

# The meaning of "On the Bit"

By: Dawn Chamorro

I get asked the question "What does it mean for a horse to be "On the Bit"?" from many people. The concept of "On the Bit" gets misconstrued by many riders. I see riders that pull so tightly and claim that their horse is on the bit and other riders that barely, if at all, touch the reins in fear of interfering or hurting them. These are the two extremes. There is a middle point, a point that works, an area that is productive, and a place where you should be for you and your horse to excel and improve. So what does it mean? Well, while I explain the meaning I have also talked with many elite professionals all over the world that added their input as well on this very subject.

Many top professionals agreed that this is a subject that is not discussed enough and all had a hard time putting this into a few words instead of an entire book, which is not surprising. In the past this subject has been addressed by many people in many different articles but there is a clear difference that is not addressed by these articles: *every horse is different*. To get to a point where the horse is working on the bit can be achieved in different ways depending on the horse you are riding. There is no exact manual on riding and no perfect how-to book for every horse. There is only a feeling and look everyone can describe and until you feel that for yourself it can be hard to achieve. This is where patience and trust play a huge part as well as really knowing and understanding your horse.



*"Here are my thoughts of "on the bit". On the bit should feel like an elastic friendly open line of communication between you and your horse. You should have the feeling that you could talk to your horse through the reins and that neither of you should be annoyed by the conversation. It should not be empty and floating nor stuck and oppressive. Picture holding someone's hand for the entire day and at the end of the day neither participant is sick of the feeling they shared."*

**– Yvonne Barteau (FEI Grand Prix Rider)**

When I think of a horse working "On the Bit" I think of a horse that is engaged, supple, and into the contact. I have found that there are many riders that tend to hold their horse in frame and drive them forward. For me, this is incorrect. The holding with force concept can have many down sides and negative effects.

This method of holding with force and pushing causes so much tension in the horse making the movements look false and unsteady. On the other side of that, having no connection with the horse can cause them to be flat and going on their forehead. There is a balance between these two extremes. We have always heard from our instructors to "ride him to the bit" or "push him into the contact" but how?

I love how Yvonne described her definition of "On the Bit". This is very true. You and your horse create a partnership and in that partnership there is a constant communication throughout the ride. If you are nagging or forceful it creates stress and resistance and in turn the horse and rider have stopped working in unison. There are different ways to create such communication depending on the horse. None of those consist of holding or dropping the reins. These are mixed messages that don't help in the riding and definitely not in the training of a horse.

I also very much enjoyed Axel Steiner's thought as it is a mutual and respectful interaction to which the horse works with the rider and vice versa. There is such a deep partnership during a ride that shouldn't be taken for granted and should be worked on every time you ride.

**"Being on the bit is the result of a mutually respectful interaction between rider and horse and when the balanced horse is willingly yielding in mind and body to the reasonable wishes of the rider."**

**- Axel Steiner FEI 5\* Judge (Ret), USEF "S"**

So how do we accomplish riding on the bit? That question can be answered many different ways. Let's take a few of my personal experiences with completely opposite horses.



Dawn Chamorro riding Clifton Rookie

At one time in my life I was an eventer. Something I am very proud of as it has taught me a lot of patience with my horses.

One of my particular event horses I competed was super sensitive but also had a lot of heart. Dressage is not his favorite by far but as you know, it's still required. Knowing he could clearly jump, I worked daily on the dressage. He was the type that if I barley pressed my legs, he was off, and if I used too much rein, he panicked. So I'm already thinking this is going to be difficult. With him it took me a while to get him working properly on the bit without him getting tense or nervous. Everything had to be subtle and soft but yet submissive to my leg and rein aids.

There was a lot of transitions, lateral work, and a lot of quietness throughout my body. I had to be patient and clear. If I applied to much at once, it would overload him and I would lose the suppleness. Working through the tension over poles helped create a connection with him and as long as I was quiet and effective my horse would engage correctly from behind and into a nice contact and feel. Never pulling or demanding obedience, just guidance and continuing to show him the correct way.

And then there is Kiki. He is the last event horse I purchased before having my two children. I transitioned my career to Dressage and trained him through the levels up to Prix St Georges. He was one that was typically already heavy in the hands and liked to fall out on the forehand. He was dull. He was extremely happy not to be jumping anymore so he worked as hard as he could learning and listening. He is the type to never work on the bit if you didn't engage him from behind. He will just trot around with a huge giraffe neck and a hollow back if he isn't going forward. If you solely pull the reins, everything gets worse. It was easier for him to tighten and lift from the poll instead of stepping under and lifting his shoulders. All my work with him was riding him deep so his back could lift and forward to engage the hind. I had to light a fire under him to get him moving. Once he was easier off my leg, the whole outline and picture of him fell into place. I had to break up my exercises with him to keep him light on my aids and forward.

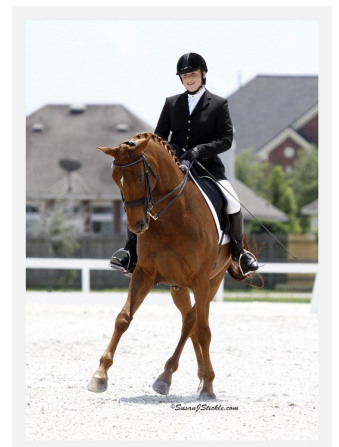
These two horses are just some examples of how different horses can be. What works for one may not work for another but in the end you are working for the same goals and overall look in every horse. Some things may be harder to obtain due to your horse's conformation but your goal is to maintain the key elements of riding such as suppleness, rhythm, and quality of gaits while working to have your horse on the bit.

*"On the bit" is possible when the horse moves from behind through its body - with active hind legs over the swinging back into the rider's hand (so that the rider is able to feel the horse's hind legs in his/her fingers/hands). To have this feeling in the saddle the rider has to have the horse in front of the driving aids."*

**– Christoph Hess (FEI Judge)**

This is also a very good description. A rider must show the horse where to go. Create the contact by activating the hind legs. In communication with the horse, a rider must tell the horse to come through its back and up into the bridle creating the correct "On the Bit" feel. I know that all these things seem like so much but if you simplify them, they can be quite easy. A willing and supple horse that is engaged correctly from the hind can move forward into a contact which becomes very productive and helpful to your horse. There is no rush for perfection. In this sport you need patience and time.

With this all things are possible.



Dawn Chamorro riding Kiki du Manoir

As a rider, trainer, and horse lover for life I take great pride in getting to know horses and their anatomy. I highly recommend everyone getting to really understand a horse's anatomy as it can help with your riding. If you scroll through photos of dressage riders you can begin to see just by the photo if a horse is truly "On the bit" as well as many other things. Below you see a photo of the super famous and amazing Valegro.

As you can see the horse clearly works "On the Bit". You must also have to understand to get a horse there you need all the key components of the Training Pyramid. Look at the horses outline and follow it from his poll to the hind quarters. You can see clearly the relaxation and correct usage of muscles through the body and all while performing at such a high level. Look at the freedom of the shoulders and the placement of the neck. There is a clear elasticity through his body.



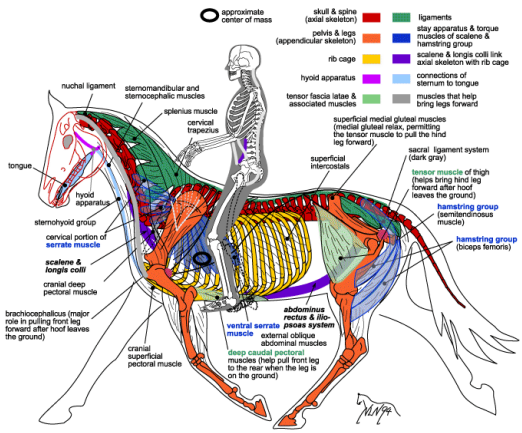
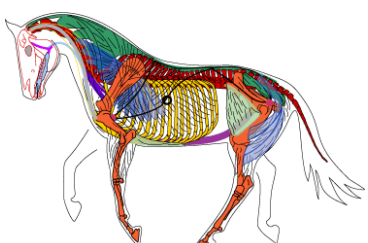
*"I just stick to FEI rules (401 and following) where it is all clear, what it is not clear are the deviations from such rules tolerated and even appreciated.."*  
**– Vincenzo Truppa (5\* Judge)**

OKAY, I must admit I had to pull out the rule book but voilà, there it was. It has some pretty good and clear explanations on the principles of dressage and "On the Bit". In the FEI rule book it states "A horse is said to be "on the bit" when the neck is more or less raised and arched according to the stage of training and the extension or collection of the pace, accepting the bridle with a light and consistent soft submissive contact. The head should remain in a steady position, as a rule slightly in front of the vertical, with a supple poll as the highest point of the neck, and no resistance should be offered to the Athlete." This is a rather good and standard description. In the rules it goes on to say things such as "The walk is regular, free and unconstrained. The trot is free, supple, regular, and active. The canter is united, light and balanced. The hindquarters are never inactive or sluggish. The horse responds to the slightest indication of the Athlete and thereby gives life and spirit to all the rest of its body." I do highly recommend that if you have confusion on such things, don't be afraid to pull out a rule book to get a general description of dressage and the movements within dressage.

The rides you do at the shows are probably not what you should do every day in your training. At home, it's back to the basics. Bringing the horse up and relaxing them back down. Teaching your horse to be on the aids like this will make it easier for you to maintain a better overall ride in the show ring.

If you don't have your horse working through it's body, you will not correctly get your horse on the bit. If you are holding, you will see tightness in the neck as well as hollowness through the back. If you don't have any contact, you will find that you are not building correct muscle development in their neck and body and your horse will merely stay on their forehead. Horses that are trained with a heavy hand can tend to feel boxed in or nervous and may also create a habit of rearing as they have no where else to go. Create the communication and guidance to maintain the horse working properly and with the correct muscles. On the opposite side of that is no contact. A wise man once told me "If your driving down a windy road with no hand on the wheel, Good Luck!"

Take some time out to really look at the horse's anatomy. You can see that all the muscles work together and if you work incorrectly it could affect more areas of the body than just one.



So what are some good exercises to use while riding to get a horse on the bit? From the training pyramid I work on the first three (RHYTHM, RELAXATION, AND CONNECTION ) before I can ask for more from my horse. I find that your warm up is key to a successful ride. Do the right thing in your training from the beginning and you will receive the results in the end. Here are only a few exercises you can try on your own. Remember, all your work at home should be reinstating the basics to your horse.

**Exercise #1:** Create a consistent rhythm with your horse at any gait you choose and with a steady outside rein and a slight flexion to the inside (just seeing the corner of your horse's eye) try to push their inside hind leg under them with your inside leg. Keep your hands steady and in front of you. Try this exercise in circles and stay off the rail so the horse has a chance to move out onto the outside rein and under himself. Once you feel a good consistent connection with your horse and they are moving under themselves try to straighten them and push that inside hind leg forward, center your body, and go straight down the long side. If your horse loses rhythm, becomes tight, or loses connection in any way just go back to the circle. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Always remember if your horse is not understanding what you are asking, try going down a gait. Keep the work slow so the horse has time to move his legs under and maintain the balance.

**Exercise #2:** Try millions of transitions. This I can not stress enough! If you don't do very many normally, then you are only hurting yourself. Work around the ring in whichever gait you'd like to work on. Make 10-15 meter circles making transitions within the circle going up or down. Try transitioning within a shoulder in or shoulder fore. Try to keep a steady feel of the outside rein. The circles will help the horse step under themselves naturally and the rail helps them balance for the transition. Also, another transition exercise is transitioning within the gaits. On the long side or across the diagonal ask your horse for a more forward or extended gait. The fault I see with riders is that they continue on too long and the horse is already running. Break up the extended work by coming back to a more working or collected gait sooner and then asking for a forward gait again. The transition from collection to extended work should be done with a steady connection and relaxation through the horses body moving forward to the bit. If your horse starts to get tight try slowing everything down and reestablish the connection.

**Exercise #3:** The Half-Halt. I teach my horses to listen for the half halt through my seat and not a heavier hand. This makes life a whole lot easier. When I ask for a half halt, I sit deep into my seat, center my seat bones, close my thighs (which tells them to slow the shoulders), close my lower legs (which tells the horse to keep bringing their hind legs), and keep a steady connection to which the horse will become more collected. Once your horse answers, I give a release with the thigh but always keep a slight soft feel of my calf on the horse and engage my core. Try this with your horse. Start at a good walk and transition to halt. Does your horse answer without a heavy hand? If they don't, keep working on it. If they do, work on it transitioning in and out of gaits as well as within gaits.

These are only three of many different things you can do with your horse. Always remember, it's about the basics and with the basics, you can get your horse working on the bit. Many transitions are required. Don't keep riding around the arena over and over again. Break up your work. Come out riding with a plan. Set your goals for your ride. Think about what exercises you are going to do.



“Unfortunately many riders only focus on the front end of the horse, falsely believing that a rounded neck means that the horse is "on the bit". Fact is, however, that the term "on the bit" or "on the aids" refers to the outline of the entire body of the horse. To

achieve this goal, a horse must be encouraged to move forward with active hind legs, a swinging back, and have the horse seek the contact which the rider provides with steady and soft hands. In this process, the horse steps further under its center of gravity beginning to carry more and more weight behind, lowering its croup, and thus elevating the neck. This is the beautiful outline that everyone universally recognizes of a dressage horse. The horse is now in an uphill balance, and if correctly done, shows powerful and balanced gaits with ease and relaxation and light contact in the bridle.

The idea of being on the bit is to get the horse engaged from behind, meaning you must ride forward, but at the same time softly restrict the horse so that it submits to the bit. Without engagement, the horse is not correctly "on the bit". A false approach would be bending the horse to one side or back and forth. At some point the horse may get round, but that does not mean that the horse is on the bit. The horse solely has the neck round with no engagement.

One valuable exercise to increase engagement of the hindquarters is to use transitions (between gaits or within a gait) as a helpful tool, as is the schooling on curved lines, a circle, or shoulder in presenting the opportunity to ride the horse from the inner leg to the outer rein with mild bend. This encourages the inner hind leg to activate and improves the frame in the process. Remember, always rely on your outside rein as your supporting rein and your inner rein as your driving aids, mostly inner leg, and don't forget to release. A half halt is the combination of the driving and restricting aids, and ends in the release.

Don't get frustrated if you don't achieve all of this right away. The best riders in the world seek to achieve the perfect frame, relaxation, and harmony with their horses each day. Understanding what "on the bit" means is the first step to a happy connection between you and your horse. “

– Jan Ebeling (Olympic Grand Prix Rider)



So when you are in a lesson or watching someone ride and you hear “Get your horse on the bit” remember, it’s not just the neck of the horse or their frame but it’s the entire outline of the horse. The way the horse looks as a whole from the back to the front. When you are riding a horse on the bit you are asking the horse to first engage from the back and come into the contact. The horse’s poll will naturally elevate in the correct form once you have your horse forward and supple through their body and back.

Try the exercises. If you dedicate time to your horse and work on all your transitions, you will notice a clear difference in your horse within weeks or even days. Make this a “must do” for all your rides. You should be making fifty or more transitions within one ride. You have around 15 or more in your dressage tests alone.

Always remember, you won’t have a great day everyday. If things aren’t working out that day, go back to your basics and work on your relaxation and forward. Keep it simple on harder days. Try not to get discouraged. This sport that we’re in is not easy at all. The training of a horse take lots and lots and LOTS of time. Be patient. You’ll never reach your goals if you are fighting with your horse. Take it all one step at a time and before you know it, you will have your horse moving better than ever! Happy Riding!

**TO HAVE A HORSE ON THE BIT IS NOT TO BRING THE HORSE’S HEAD DOWN. IT MEANS MANY OTHER THINGS**

**BY CESAR TORRENTE, 3\* FEI DRESSAGE JUDGE**

I believe that no other term in dressage has been the object of so many articles, videos, books and, of course controversy, as “On the bit”. In this short commentary, I want to explain what does it mean, what other terms are used by professionals that also reflect the concept and what are the conditions necessary to have your horse on the bit.

The FEI Rules state that *“A horse is said to be “on the bit” when the neck is more or less raised and arched according to the stage of training and the extension or collection of the pace, accepting the bridle with a light soft contact and submissiveness throughout. The head should remain in a steady position, as a rule slightly in front of the vertical, with a supple poll as the highest point of the neck, and no resistance should be offered to the rider.”*

Some experts and authors prefer the term “on the aids”, in order to emphasize that it is not only a head position but rather that the horse is in all 3 aids: seat, legs, and hands.

Others prefer the term “acceptance of the bridle”, a term also used in the FEI Rules, which add that the horse must move *“...with submissiveness throughout and without any tension or resistance.”*

In my opinion, all definitions must be combined with the concepts of “engagement”, “thoroughness from behind”, and “a rider in harmony with the horse” in order to have a truly comprehensive understanding of the term “On the Bit”.

Therefore this expression should not simply draw the attention of riders, trainers and judges to the position of the head, because as we all know, the frame in front must be the result of the engagement and thoroughness from behind and of a rider that is in harmony with the horse and on the aids.

To be very clear about this, the concern should not be to bring the horse’s head down and the solution to put your horse on the bit is not to bring your hands down or pull on the reins. This must be very clear for every rider from the beginning, because otherwise you will never be successful in the training of your horse.

First, you must make sure that you are riding your horse from “back-to-front” and not from “front-to-back”. Therefore, first think about activating the haunches and then drive into the contact.

I insist: do not think only about putting the horse’s head down. Drive forward and think, about putting your hands in a level, elasticity and position that will allow your horse to offer you his mouth, and believe me, your horse will seek the contact and will remain on the bit and on your aids.

Obviously, the foregoing requires certain qualities of your contact or connection: (i) **it must be firm**: many times the riders think that they should ride with very soft hands or with a very soft contact, which ends up in no connection and even worst in loosing connection and the pulling. This does not work and will do no good for your horse. (ii) **It must be consistent**: first you must have a steady seat and only as a result of that, you can offer your horse a steady contact; therefore, if your seat is not steady, go back to the lounge line, fix your seat and then make sure you are not interrupting your connection with hands that do not allow a clear communication with the horse’s mouth, and (iii) **elastic and symmetrical**, with both hands adapting to the movement, especially in walk and canter and at the same height.

Therefore, when we judges say that we want to see a horse on the bit, we want to see not only the position of the head of the horse, but at the same time we want to see a clear and uninterrupted connection with the horse, that is moving with balance, accepting the connection, pushing forward from behind and showing the appropriate self-carriage for the level he is showing on. This is when the good marks come and the FEI Guidelines clearly express that this should be clearly rewarded.

