll put both reins through a running martingale if I have a horse that wants to be a little cautious about a curb—it helps me to get them down and round, and yielding to the curb and getting comfortable with the curb chain with no draw rein—just straight reins. Then I wean them off of the top rein and I end up being able to balance them through just the curb part of it. And once they’re really steady, I transition them to just a shank bit.”



**Mylar bit**

“As far as work bits, if I’ve got one that’s not comfortable with a solid mouthpiece, I use a Mylar. I have a slobber bar on it (note, this is the bar that attached the shanks at the bottom of the bit), otherwise because of the presence of the barrel in the mouthpiece, the shanks will just spin. With the shanks held together at the bottom, the bit can only move so much. This gives the horse a combination of a place to put their tongue, and an opportunity to roll that barrel that spins on the roof of their mouth. It can lead to them wearing a longer shank and learning to go down and stretch their topline without the rigidity of a solid mouthpiece.”



**Mikmar bit**

“This is one of the original Mikmar bits. It actually ends up with four pressure points on the horse. You hook your reins through the rope, and the rope goes over the horse’s nose. And when you pull back on the reins, you are getting equal pressure on the nose, the bars, the chain, and the poll. So there’s never too much pressure on any one area. I use it on a horse that needs to freshen up a little. It invites the horse to break over at the poll and to give their neck at the withers.”



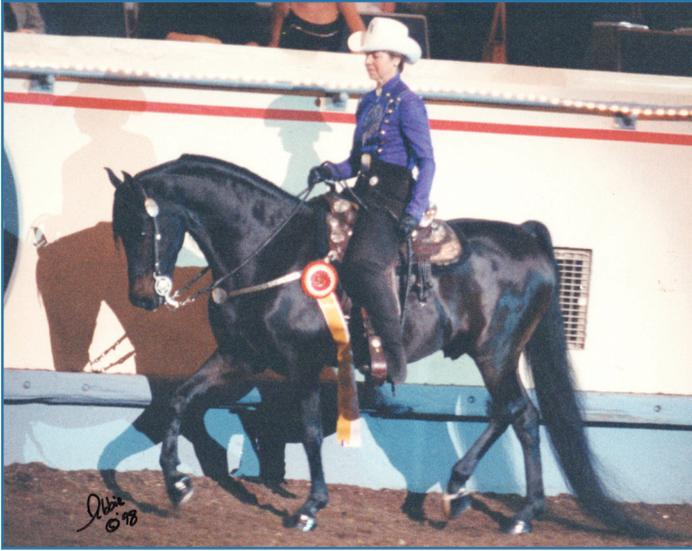
**Kimberwick with a California mouthpiece or c-port**

“This one is a California mouthpiece, so it offers a little palate pressure. The higher the port, I’ll tend to use a softer, more protective curb chain.

This has two slots, so I can put a rein on the bottom slot, and it’s like a mini-tom thumb. So it’s just the beginning of feeling the curb chain. A lot of times I go from this to a longer shank.”

# Demystifying the Curb Bit

≈ JUDY NASON



*Burkland Nicholas is a wonderful example of a “Judy Nason horse.” He displays prime self-carriage, and shape in his neck*

(Photos © Debbie Uecker-Keough).

where you can carry their belly up under you with your legs. By that I mean you stabilize the horse in the front, and you rev their engine behind, you get them energized with their hind feet. Get life in their hind end, but you're not letting that horse lengthen in the front, instead he adjusts and pops up underneath you. Once the horse achieves that, they soften away from the bit and we reward them by releasing. Sometimes they can't hang on to self-carriage for more than a couple steps. But as you feel them flex under you, you release them. And then they'll know that it feels comfortable, and they'll do it more and more. So, it's just knowing the mechanics and being patient about what it takes to get there.

**It's interesting to me to hear you talk about this, you seem so entrenched in the theory, and it makes sense to me because your horses all follow this pattern, and they are recognizable as a “Judy Nason horse.”**

Head set or self-carriage, whatever term you want to use, is not primarily about the bit or the bridle. Just like any athlete, you have to know how to use your body. That's true for the rider and for the horse. I tell a lot of my riders to do “the hula,” or loosen up at your waist. Because you want your horse to have all this suspension, but a lot of riders come into the barn and their heels are locked down and their backs are braced. And yet they want their horse to be low and soft and really relaxed. But they're creating resistance on top, and the horse picks up on that and then you prevent that horse from curving back up at you. If you have a basketball and you have your wrist stiff and you hit it, it's going to come back up—but not as well as when you have a flex in your wrist, it would have bounced higher. So when you have a flex in your back and you're floating along with that horse, with a relaxed back of your leg, you have better results. If you have softening in the back of your knee, in Western or English, you can get a horse to move better, more energetically. I ride my English horses with the same balance I ride my Western horses with—the same flexibility. If the horse is build to

step up high, I'm going to get that spring and that energy and channel it in the direction the horse is best suited.

**Tell me about the age of your horses when you start transitioning from the snaffle to the curb.**

I usually won't start the young horse into a curb until they are four to six months into their three-year-old year. A lot of them don't wear a curb bit until I'm headed to Oklahoma, so a lot of the time I'm not showing in the curb bit until Oklahoma. But I have to take it in stages so that I know they are ready.

**What is the change in shape from your snaffle bit horse to your curb bit horse?**

The snaffle bit horse has a balance point. The goal is to get the horse out of a snaffle as soon as they get so comfortable that they lean and balance on it. Then it's time to get them out of it and teach them to carry themselves. Even if I end up showing in a snaffle bit, I might work them in the kimberwick or a leverage bit. And sometimes what prevents me from showing in a snaffle is that I haven't got them supple enough in the jaw line to neck rein and follow my hand and my seat. They still want to be dependent on the bit. And at that point their stifles aren't developed and they aren't stable—as steady as they probably should be. Then as soon as they transition to the shank bit, they round up. They learn how to carry themselves and it lightens their load in the front end. Again, it's an age thing. I've had four year olds that weren't ready to wear a curb because they were just so growthy. And sometimes they just kept staying butt high, and it just wasn't physically possible for them to balance off of a curb bit. Some of those horses had to wait to hit the show ring.

**I never really thought about it that way—balancing on the snaffle and off of the curb.**

I've had horses that have run through their canters in a snaffle bit, and I



JUDY NASON

# Demystifying the Curb Bit

## Judy's Show Bits



**Low rise**

*"With a youngster, or a horse with a sensitive mouth, I tend to use a low rise. It has a little place for the tongue, not too much pressure on the bars of their mouth. The curb chain versus the leather strap is personalized for each horse."*



**California mouthpiece (c-port)**

*"This is not the original mouthpiece, I had it welded in. I really loved the bit, but I changed the mouthpiece. Morgans tend to have a lower, narrower palate than some of the other breeds, so they might be more responsive to pressure on the roof of their mouth as opposed to downward pressure on the bars."*



**Half-breed**

*"The bottom part of the bit is a low rise, but it offers pressure on the roof of their mouth, as well."*



**High Salinas without hood**

*"Most of these come with a hood that presses up against the roof of their mouth. But I like this one better because all of the spittle doesn't clog up in there."*



**Billy Allen**

*"It's used on horses who prefer not to have any pressure on the roof of their mouth. Horses that tend to gape. With the slobber bar at the bottom, it will tend to move less. But it does still have a lot of flexibility to it."*

# Demystifying the Curb Bit

~ JUDY NASON



have to find a mouthpiece for them that works—I'll hit on something and suddenly they'll carry it, they'll round up and balance, and all of a sudden they've learned how to use their hind end. Sometimes you just have to get to know their mouths and what their needs are. It's not black and white by any means, every horse is different. You can have your baseline, but then you deviate depending on the horse. I've had two-year-olds that I've started that have had hard mouths. And it's just that the tissues in their mouths were denser, and they just aren't sensitive. And I've had horses that were the opposite.

## So you're saying that it can be the tissues in their mouth, or their conformation, or where they are in their maturity that makes a difference in biting them?

Yeah. This time of year, the three year olds, their mouths are changing. They're losing caps, and at the other ends their stifle joint is not tight.

## Like pre-teens? Middle schoolers?

Yes, exactly.

## How do you adjust your curb sit in the horse's mouth?

I like to have one wrinkle, but on occasion I'll have no wrinkles. A lot of it has to do with the length between the cheekbone and the corner of their mouth. The Morgans tend to be short. The Western horse has to be comfortable with how they carry their tongue. If I have a tongue problem, since we don't tie a tongue on a Western horse, I try to educate them at home to teach them to keep it in the spot where it needs to be. Secondly, I find a mouthpiece that they're comfortable enough with that they don't feel the need to evade the mouthpiece, which would include flipping their tongue over the bit. But if the bit can be a little lower in the mouth and still be safely positioned, the lower that is on their jaw, the more leverage you're going to get to from that lower jaw. That's why a lot of times on a saddle seat horse, where you're permitted to tie a tongue, you can drop the curb a little lower and separate it from the snaffle so they aren't bunched up together so tight in their mouth—getting more leverage to the curb with less hand.

## What determines mouthpieces for a horse?

I have a lot of flex in my hand and wrist, and I sit down and soften my waist and get the horse to shift back on their hind end through their pelvis. Having said that, the conformation of their mouth and their body has a lot to do with it. Your horse will tend to respond to palate pressure if they're conformationally built to round their neck, which, as I said, most Morgan, Arabs, and Saddlebreds—as opposed to Quarter horses and Thoroughbreds—are built to do. And so, what I find with the higher, flat plate that connects with the roof of their mouth, they'll flex at the poll or six to eight inches back from the poll, which lifts their neck up out of their shoulders at the withers. That's where you're going to get them to lift their back right behind their withers, so their reward is that they find a way to come off of that pressure. There are different bloodlines within the Morgan breed that are conformed differently within their bodies as well as their mouth. Some of these cannot tolerate palate pressure. And they can't tolerate

any kind of rear restriction, so that horse has to have the low rise.

I've been in it long enough that I can tell right away if I've bridled the horse up too much. And of course, I start with little snaffles, and a lot of the time I find the Morgans don't like a single joint—they want a French link or a Dr Bristol (a bit with two joints with a small bar or key in the middle).

## What I understand you to mean is that you don't necessarily have a certain bit you want to get into, you have a certain look to achieve, and whatever mouthpiece is best is what you use. The horse doesn't have to progress to a certain bit.

Right, that why I have a lot of different bits. I have two containers full of show bits, and sometimes at a show we'll start the week with one and will have changed by the end of the week. You know, if a horse hasn't had enough sleep, or he's had to work a little harder during the week he may have become a little stale, we might step it up a little.

And not all riders can ride in the same bit. If it's another of my riders, there are times I have to put less in there to minimize overreaction so that it's a balance of hand to horse's mouth and rider ability.

## Oh, that's a whole other component to factor in!

Exactly. It's not always the rider's education or lack of it, it might be their body isn't as flexible, so they can't get that horse tracking up from behind. So I might have to go to a different mouthpiece to get the horse to come up a little bit more on his own. Or I've got a rider who has rigid hands and I have to go to less because the horse will suck back too far if he has too much port in his mouth—too much torque. There's a lot of customizing. For me, it's not so straightforward. But it's lots of refining to get that look.

My goal is to teach my riders how to feel that, and how to achieve that so that they don't have to be working at it so much. Then the horse can find a spot and they don't have to be prodding them to do it. If they have to push the horse to come up and get round, the horse isn't engaged behind. And sometimes that's because they're sitting too straight, or their foot is too far back. Or because they aren't floppy enough in the saddle. Sometimes I'll say, "Ride like a sack of potatoes!" And all of a sudden the horse will just drape their neck because they've released their back.

## Because there's less concussion on the horse?

Absolutely. She smacks her hands together. Less pounding.

And you have to be soft in your hands, too. I tell people to imagine they are holding ice cream cones or baby birds. A lot of it makes sense to an adult rider—they've had a lot of life experience, a lot of the rev I'm looking for, the energy from the hind legs and the tightening of the stride in front is like—if you're driving a standard transmission and you're sitting at a traffic light on a little hill, you're riding the clutch and the gas at the same time, and you're kind of revving it, that's where you are on the horse.

## Wow. I understand totally what you mean, sitting here in my chair I can feel what you're talking about.

Nods head. It's the refinement of it. ■