



≈ THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE ≈

Western Bits

Three decorative Western bits are displayed horizontally below the title. From left to right: a dark brown leather bit with a large, ornate metal mouthpiece; a silver bit with a large, ornate metal mouthpiece; and a gold bit with a large, ornate metal mouthpiece.

By Allyson Hughes

One of the most thorough discussions of Western bits you may ever read. A Western pleasure guru conducts an exhaustive interview with legendary manufacturer and “bit doctor” Les Vogt. And she invites reflections on favorite bits from some of our own breed’s masters of the art of Western pleasure.

Pictured above are, clockwise from top left, Santa Fe Renegade, Cherrydale Melania, Grand Cru Beaujolais and Roy-El’s Valentina (Photos © Howard Schatzberg). Also pictured are a selection of Les Vogt bits which includes, from left to right, LVCC Fresno #968, LVCC Fresno #46 and LVCC Fresno #1405.

Legendary Bit Doctor LES VOGT

How and why did you get into manufacturing bits?

LES VOGT: I got into manufacturing bits in about 1980. At that time it was a family business that was started by my father and then it gradually worked its way over to me through some of the other family. So our family has been involved in manufacturing bits for a long, long time. Why did I get involved? Well, I guess the bottom line is, like most other people who have horses, I've been really fascinated with bits. When I started, I had really good horses—I had the King Fritz horses and so on. They were pretty iron clad, invincible, tough, good horses. And I had a lot of bits—in fact, I had quite an arsenal of them. I'd just go shopping through them and try to find something that happened to work on each horse, but I never knew why. I'll never forget my Dad saying: "Les you have to become an expert in these bits right now." I said, "But how do you do that?" He said, "Start thinking." So that's basically what it amounted to, how I got into it and why.

I just love the tradition of bits and biting, and making better horses by having better tools to communicate with. And, my background of training reined-cow horses and reining horses is a huge plus, because it put me in a totally unique position of being the only volume bit maker that has had the depth of experience I've had on world champion horses. I knew a lot about horses, but I also knew there had to be lots of ways to improve my communication with them by improving the tools I used. And as a bit maker, it put me in a position to have access to any bit that I wanted—if I could dream of it, I could have it! I got to do a lot of experimenting to find out what worked and what didn't. I am a "why" person. If I wanted to know "why" a bit did or didn't work, then I'd dissect it as far as the pros and cons of each piece, until I could put things together in a positive way, by stacking the positives.

So I did exactly that. I literally went through hundreds of prototypes to come up with the "conclusions" that we offer today.

Have you had other trainers suggest new bits? And have bits changed over the years?

VOGT: I'm pretty much the bit doctor and, you know, I get lots of questions. Some trainers have their favorites, but not as far as suggesting new bits, no. And how they've changed over the years? Bits, in general, have not changed. However, my bits have changed dramatically in that I've fine-tuned all the parts and then categorized the bits—leverage positions and mouthpieces, to make it easier for a rider to figure out what's going to bring them the results they're after.

Tell me how you've categorized your bits?

VOGT: There are two parts to a bit. My bits are categorized by their leverage positions (mouthpiece location on the shank) and their mouthpiece power (hot to cold). Leverage position is where the mouthpiece is placed percentage-wise. The leverage position creates not only the leverage, but the speed of the bit—how long it takes for it to react from your hand to the final result, which is the curb strap. There are anywhere from two to four signals in a bit, if it's set up right.

The length of a bit cheek has nothing to do with the leverage. That's a huge misconception. A seven- or eight-inch cheek could have the same leverage as a ten-inch cheek, just depending on where you put the mouthpiece. A 4-to-1 leverage position means you move the bottom where the reins hook four inches to get one inch of actual closure on the curb strap. So that means it's slow, which is wonderful because in that four inches a number of "pre-signals" occur that allow your horse to know what's coming. Therefore, he can respond prior to the curb strap. So many of the bits these days are designed by other people that strictly work off the curb strap, and that means they work off of pain, instead of education.

So leverage position sounds like a math problem. How do I figure out the leverage of the bit and what does it mean?

VOGT: You just measure the top, measure the bottom, measure from the mouthpiece down. And that will give you the leverage position or ratio. If it's say six-inches down

below and two on top, then the leverage ratio is three-to-one because most of mine are eight inches. And that eight inches is calculated from the inside of the ear on top to the point of pull on the bottom ring. Then I offer varying leverage positions in all of my custom bits and the Performax bits. I don't think I know of anybody that's ever done that before.



Les Vogt on Nic It Smartly



Masterclass GARN WALKER

Garn Walker Stable



When we are making our decision on the proper bit for our horses, we have certain determining factors which allow us, we hope, to bit the horse correctly.

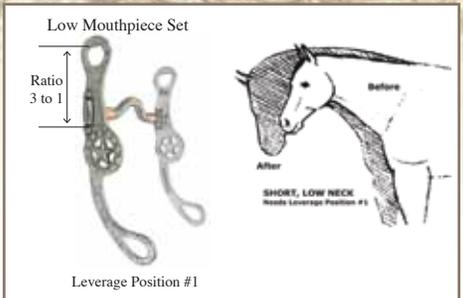
The age and level of the training, our knowledge of the anatomy of the horse's mouth, and the ability of the rider all factor into bit selection. The age determines what bit we can or cannot use—that is to say, junior horse vs. senior horse. Level of training allows us to choose different shapes and sizes of shanks and mouth pieces. The anatomy of the mouth gives us various hints for the choice of long, medium or short shanks, the length of the purchase and type and shape of the mouthpieces to use. The ability of the rider, which includes age, training level, show experience and dedication of our riders, helps us to choose one or two bits which should work between horse and rider. Based upon our determination factors, the four bits shown produced perfect moments in the show arena between horse and rider.

Bit number one—This is a Chief Rojas S shank, open port. Thicker at the shanks, thinner to the port. Good for older mature horses. Worn by He's Simply Marvelous to six world titles and nine Grand National titles.

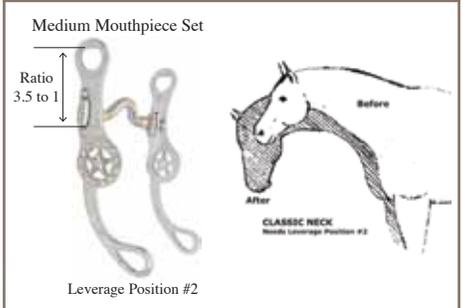
Bit number two—I do not know the maker of this one. It has a mild sweep to the shanks, covered medium port and a balanced purchase. This makes it a good overall bit for a senior horse. This bit was worn by Star Of Midnight to four world titles and four Grand National titles.

Bit number three—This is a Les Vogt bit, and is probably my favorite. Thanks Les. Beautiful balance, soft swept shanks, a proper purchase, and a mild copper covered port. Wonderful for a junior or senior horse. This was worn by multi-titled world and Grand National Champion Cabot French Lieutenant.

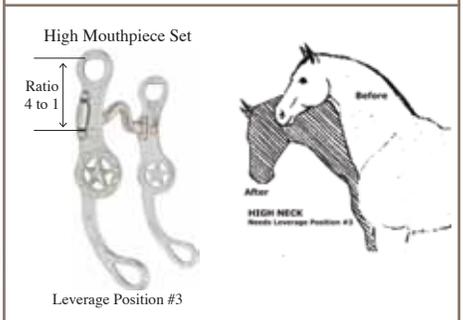
Bit number four—This bit is a handmade Myler bit. Beautiful silver, gold and jeweler's bronze inlaid on the swivel shank and purchase. A jointed uncovered medium port, with tongue release, makes for good control and response for a mature and older horse. This beautiful bit was worn by Fiddler'sCash Command to the Open Western World Championship, and then later to many Grand National titles.



Bit Leverage Position #1
For short necked horses with low neck set that need some lift at the poll to flex properly and re-distribute weight to the hind quarters.



Bit Leverage Position #2
Gives the classic necked horse the performance advantages of perfect neck flexion and head position.



Bit Leverage Position #3
For horses with higher neck & head carriage. Designed to lower high neck and head giving that soft flexion need to increase performance.

Here's how the leverage position works: the higher leverage drops the whole neck; mid-range leverage breaks the neck about in the middle (for nice necked horses with no problems); and low leverage will lift the shoulders (for horses that want to load in front). So leverage position shifts the load or the balance points of the horse to where you want them. It's not a computer chip, so you can't just put it on and say, "Here it is. Change right now Mr. Horse," because that doesn't seem to always happen. You'll find they have to become educated to the bit. But it's a well-designed bit to allow you to effectively communicate your desires to a horse without any pain.

Then the other part you need to find is the mouthpiece that demands the respect

that you've got to have. You've got to have your horse listening to you all the time. That's real important.

How are the mouthpieces rated?

VOGT: The mouthpieces I have are all numbered on a one, two and three scale. One's cold and three's hot. And so if you had a horse that was pushy you'd go with a three, rather than buy six bits or ten bits and then figure out what you want. You just start looking at category three because I know what will work with a horse like that. With my background I know which mouthpieces are hotter or colder, or have different pressure points that a horse will respond well to.

Soft Mouth • Mouthpiece Power #1		
LWWR	8	18
10X	19	54
Average Mouth • Mouthpiece Power #2		
10	58	61
92	95	99
Hard Mouth • Mouthpiece Power #3		
93	77	114

You mentioned "pre-signals." What exactly are "pre-signals?"

VOGT: Pre-signals are the number of signals that the mouthpiece is designed to give before the curb strap hits. In other words, it changes pressure points purposely. There are six pressure points: there are the corners; there's the palate; there's the tongue; there are the bars, straight down on the bar and the outer edge of the bars (the mouthpiece kind of squeezes on the outside). And the last pressure point that should work would be the curb strap. So many bits are set up around just the curb strap, which means the horse gets no pre-signal or forewarning before he can respond to signal one, two, three, or four

Masterclass

JUDY NASON

Bellewether

I have primarily used bits made by Vogt, but one is unmarked.

With Pondview Portrait, the 1991 Open Western Pleasure World Champion, and 1991-92 Ladies Western Pleasure World Champion, I used bit number one, a straight shank with a frog mouth in 1991 to 1992. When I returned to the ring with her in 1999, I used bit number two, a "C" port curb with a star style concho and back to forward curved shank. I gravitate to the shanks that are in line with the top of the ear (where the headstall attaches) to where the rein snaps on. I guess it comes from my background of starting English horses in curb bits, and they are straight line shanks. This gives me a comfortable feel of the leverage I have.

With Treble's Tanqueray, the 2007 Open Western Pleasure World Champion, I used a combination of three different bits. I very often will switch bits to keep their mouth fresh and alive. Bit number two is the same "star concho" bit with the "C" port that I used on Portrait; the second, bit number three, is a more weighty concho with the same curved shank. This one has a forward curved "C" port that is wider and has a bit more backward tilt to the port. It is a bit easier on them if they are in need of less torque. The third bit I used is bit number four, is one that has a concho that is a square with a nice round section in the center. The mouthpiece is a medium height hooded salinas port with a roller that long ago got stuck, so it is good for one that might otherwise overuse a roller. This was Tanqueray's first bit, and was effective off and on through the years I showed him. Other mouthpieces I use are the higher hooded salinas, a low rise, and the half breed. I probably have about 12 sterling show bits to choose from. Most are Vogt, others are Garcia, BC, and Sleister. Also, I will use both curb chains and leather straps, depending on the individual I am working with.



Photo © Saddle-Horse Report



Masterclass JEFF & AMY BESSEY Summerbird Farm



With Worked In Gold, world titled and National titled Western pleasure stallion, we progressed with three different bits. The first was used on him as a three-year-old, as he was a baby and needed a mild mouthpiece. He didn't know how to grab a shank and really didn't know how to use a curb. When he progressed to being a four-year-old stallion, he started being mouthy by playing with the shank. We moved him up into an "S" shank from Vogt to correct him. As a five-year-old he became more sophisticated and we introduced him to the "C" port a few times until he became more comfortable with it. This was more of a finesse bit that required light contact. We wanted to make sure he didn't scare himself. It did provide more respect for the bridle and gave us a polished ride.



prior to the curb strap; so he just waits for the pain.

How does changing up bits and pressure points impact a horse?

VOGT: If you brought me a horse and said he was a fire breather and you wanted to show him, rope on him, or you wanted to get one more season out of him, we'd look at the bit you'd been using and we'd change pressure points for sure. I ride with different pressure points when I'm schooling than when I'm showing. Horses don't get mad at you personally. You can scare them, but they don't get mad at you, they get mad at your bit. So when you change bits or pressure points, then it's amazing how quickly a horse straightens up and gets quiet and happy. I always, always, always take three bits to the arena when I go to ride. And if something is on the horizon, if there's a little confrontation coming up, we change bits. And I don't have those arguments anymore. It's a very conventional and also a very modern approach.

So if I've got a Morgan that needs his head picked up, what bit would I look for?

VOGT: Then you'd go with a low leverage bit. But, now, if you went with a low leverage bit to break out the poll, and say you had a horse that was a little bit hot, or pushy on the bit, then you would go with a category three mouthpiece. And so, you would go with a low leverage bit, but then you might need a little more mouth to compensate, to make him do what you want.

I want to say something before I forget here, I'm kind of off the subject but, my phone rings all day long and I talk to people and I try to prescribe a bit to help them maximize their horse's performance. So many people say, "Well my horse is really light and he's really super, he's so light, but he does all these horrible things." My point is people want to save the mouth, people want that light bit because they all love their horses, but that causes them more misery and grief than they can imagine. Think of it like a continuum: On the left you have mild, where you get no respect; medium, or half way over you get some respect; over to the right you have: lots of respect; Then over, just a tiny little bit past that it says fear. You want to be at: lots of respect. Absolutely. If you're babying your horse, and what you think you're doing is saving his mouth, there's no such thing. He's learning to push or disrespect the bit. And it's kind of like talking to a class that's looking out the window. Without respect your education is either blurry, foggy, dull or distorted. Certainly not clear. Disrespect means you're riding a plough horse, and you'll never get anywhere except to the field. That's the art form of bridling a horse, to ride softly with a bit that gets lots of respect.

What is a characteristic of a good, well-made bit?

VOGT: That would be pre-load. Pre-load is the certain amount of weight in the mouthpiece in relation to the shape of the cheek. The cheeks are designed purposefully so that they want to swing forward. I want them to seek out gravity; I'd love it if I could get one to go 45-degrees out front, if I held the mouthpiece in my hand, you know? And that's hard to get. Why? Because it seeks gravity out there and it's going to hang by it's ears, I call them. You know what I mean by that?

Masterclass DARYL HOPSON

Trafalgar



Photo © Howard Schatzberg

The photo I provided is of the bit I used on Grand Cru Beaujolais, the 2010 Open Western Pleasure World Champion and the 2004 Open Western Pleasure World Champion (with Keith Nelsen). As to why I use it, it's comfortable and complements my style of training. I usually look for bits with some tongue relief as Morgans tend to be bit busy in their mouths. I vary my bits by the length of the shank and the curb chain. I usually wrap my bits with latex to add cushioning. I rarely work my horses in their show bits; I will regularly rotate the type of bit in which I work and train each horse. The look and appearance of the show bit are also important considerations: a petite bit looks good on a pretty headed horse; a heftier bit matches a bigger headed horse. As to work bits, I use Myler bits (snaffles and curbs), an Elevator bit, and a bumper bit, to name a few.



So it stays more balanced?

VOGT: No, no, no. It's going to hang by its ears. You know what I mean by that?

No, I don't.

VOGT: The ears, I call them the ears, where your bridle goes through the top, the head strap that holds on top, you know?

Yes, now I know what you mean.

VOGT: Just like little ears, to me. So I call them ears for the sake of description. Your bit hangs by its ears. When it wants to seek gravity out in front of the horse, it gives it a spring-loaded effect. And it literally gets heavier the further back you pull it, even in your hand. And that's an amazing thing. But it does. The weight increases a lot. When you let go, if they're really pre-loaded, they let go quickly, which is the perfect essence, and they don't rock around and give a lot of false signals on your horse.

So does that enable you to give them release when the horse sets up or gives to you?

VOGT: Exactly. It can release so much more quickly. It's amazing. So we have pre-load, we have pre-signal, we have what we might call balance. Balance is always synonymous with gravity. In other words, when someone says I have balanced reins for sale, it means they have reins that have some pre-signal or gravity to them. Whether they're weighted, oiled or whatever they are. Compare that to baling twine as reins. That baling twine would have no pre-load, no balance whatsoever. Because when you pulled your horse, it would only feel your hand. If you have reins that are balanced with rawhide buttons, or whatever you do to get reins that have a little drape to them, "float" I call it, then your horse doesn't feel the dead end of your hand. He can respond as he feels the slack beginning to leave between your hand and the bit. Does that make sense?

That's more pre-signal.

VOGT: That's pre-signal, yeah. This is pre-signal and balance, yeah. But, you see, those both are to do with gravity. Am I getting too far out there?

No. No.

VOGT: Both are to do with gravity. Okay, so we have balance, pre-signal, pre-load. Pre-load is what they call that too, see? Balance and pre-load. Pre-signal is more, well that would be part of the pre-load, but in the mouthpiece there are a number of functions that would take a long time to talk about, but it's a matter of changing the pressure points in a series of really clear stages—one, two, three, four. Number five being the curb strap. Theoretically, your horse should work without curb strap pressure. It doesn't always seem to happen, but mine do, for sure. I leave my curb real loose and I want them to work off the mouthpiece.

Where should a curb strap be adjusted?

VOGT: Every bit should be adjusted on a one to ten scale. If you had the bit on the horse with no curb strap, every bit should be

Masterclass

EITAN BETH-HALACHMY

Wolf Creek Ranch



Bitting is and always will be a topic of interest. We all hope that a bit will have that particular magic that will make our horses happier working partners. As much as my comments are to be about particular bits, I have to say that for me it is not about the bit...it is about where the horse's feet are. If the feet are in the right place you will find just about any bit will work well.

Correct movement, balance and cadence is what makes a horse a "bridle horse." Not what bit is used. If the horse moves properly the head will be in the right place. To ride a horse properly with a bit requires you to ride from the back end of the horse to the front end...the bit is for sending and receiving messages to the horses, not to slow him down, set his head, et cetera. These things come from the rider's seat, hands and aids combined with balance, movement and cadence of the horse, not the bit itself.

We all strive for "collection." Collection is not a head set. To have true collection the withers must be higher than the croup...because the croup will drop down allowing the horse to round his back, engage, and stride deep under himself supporting more of his weight. You can have a hollow backed horse that moves with his hind end far out behind him, not supporting any of his weight thus throwing the horse on his front end. Try to ride a horse who is heavy on the front...you won't find a bit to fix that: you need to train the horse to move from behind, not on the front end. Do not think that an upheaved horse cannot be downhill or heavy on the front...they can.

Bitting is a long process. If you have bitting problems, do not change bits and expect miracles...go back to the beginning and start over. Get it right. Improve your riding. If there is one thing that will help any horse pack a bit, it is forward motion. This is not speed; it is torque—power from behind.

I start my young horses in a halter or side pull and then on to the snaffle bit. I then would move on to my transition bits, most often made by the Myler Bit Company. Because I trained and showed many young horses I preferred and used Myler bits. I liked their shank bits because they allow me the use of a direct or indirect rein, but when needed I can engage the chin strap as in a curb/shank bit. These bits, because of the way they were designed, also allow you to pick up a shoulder. I still use these bits often in my training process. They are excellent as a transition bit from the snaffle to the curb. Once my horses were ready to transition from the Myler I would go to a traditional curb. My favorites were bits with little or no port, or a straight bar from side to side. I like these bits because they lay on the horse's tongue which act as a cushion. These bits allowed the horse to use his tongue to pick the bit up and keep it off his bars....this is what is meant by a horse "carrying a bit." He literally carries the bit with his tongue to keep it off his bars allowing for more comfort.

No horse really likes a bit. You must give them the tools to deal with them in better comfort. It is up to you as a rider to help the horse along. There is an old saying, "fix the rider and you fix the horse." Before you start looking for the miracle bit, think about what you can do to improve yourself and your horsemanship.

Eitan's bits (top to bottom): Half-breed Salinas mouth piece, shank angle; Half-breed Salinas mouth piece with a Santa Barbara shank. This is for an advanced horse who is light and responsive. If done properly it should take a long time and lots of patience to get to this stage of training; Myler with low port tongue relief; Mullen Mouth Myler bit, used in early training from the snaffle to a shank-type bit.

Masterclass ALLYSON HUGHES

Article Author

adjusted so that if you pulled it straight back from 1 being normal, more or less perpendicular to the ground, and ten being horizontal with no curb strap, every bit should be adjusted for your base line where the curb strap stops your bit at five. If you have the curb strap too tight, your mouthpiece will not rotate and, therefore, you don't get anywhere near the pre-signal. The tight curb strap makes the bit really fast, and fast is not good in a bit. Then you can change one hole, plus or minus, depending on the feel you get. The two-finger theory is junk and if you did two fingers, you wouldn't even slow down. So it makes no sense at all. It's just an absurd rule.

What should you be looking at when adjusting a curb, height-wise, in the horse's mouth?

VOGT: The two wrinkles, as far as height goes, again is a wife's tale, it's outdated and old school.

If you want to drop the neck, collect and round the horse, you lower the horse's bit, drop the bit lower. And if you want to lift him and have him break higher at the poll, pull some wrinkles. Simple stuff. And don't always school with same adjustment and the same place that you're going to show. That'd be crazy. Why would you make him a little nervous or why would you even make him familiar with a certain spot in his mouth and then take him to a show and expect him to be fluffy and bright? Familiarity breeds disrespect in a bit. Same reason I don't school with my show bits. You leave your show bit hanging in your tack room. Put it on one day before you go and you're much better off.

What about the angle of the shank of the bit? Does it impact the performance of a bit?

VOGT: Angle of the shank only creates the pre-load. The angle of the shank has nothing to do with leverage, which is a misunderstood concept. The numbers are the numbers. In other words, if it's eight inches long, I don't care if it comes down and makes a "7," I don't care if it makes a lightning bolt, or if it's an "S" shank and it comes back and then down. I don't care if it's a straight Las Cruces up and down shank. I don't care if it's swept back like a

I choose bits to meet each individual horse and their level of sophistication. I particularly like the Vogt Performax work bits because they allow you to change one variable (either the leverage position or the mouthpiece power) and see the result. You can then have the "perfect combination" made into a show bit by Les.

Bit number one is what I currently use to show Cherrydale Melania, the 2010 Ladies Western Pleasure World Champion. It is low leverage with a mild mouthpiece with a Santa Barbara cheek style. Bit number two is the other bit I show her in. It is a high leverage, mild mouthpiece Vogt bit with a jointed cheek style. Melania has a very light and quiet mouth. I was originally concerned with her mouth as she had been an English horse with her tongue tied and used to a cavesson. I chose these bits because they are mild with a small amount of tongue relief.

Bit numbers three and four, respectively, are the work bits I use for Melania. They are Leverage 3 and Leverage 2 Les Vogt Performax bits with Mouthpower 1's. I like the jointed cheek style of the Performax bits: the jointed cheek style allows me to do a lot of lateral work and neck suppling. The Performax bits also have copper barrels wrapping the mouthpiece which adds circumference to the bit, creating greater comfort for the horse. Melania actually leans down and looks for the bit when I'm putting the bridle on her. I also work her in a twisted snaffle and a gag snaffle for variety and to maintain lightness.

Bit number five is an old-school California-style silver bit I used on Nemours Peter Piper, the 1989 Open Western Pleasure World Champion. It's a Vogt with a Mona Lisa mouthpiece. Peter was somewhat pushier and had a tendency to put his tongue over regular bits, so the hood kept his tongue where it needed to be.

I like to analyze each horse to determine what bit will be comfortable for that individual, but at the same time maintain respect. And of course, the physical and mental training of the horse must accompany the proper biting.

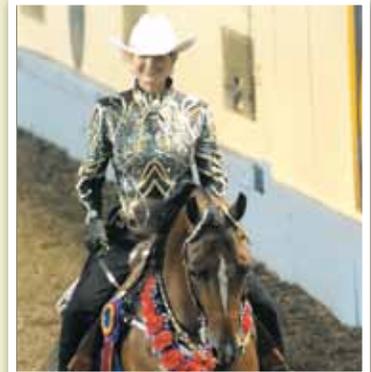
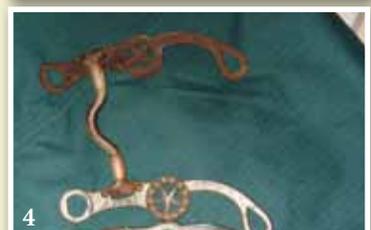


Photo © Howard Schatzberg



cutting horse bit. The distance is still the distance. The leverage is still the same. In other words, the angle of the cheek has zero effect on the leverage. It only has effect on balance or pre-load.

Are there certain cheek styles that have better pre-load?

VOGT: Absolutely.

Which cheek styles have better pre-load?



Santa Barbara Style Cheek

VOGT: Take a Santa Barbara style cheek. That bit has a big bubble on the back side, the rider's side of it, so that means it really releases a lot and there's really a good reason for that particular cheek to exist. Anything that has more weight or metal behind the mouthpiece has more pre-load. So, of course, a bit with a forward mount mouthpiece, on the front of the cheek, has more pre-load than a mouthpiece that is center-mounted. And you don't even have to hold it in your hand. You can look at the bit and see.

Let's talk about the inside of the horse's mouth and the different bits. What bits are useful for training?

VOGT: First thing you have to realize is every horse's mouth is shaped differently, just like your feet and mine. They're hardly ever the same. There are fat tongues, thin tongues. Wide tongues, narrow, thin. Their bars aren't the same and their palates definitely aren't. You need to look in there. That's kind of the rule of thumb. You've got to start somewhere and find a baseline. You know your horse's pain tolerances and, if it's a horse that's been pushy a year or two in your life, then you're going to start with something a little hotter. Like a straight bar, to me, is valueless. That works right off the curb strap. I wouldn't ride any horse with it—people think they're being gentle with them—their horse doesn't think so!

As for training, the snaffle bit is to create your horse and to fix form. We don't fix maneuvers, we fix form. Everything is form to function these days. And this is what my bits are about: form, to create a form. If you create the form you need with any performance horse, you will have the function done. People try to fix functions. Functions are spins, stops, turns, cow work, lead changes, and so on. They try to fix a particular issue, instead of the cause of the issue. And the cause is always in the form and the suppleness of the neck. And the neck is governed so much by the bit or tool it should have. It's not wise to try to repair things with a leverage bit as compared to a snaffle.

What are useful training bits? How does the Elevator bit work?

VOGT: Well, the Elevator's my favorite tool, for sure. The Elevator is simply one to one ratio like a snaffle and it has, as mentioned, low leverage. It has a lot of lift. Particularly if you want a lot of lift in the shoulders. If you have a horse's head tipped to the left, you



Elevator Bit

can sure lift that left shoulder up, too. I use it a lot. It's just really, really a handy tool.

Is the basis of the Elevator that when you pick up the rein, it raises the bit into the corners of their mouth?

VOGT: Yes. One to one, so you get lift.

So does it function like a gag snaffle?

VOGT: Not really at all. No. You'll get some lift stretch, but if you have it set high in your horse's

mouth, you will get lots of lift. On the other hand, the Elevator can drop one, too. If you want to leave it a half-inch off the corners, you can get a huge amount of drop in that neck. So you can get what you want out of an Elevator—up or down—that's why it's called an "Elevator."

There are also lots and lots of pre-signals on an Elevator. You've got a fairly loose curb strap or curb chain. So you will get about an inch-and-a-half of stretch, then the horse feels the, "Hey don't you wish you had responded" curb chain.

The Elevator bit itself is long, it's about ten inches I'm going to say. I could have made it six or eight inches and would have worked very close to the same, but I wouldn't have gotten the lift out of it that I get with the bit the way it's set up. The leverage on a regular, conventional snaffle with reins, when you pull it, that's one to one also. So there is no leverage involved on a Elevator bit. But it's just different torque, a different lift factor and then there's the reminder at the end of the pull, if you have to pull so much that the chain intervenes. So it has a lot of pre-signal.

And is an Elevator good if you've got horse that's heavy, that isn't good in just a regular snaffle and you're looking for another work bit?

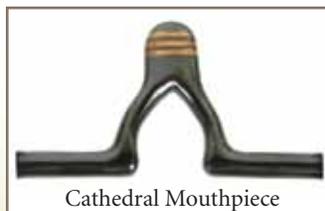
VOGT: It's good for any time you need to move up in your education and you're getting a busy signal.

So if they're disrespecting you in a snaffle?

VOGT: You're getting a busy signal. You know?

(Chuckle) The busy signal. Okay.

VOGT: I don't like busy signals at all.



Cathedral Mouthpiece

One follow up question. You mentioned the Cathedral bits and how they impact the palate of the mouth. How do you know when you want to work off a horse's palate?

VOGT: Well, if you are kind of running out of places. If you want a lot of flex to him or a lot



of attention and he's doesn't have a lot of tendencies to open his mouth. If he opens his mouth big with a snaffle bit, you'd certainly never dream about bridling him with a Cathedral. Horses that open their mouth typically either have a fat tongue or the cavity underneath their tongue is not much of a cavity, so it's shallow. Therefore, their tongue's up on a platform and so they get tongue pressure from most bits. If you were a horse or I was, you'd open your mouth to get away from it. You'll find that tongue set-up most often, with horses that want to get up or open their mouth.

Because I've always wondered, if you had a horse that flipped their tongue up over their bits, would a Cathedral bit work?

VOGT: You could sure use it that way. Either that or a high port. Something they can't get their tongue around.

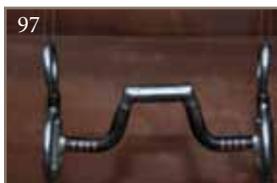
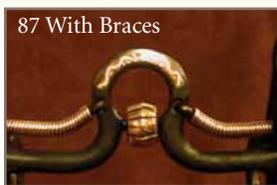


What are some of the newer mouthpieces?

VOGT: Go to the Vogt bit gallery and go to mouthpieces. These mouthpieces are fairly new and more sophisticated.

Number 77 puts pressure outside of the bars and it squeezes down as you pull.

I like the sway braces in Number 87. Number 87 puts the same pressure point as Number 77, but the sway braces pop back and forth. The bit cheeks are set loose enough that when you pull or neck rein it's like a machine. Those braces move right and left every time you rein one way or the other. And the tongue is in contact with those braces. So your horse really knows what you're thinking.



So it gives extra pre-signal?

VOGT: Oh, yeah. And it's really fun. It's not like maybe it works. It works big time.

Mouthpieces like Number 97 and Number 95 lift shoulders. I've made some with high leverage that will



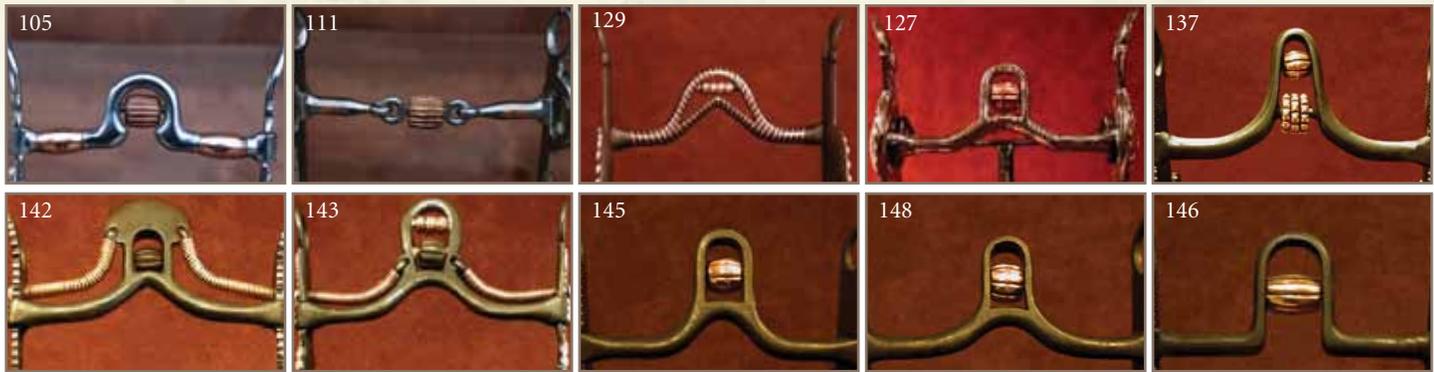
USEF Rules REGARDING WESTERN BITS

There shall be no discrimination against any standard Western bit. A standard Western bit is defined as having a shank with a maximum length overall of 8 1/2". The mouthpiece will consist of a metal bar 5/16" to 3/4" in diameter as measured one inch in from the shank. The bars may be inlaid but must be smooth or latex wrapped. Nothing may protrude above or below the mouthpiece (bar) such as extensions, prongs or rivets designed to intimidate the horse. Rollers attached to the center of the bit are acceptable, and may extend below the bar. Jointed mouthpieces are acceptable and may consist of two or three pieces and may have one or two joints. A three-piece mouthpiece may include a connecting ring of 1 1/4" or less in diameter or a connecting flat bar of 3/8" to 3/4" (measured top to bottom with a maximum length of 2"), which lies flat in the mouth, or a roller or port as described herein. The port must be no higher than 3 1/2" maximum with roller(s) and covers acceptable. Jointed mouthpieces, half-breeds and spade bits are standard. Slip or gag bits, rigid donut mouthpieces and flat polo mouthpieces are prohibited. Roping bits with both reins connected to a single ring at center of cross bar shall not be used. Reins must be attached to each shank. Any rein design or other device which increases the effective length and thereby the leverage of the shank of a standard western bit is prohibited. Anything that alters the intended use of equipment as provided for in the description of appointments for a given class is considered to be an artificial appliance.

Standard snaffle bits are permitted in any class on a junior horse five years old and under. A standard snaffle bit is defined as a center jointed single rounded, unwrapped smooth mouthpiece of 5/16" to 3/4" diameter metal as measured from ring to 1" in from the ring with a gradual decrease to the center of the snaffle. The rings may be from 2" to 4" outside diameter of either the loose type, eggbutt, dee or center mounted without cheeks. The inside circumference of the ring must be free of rein, curb or headstall attachment hooks. If a curb strap is used it must be attached below the reins. Closed reins (example mecate) on a snaffle bit are prohibited.

Hackamores are permitted in any class on a junior horse five years old and under. A hackamore includes a bosal rounded in shape and constructed of flexible braided rawhide or leather and must have a flexible nonmetallic core attached to a suitable headstall with maximum diameter of 3/4" at the cheek. Attached reins may be of hair, rope or leather. No other material of any kind is to be used in conjunction with a bosal, i.e., steel, metal or chains (Exception: smooth plastic electrical tape is acceptable).

Horses shall not be shown with artificial appliances that would tend to alter their performance. Curb chains and leather chin straps may be used but must be flat and at least 1/2" in width and lie flat against the jaws of the horse. No wire, rawhide, metal or other substance can be used in conjunction with or as part of the leather chin strap, or curb chains. Rounded, rolled, braided or rawhide curb straps are prohibited. A light lip strap is permissible. Hackamore bits, bosals, cavesson type nosebands, martingales and tie-downs are prohibited. A judge does not have the authority to add or to remove any of the standard equipment as specified above.



drop the neck and lift shoulders, which were really fun.

Number 105 is like your Frog mouthpiece and it's a good mouthpiece. It's right down the middle of the road. Not hot, not cold.

Then 111 is just nice. The reason we have a roller in the middle is because, when you pull your snaffle you have different pressure points than you would have if you had a toggle in the front.

And that would be something very mild?

VOGT: Yeah.

Now we're getting to Number 129 and that is new and really has nice pressure points on the outside of the bars. There's a lot of pre-signal to it.

Number 127 has a little sharper break in the curb up towards the port, which gives you a little more bar pressure as it catches the outside edges of the bars, which is one of my favorite places to work on.

Then Number 137 is a wonderful mouthpiece and horses really enjoy it. It has a little more rise to it, but then again works on the outside of the bars and it could touch the palate. But it would only touch it, not very much. It's just a little more than a mid-range.

Number 142 is huge as a spade. It took me three years to develop. Probably almost 40 different prototypes to make a user-friendly spade. Number 142 works really good and it's the only spade I use.

Number 143 is on the same principle as Number 142. And they're both results of a lot of years of experimenting with different prototypes.

Number 145 comparatively to Number 148, right below it. You can see Number 145 lifts over the tongue just a little more.

Then Number 146. Of course you see those edges there, where you have square corners that are close together like that, it's going to put tongue pressure because you might want that on certain horses.

How does the circumference of the mouthpiece relate to the function of the bit?

VOGT: Typically, the smaller mouthpiece would attract more attention [be more severe] from your horse. Most of mine are 3/8ths. I have been surprised at different times in my life when I have gone with a bigger mouthpiece and have gotten a better response. Because a horse, you don't know what he's thinking always. If he's thinking he's a little concerned or apprehensive because it's a little too small for him or he's afraid of the pain, then

he'll act heavy against it. If you go to a bigger or fatter one, he might soften up. Usually a smaller diameter mouthpiece is more functional and gets more respect.

What are the different finishes?

VOGT: The finishes are un-dyed or uncolored, brushed steel and that's really nice. You can also have stainless steel, which will never rust. You can have a stainless steel mouthpiece too, if you want and it will never rust. People will say, "Oh, what about the slobber value of a sweet iron, which all of our bits have sweet iron with copper inlay. That story was true for the horses they rode out on the range all day long and they needed that kind of moisture retention. But, if someone's squeamish about, "I don't want rust on my bit" you can order stainless steel mouthpiece. We don't do it much, but I've ridden with them and never noticed a difference. We can put copper in it. And the copper inlay is in the mouthpiece. The taste of sweet iron and copper is a bitter-sweet taste. I've tasted it and it makes you salivate a little. The other finishes are, like I say, stainless, brushed steel. I can go blue, black, brown, gray, or oxidized. That's an antique finish.

I can make custom bits with alpaca silver too, which is less money. So I can do three different ways. I can sell you a pre-made Performax, I can do custom silver bits which are gorgeous, and the alpaca silver custom are very nice as well. That's becoming very popular, very fast because silver has tripled in the past year.

Does the weight of the bit impact its effect?

VOGT: The weight doesn't affect the bit when you pull on it much, but some horses are sensitive to it. That's one where you have to experiment with it. If you don't like the way your horse feels in a certain bit, you can do the cheeks in a 5/32" width: they're thinner, a little nicer. I like them but I don't like to do a lot of them because people bend them sometimes if they're not really good horsemen and I don't like fixing them. 5/32" is thin; 3/16" is normal. Most of the cheeks on mine are made 3/16". Quarter inch would be very stout. The weight you want totally, totally depends on the horse. You can't generalize that at all. I think that 3/16ths is very universal. Of course, your bigger bits, California style, weigh a lot more.

How much should someone expect to pay for a custom made silver bit? How much for a pre-made Performax bit?

VOGT: For custom silver bits, anywhere from \$475 to \$575, depending on how many whistles and bells you want. The spades are more money. The pre-made Performax bits range from \$119 to \$135.

It's been fascinating to talk with you, Les. I feel I've only scratched the surface of your wealth of knowledge. On behalf of the Morgan community, thank you for your contributions to the show horse industry.

To date Les has 31 championship titles to his name. He's been inducted into the National Reined Cow Horse Association Hall of Fame. In 1992 he took Chex A Nic to the Quarter horse World show and won

both the Senior Reining and the Senior Working Cow horse, the first time the same horse had won both events in one year. He's hosted television programs. His image has graced the covers of countless magazines and he's put on clinics and produced videos for Pros and amateurs. Although he is semi-retired now, he still enjoys riding for pleasure, giving clinics and has made a business of designing intricate bits and spurs. His website is located at www.LesVogt.com.

In spite of his tremendous success in the show ring, Les hopes to be remembered for something beyond the horse world. "I think that I would want to be remembered as someone who never wasted a moment. That in the search for excitement, found it, didn't just talk about it." ■



UVM Lancer & Sue, 1967

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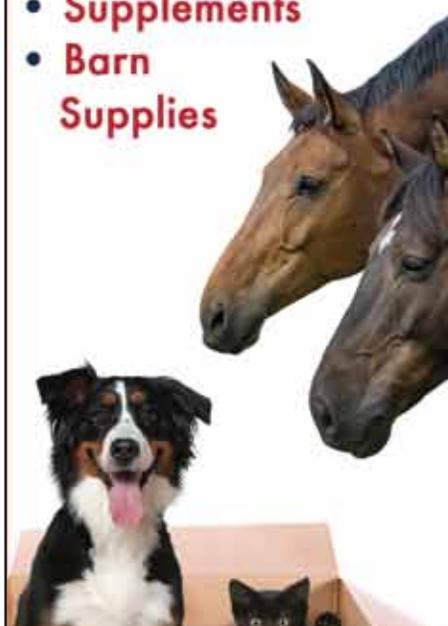
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