

A Q&A "ON THE BIT"

Going beyond the other disciplines in saddle seat

BY JOANNE MACBRIDE

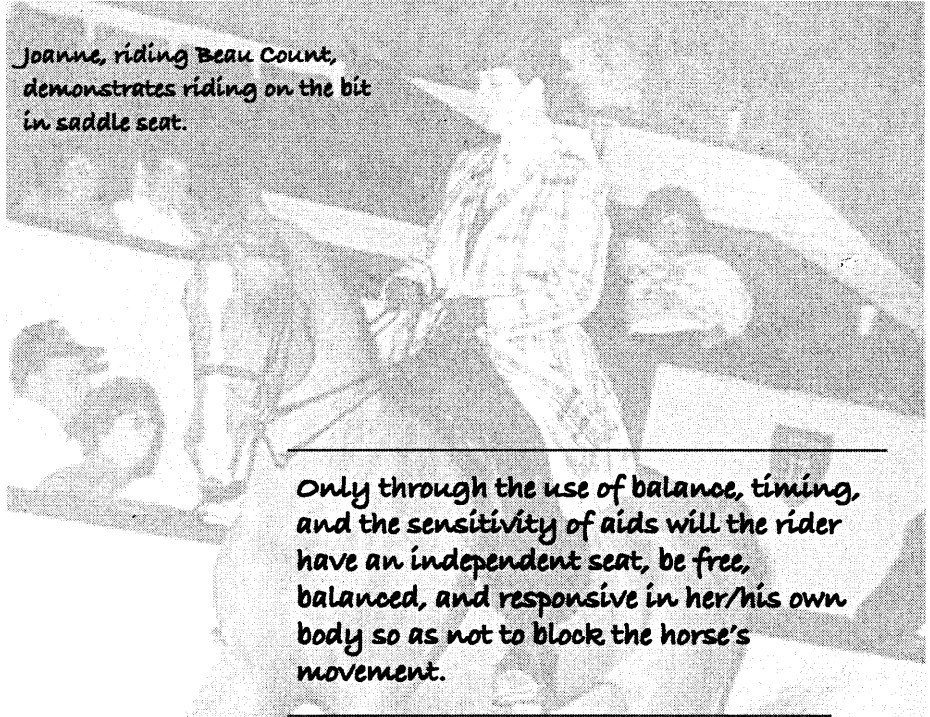
Atlantic Arabian: Could you comment on the term "on the bit" when one is riding saddle seat as opposed to dressage, hunter or show hack?

Joanne: This is an interesting question; and perhaps only those who have (1) ridden correctly in all of these disciplines; and (2) actually know what the term "on the bit" really means, will be able to truly understand the difference.

Before a horse can learn to be "on the bit", s/he must first learn to be ridden "on contact". This is a soft or passive contact in which the rider adjusts the reins and uses her/his legs to encourage the horse to move forward with longer strides. This encourages the horse to extend her/his neck and reach into the contact with the bit and the rider's hands. This is a necessary and useful stage in teaching the horse to accept the bit.

First of all, it would be helpful for me to explain the term "on the bit" in dressage terms. It has been my experience that this term is misunderstood. Being "on the bit" is not about having a horse's nose tucked in on the vertical. This is a false flexion. Being truly "on the bit" requires engagement of the horse's hind legs and lengthening of his back and neck through the rider's use of legs and seat. The horse meets the soft yet firm resistance of the rider's hands. Hands should always be elastic to some degree, but firm enough to not give and follow the movement of the horse's head (as in a passive kind of contact). As the horse pushes against the resisting hand, s/he learns

Joanne, riding Beau Count, demonstrates riding on the bit in saddle seat.



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to yield to the bit through collecting her/himself. The horse relaxes the jaw, flexes at the poll, flexes the lumbosacral and hip joints, and rounds the back in collection. This creates more engagement, a change of balance, and increased collection. The horse uses his back to raise the forehead and make a neck telescoping gesture. This work should be begun in a mild and gentle snaffle bit.

This stage requires more of both rider and horse. It is most important not to "muscle" the horse into obedience. Only through the use of balance, timing, and the sensitivity of aids will the rider have an independent seat, be free, balanced, and responsive in her/his own body so as not to block the horse's movement. The ultimate goal of this stage in both dressage and saddle seat disciplines is "self-carriage".

In saddle seat language the term "on

the bit" is taken one step further. Before a saddle seat horse can go this further step, however, it is critical that s/he learn the above. A saddle seat horse needs to learn to (1) reach for the "contact" and (2) learn to be ridden on the bit (dressage fashion). Only then can the next stage occur. It is most important that whomever is training the horse have a good understanding that this is a gradual process which takes into consideration the muscle development of the animal. No athlete should be expected to perform at a level that they have not been trained and conditioned for.

We have now reached the place where a saddle seat horse can begin to do the work needed to be "on the bit" saddle seat fashion. In saddle seat we want to push a horse up into the bit using our legs; and then bump her/him back off of it slightly. Then we repeat

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ON THE BIT IN SADDLE SEAT

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and repeat. The idea is to constantly animate and collect the horse in a very coordinated fashion. The term "on the bit" in dressage for the saddle seat horse would mean that the horse is leaning into the bridle a little too much. The horse should not be made to constantly feel the weight of the rider's hands. We want our horses to carry their own heads, and not be held up by the rider. In saddle seat, as in dressage, the horse's neck flexion is at the poll. The horse should be permitted to "float" in a half-inch area varying from being both on and off contact. If the rider works with her/his fingers in a delicate and sensitive fashion, this degree of flexibility can be maintained. A rider should be able to "give" the hands for a few seconds without the horse "taking" her/his head. If the rider yields too much the horse may lose collection. This constant play and flexing must occur within the half an inch space. This giving and taking is an ongoing process. The reward for the horse, once her/his head is "set" in the perfect position is a momentary softening of the rider's hands. The word "set" is a bit of a misnomer when one considers that the fluidity of movement of a rider's hands and the degree of collection of the horse are constantly being manipulated and reorganized with repetition throughout any given ride. ■