

## **The Curb: A Finely Polished Instrument - by Egon von Neindorff tr: Thomas Ritter - ©1999 - All Rights Reserved**

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When a horse is fully developed in the basic gaits from collection to extension, and completely balanced on straight and round lines, he also becomes mature enough for the rein conduct with one hand. The snaffle allows this riding with one hand in the arena for practice purposes, but outdoors it is generally possible only for short periods of time. For most riders this is a far cry from the goal of the horse's safe and finely tuned guidance even in rugged terrain, or high demands in the arena. The lever action of the curb bit and the curb chain through its shanks and upper segments can easily replace the second hand when the reins are brought into a light contact. However, this requires that the rider does not disturb the previously achieved relaxation or the horse's permeability with his own clumsiness; for, the far greater effectiveness of the curb lever compared to the snaffle bit would quickly render an instrument of greater finesse into an overly sharp, i.e. very soon ineffective, weapon against the horse.

Unfortunately, this has often happened. For this reason, many riding enthusiasts refuse to use this instrument that is more difficult to learn. The correct effect of the curb begins with its correct adjustment, which plays a greater role than with the simple snaffle. And if many modern riders think that the double bridle should not be used in 2nd level (Klasse L) dressage tests, with a view to showjumping, one should not forget: this would also mean to say goodbye to safe guidance with one hand cross country. Besides, it is especially the finely tuned curb that gives the rider, on the sufficiently prepared horse, a better chance of developing the permeability and, with it, the horse's beauty.

This already leads to the second prerequisite of the correct double bridle usage. The rider must have learned first to use his hand with the finest nuances and completely independently of his own body movements. Most importantly, he must not see the double bridle as an emergency brake with which to "curb" spirited or spoilt horses, in order to make them obedient, prevent them from bolting, or to force them into a certain "frame" and position. Cruel travesties of abusive double bridle riding did, and still do exist, unfortunately.

For, once the lever action of the curb becomes a painful torture instrument for jaw and bars, one often accomplishes the exact opposite of what was intended: the horse resists with all his strength, often until the nerve endings in the chin and lower jaw die. With a "dead mouth" and superior muscle power it enters the tug-of-war against the rider's hand. And he always wins, the more so as soon as he has enough experience in pulling, in running away, up to bolting, and the more strength the rider has wasted in the wrong place. After all, even holding the curb reins unelastically or too high leads to overflexing or overelevating (ewe neck) the horse's neck.

Today's dressage sport is no longer a matter of life and death, as the military riding of old. However, one has to demand safety in traffic even of today's trail rider, the mounted participant

in a parade, as well as of any other user of public roadways. The double bridle is a good tool, in this respect, if it is used properly, and there is no convincing reason to reject it as supposedly anachronistic. It is not without good reason that the 2nd level dressage tests require the double bridle as standard (snaffle only in exceptional cases).

However, one should expect horses that have been developed honestly through high school level (as in my institute) to be able to produce their movements flawlessly with a snaffle as well. This requires not only a rider who can ride the school horse appropriately (even rarer today than in the past); in the right hands the curb's lever action also increases with most subtle hints the expressiveness and movement of the honestly schooled, and that means a completely supple horse. Using a double bridle prior to this stage is nonsense anyway.

Certainly, the curb did not become a tool for subtle aiding through the course of history without errors along the way. When Griso's most important student and successor in Naples, Pignatelli, developed it out of the often quite harsh bits about 400 years ago (he seems to be credited unanimously with the invention of the curb), it was important to keep the rider's right hand free for wielding the weapon, without losing control over the horse. For the armored and therefore relatively heavy, less sensitive stallions, many of whom were pure draft horses, the curb shanks were made excessively long. In hard riders' fists on nobler horses they became veritable torture instruments. Only when the widespread success of gunpowder forced the introduction of fast, maneuverable, and hence nobler horses instead of heavy knight's horses, the curb bit in its many forms became smaller in the dimensions of its shanks again as well. Soon, other harsh features, such as excessive ports, were abolished too.

## **THE CURB MUST "SIT" AS WELL!**

In Europe and in most countries outside of Europe, relatively mild curb bits in combination with a bridoon have become the norm. Also, instead of curbs with S-shaped shanks (which make it almost impossible for the horse to seize the curb with his teeth) one generally uses curbs with straight levers. The same fitting rules apply for the bridoon as for the mild hollow loose ring snaffle. If the double bridle is to avoid any irritation of the horse's head and mouth, there are other considerations as well. E.g., the brow band must be long enough to preclude chafing on the ears, since the double bridle has two sets of cheek pieces, one for the bridoon and one for the curb. The curb bit has to lie where the lip begins ("curb chain groove"), and must not touch the hooks in the case of geldings. The width of the bit is determined by the width of the horse's mouth. It must not jut out of the mouth on either side, but the upper segments must not pinch the skin of lips and cheeks either.

For noble, sensitive horses one furthermore selects bits with a small port, except if the horse shows the tendency to take his tongue over the bit. - If one has to choose a curb with a bigger port, one has to be especially careful not to injure the jaw or the palate with it.

Although the correct position of the curb chain has been described numerous times, that has not prevented recurrent mistakes from happening in its adjustment. It shall therefore be repeated again here. First of all, before the curb chain is attached to the hooks that are slightly bent

outward, it has to be rotated to the right until all its links lie flat and smooth against each other. Only in the middle of the chain there is an additional ring that remains separate on its outside. It is intended for the small "lip chain" that used to be attached to the little holes in the curb shanks. It prevented horses who had learned to grab the curb shanks with their mouth from rendering the bit ineffective this way. (Today the lip chain has become mostly obsolete).

How many rings of the curb chain are left hanging on either side of the curb chain on the outside of the hooks depends again on the conformation of the jaw, especially its width. The curb chain can act correctly only if it lies on the same level on the jaw as the bit. In other words, when the bit is correctly adjusted (as mentioned, at the curb chain groove), the curb chain must rest against the chin on the same level, immediately above the starting point of the lower lip. The shanks of the modern curb bits then form an angle of approximately 45 degrees with the mouth, when the reins are in light contact, whereas they run parallel with the mouth, when the reins are dropped. Neither a smaller angle nor a curb that "falls through" can fulfill its purpose.

When fitting a double bridle, one should always follow closely the guidelines in good books. The correct fit of the double bridle should always be rechecked before each use. This is especially important with new leather, since it stretches with use.

Only if the bridle is fitted carefully, one will be able to ride and learn to ride honestly schooled horses safely with one hand in traffic as well as cross country. Only if the curb is correctly fitted and applied, the road to an artistic refinement of the aids remains open. As embarrassing as it is to call this most subtle guidance instrument for knowledgeable hands "hopelessly outdated" in the presence of experts, the curb is not a cure all. In ignorant or brutal hands it can even become the "razor blade in the hands of a madman."

## **THE RIDER'S HAND HAS TO BE READY FOR THE CURB**

If the *Kreuz* (abdominal, back, and shoulder muscles, TR) is the conductor in the orchestra of the rider's aids, the delicately used curb can be likened to the bow of the first violinist. For it acts like the "stroke of the bow that draws one sound from two strings", to use a *Rilke* metaphor. The generally (at least unilaterally) restraining rein aid derives its true effectiveness only from the corresponding driving aids, anyway. That goes even more for the combination of snaffle and curb leverage.

Before each half halting, yielding, or supporting rein aid that is supposed to travel all the way to the hind leg, the horse must be ridden into the aids by the rider's *Kreuz* and leg. Then, the curb's lever action imparts great power, even laterally differentiated, to the smallest rotation of the hand. Therefore, the way of holding the reins of the double bridle results in clear differences in the effect of the curb.

The different ways of holding the reins of the double bridle are explained and contrasted in their specific purposes clearly and easy to remember in word and image in Wilhelm Müsseler's famous "Riding Logic". In the new, revised edition (it is the 39th edition already) of "Müsseler" the most

common types of rein conduct with the double bridle are described as follows:

"The conduct with divided reins (2:2) is the easiest one to learn. The reins should be held in such a way that the softer snaffle becomes active first, and the sharper curb second. Its advantage is that the rider does not need to adjust the reins when changing the horse's bend, in order to prevent the outside curb rein from becoming too tight. This way of holding the reins is also useful in jumping and cross country riding, since the rider can yield with both hands along the horse's neck- depending on its stretch - without losing the reins.

"The 3-in-1 conduct requires a considerably longer training and more skill. Since the left hand has to stand in the middle of the body, while the right hand is placed in front of the right hip, the hand position is asymmetrical. If both hands are held symmetrically, the curb acts at an angle. This obviously causes endless mistakes.

"The advantage of the 3-in-1 conduct is that it represents a more subtle rein conduct, since the rider is forced to guide his horse mainly with his left hand. The left hand is generally the weaker one, and riding with one hand only instead of both hands leads to less physical exertion, i.e. greater subtlety. It also makes the transition to the conduct with one hand easier.

"The Fillis conduct has the advantage of even greater subtlety, because the different purpose of the two bits, the more elevating snaffle and the more collecting effect of the curb, can be exploited better.

"Those who are used to the 3-in-1 conduct run into difficulties when trying out the Fillis conduct, since the movements of the hands have to be completely different, due to the different placement of the snaffle and curb reins in the hand. Any rotation of the fist in the sense that the little fingers rise towards the chest, would result in a stronger effect of the curb, which is now at the bottom. The rider would have to unlearn this movement first, if he is able to. Since he probably won't be able to, since he is used to the other rein conduct, the Fillis conduct will cause him to become too hard with his hand."

Which conduct the rider chooses in each individual case depends among other things on the horse's training stage and prior development, as well as on the purpose of the intended exercise.

The most important consideration in any type of double bridle rein conduct is to avoid any unintentional pressure on the horse's jaw, that the driving aids always go through the poll without resistance to the quietly chewing mouth and that the contact always remains elastic like a "rubber band". Here especially the bit in connection with the curb chain must act only as a sieve that merely filters the flow of the horse's movement, but never impedes, much less interrupts it.

Those who have experienced how playfully easily even a big moving horse remains on the rider's driving aids, how he is guided through all patterns and movements, and can be halted any time, just to follow the releasing rein hand impulsively forward, when the curb is used

appropriately and if the horse is sufficiently prepared, will appreciate the value of the double bridle. They will also guard themselves against its premature or rough use. Those who are as yet unfamiliar with the curb's effect, and hence its dangers, should make a simple test with their own body - an experiment with which I have convinced numerous, even experienced, riders. Place a curb bit over your shinbone and a curb chain that is attached to its hooks on both sides behind your calf. Even a small arret on the rein enables you through a noticeable pressure on your shinbone to imagine what the horse has to feel when the curb is used harshly. Therefore again: The curb belongs only into the hand of the mature and thus sensitive rider!