

Some Thoughts on the Hackamore

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There are many different ideas floating around the country about the hackamore and how it is to be used. Its very makeup seems to be a mystery to many and its function even more elusive. How such a simple concept became so complex is beyond many dyed in the wool traditionalists but, be that as it may, some information about the hackamore is outlined here.

The snaffle bit came into play late in the game, in vaquero terms – showing up en masse when the British came onto the scene. Until then, the hackamore ushered most new mounts onto the payroll. It is no mystery to most that horses were started later in life in our not so distant past. Genetics, feed and the rigors of ranch life deemed it so. “Older blooded” horses were colder blooded horses – maturing later both mentally and physically. Feed, at least in many arid regions, fluctuated with the seasons and sparse times, along with long outside winters, held growth in check for many colts. It was not uncommon then for horses to grow substantially, well after their fifth or sixth year on earth.



What seems to stump most folks is the reasoning behind schooling the horse with the absence of a bit. Since the use of a bit is the end result down the road and since the horse has, in most modern day cases, already accepted the snaffle bit in its mouth, why then would we “change up” in mid stream and go to the hackamore? The most basic answers can be found straight from the horse’s mouth.

The Changing

One concept that fostered and continued the advocacy of the hackamore was the changing nature of a horse’s mouth; particularly during the years that the teeth doing the changing are the ones directly involved with the bit. This seemed to line up with a horse’s coming four to coming five year old years. The changing of teeth marked the time a horseman did well to keep out of Mother Nature’s way and steer clear of their horse’s potentially sore and sensitive mouth.

Unfortunately, most modern-day trainers ignore the changing of a horse’s teeth. The best of horsemen are sensitive to the horse’s demeanor, ever searching for the subtle hints that indicate and instruct him on his journey. Only the keenest of horsemen, while paying attention to the messages their horse sends to them, understands that the condition of the animal’s mouth is one message he would do well to consider.

The hackamore was the obvious solution; it afforded the horseman the freedom to continue using and advancing his mount through the changing of his teeth. What most horsemen never counted on, however, was the added benefits the change offered them, while working through the differences the hackamore brought to light.

The Makings

Hackamores come in many different sizes and diameters, as well as different materials. Natural



products are a must. They are more forgiving in nature, breath as they should and adjust to the shape and temperature of the animal.

Most traditional hackamores are made of braided rawhide. The good ones are braided around a natural core. That core might be a piece of worn out reata, twisted rawhide or perhaps an old piece of worn out horse hair mecate. They may be braided from eight to thirty-two strings with the average number of strings used hovering around twelve to sixteen. Sometimes another leather is used to make the strings and may be used in combination with the rawhide or alone.

The diameter of the hackamore needs some discussion. There are basically three types of braided “hackamore” type pieces of equipment. The hackamore, as we are discussing in this article, is the piece of equipment used alone, in the earlier stages of training. It is held to the horse with a simple leather “hanger” – a simple headstall, usually made of a softer leather and tied at the near side of the horse’s head. It is used with a horse hair mecate, traditionally. The hackamore is usually 3/8” to 7/8” in diameter.

The next level of equipment, for definition’s sake, is the small “two rein” variety, usually 1/4” to 5/16” in diameter, and is worn with the bridle and a small mecate. The third piece of equipment often confused with the hackamore is the even smaller “underbridle bosal” used with a shorter lead mecate for finished bridle horses. It is often delicate, usually not more than 1/4” in diameter, fitting subtly beneath the bridle. It is a lead as well as a mark of distinction for the bridle horse.

The “true” hackamore of this article is the larger of the three.

The Eye of The Needle

Perhaps we may never be able to lead a camel through the eye of a needle but the vaquero has successfully ridden a horse through one, delicately threading their horses through their maneuvers. The hackamore man does not drag his horses around by the nose, but rather places the hackamore in different positions and encourages his mount to willingly maintain a body posture that supports those positions.

The hackamore stage of training is perhaps the most risky stage of the game. How a cowboy manages himself and his horse during the hackamore process may critically define the horse’s future sensitivities. If misused or abused, a horse will quickly learn to “run through” the hackamore. Heavy hands and erratic cues can numb a horse quickly and destroy any respect the horse may have for the most basic cues like “stop” or maybe even “slow down.” Once a horse has been wrongly taught to ignore the cowboy’s cues in a hackamore, serious ground will be lost in regards to training that may

never fully be regained. Much is at stake when the hackamore goes on and a good hand knows and honors the unique idiosyncrasies of his equipment.

A Good Fit

The hackamore should fit comfortably on the horse's nose, much like a hat is fitted to a human head. Not too tight, not too loose. It should be fairly soft while still retaining a measure of firmness and shape. A hackamore that is too soft loses all its structure and balance. One that is too hard might be severe or awkward, loading large amounts of pressure in small areas. Sores and tenderness may result. Typically, pain is distracting. Horses will focus on that pain or irritation and miss the subtler cues the rider is offering him.

As mentioned, the hackamore is used with a mecate to provide the correct feel and weight. The mecate, when wrapped and tied properly, helps to size the hackamore to the particular horse as well as weight it in such a way it hangs as it should and releases when it should.

Though there have been gimmicks added to the hackamore and odd, more severe offshoots have been designed, the traditional hackamore, when made correctly and used as it was designed to be used, offers a comfortable fit and a balanced presentation.



Horsemanship Exposed

What most good hands soon learn when using the hackamore is the simple fact that there are maneuvers and exercises that a horse might be “made” to do in a snaffle bit, but the hackamore requires that the horse be “taught” to do them.

The most valuable contribution the hackamore makes in the training process is the deficiencies it reveals in the rider. Few know or understand this principle. When using the hackamore it is essential that the rider set up his maneuvers correctly and fully support the cues he gives his mount. The rider's body positioning, weight placement, timing and sensitivity must be correct in order for the hackamore horse to translate those cues.

The message the actual hackamore itself can offer is so subtle that the horse will feel for the accompanying cues from the rider's legs, weight and posture to confirm the message before acting on it. If the rider is out of position or offering inconsistent cues elsewhere, the horse will quickly lose confidence in the hackamore's cue and become muddled and confused.

This unique characteristic of the hackamore might possibly be its greatest contribution to the equine world. It requires a level of horsemanship and handiness to operate it successfully. A cowboy must know and understand all of the peripheral cues used to position his horse as he should before he can support the hackamore the way it must be supported.

The hackamore is a key phase for this reason. It trains or reinforces the concept *in the rider* that the horse is to be taught to respond to messages, later called signals, in the final stages of putting a horse in the bridle. It is extremely important that the *rider* know how to set up, support and deliver his cues consistently with all the tools he has to work with.

The Nature of The Beast

The hackamore brings with it a unique feel all its own. For those who have never used one, the mechanics of how it functions are both simple and complex.

Though both hands are used to operate the mecate, it is often emphasized that the rider only apply pressure with one or the other hand but not both at the same time. Even when stopping straight or

executing a maneuver that is balanced and strait in nature, only one or the other “rein” is used when directing the animal to do so. This unique feature, a technique often used even in the snaffle bit by horsemen in “the know” is not simply a suggestion for hackamore users but a must. Horsemen who use both hands incorrectly in the hackamore will quickly build a brace into their mounts and reverse the training they so want to advance.

Once again, the use of one “rein” brings the total picture into play. For example, applying pressure with one rein, when asking for a maneuver that requires the animal stay straight requires the rider to balance the cue with all the necessary supporting postures to help the horse to remain straight.

Understanding that we do not merely sit on their backs like so much dead weight and pull them around with our hands is never more clearly communicated than when we tackle the use of the hackamore.

The Governor

Another important trait the hackamore promotes is a balanced temperament and good decision making skills, once again, in the rider.

The success a buckaroo achieves with the hackamore process is dependent on a series of decisions he might make on the days he uses the hackamore. Knowing what is required to do a job and choosing equipment and horses accordingly can make the difference between victory and defeat.

There are tasks that are not well suited to the horse newly introduced to the hackamore. Wrangling the cavy on a fresh, crisp morning may be an example. A young horse may lose himself in the momentum of the bunch and fail to notice the subtle cues the hackamore offers. Understanding the pressures that speed and instinct inflict on a horse can help a cowboy make the right decisions.

Slower, quieter jobs that offer the horse plenty of time to sort through cues and respond are better suited, especially in the first stages of the hackamore’s use. It takes a horse a certain amount of time first to understand a cue and then to build confidence in his response. Confidence is built through consistency. Sadly, a horse who is set up to consistently “run through” the hackamore will build a similar confidence in his ability to do so.

The responsibility for the work choices made when using the hackamore are one of the many ways a buckaroo can set himself up for success.

If managed correctly, a buckaroo will usually experience the first glimmers of a true feeling of “oneness” with his mount while progressing through the hackamore stage. There is no substitute for the subtle connections made when the hackamore horse begins to feel and respond with confidence.

Mind Over Muscle

Finally, perhaps the most important decision the cowboy will make in this stage of the game is how he will manage himself. The hackamore requires, more than any other early training practice, that the user is capable of controlling his emotions and responses when working with his horses. There is no room for lost tempers or overreacting.

If a buckaroo can’t control his own responses, the hackamore will destroy him. One fit of rage, one volatile day will forever taint the hackamore horse. There is a saying that “muscle doesn’t make the man” and similarly it will not make the hackamore horse either.

For this reason, the hackamore offers the would-be bridle horseman a checklist. Maintaining a suitable attitude is an attribute the spade bit horseman must have in place. Handling the hackamore is an excellent way of measuring the characteristics that will later be needed to handle the bridle horse. It is ironic that it is the humble hackamore that asks the rider to check his ego at the door. He will not be able to do this unless he releases his grip on the voices in his own head and listens instead to the thousands of subtle messages his horses will send him.

So, with no rein chains jingling, no silver blazing in the sun, the hackamore man quietly takes his place in the long silent line of bridle horsemen before him. From this point on, it will be the

buckaroo's job to melt into the background and polish instead the horse beneath him. All look for the transition in the horse as he advances through the hackamore but the real change is etched in the heart of the man who rides upon his back

