

Drop the tight noseband

Are certain nosebands over-used and too readily reached for as a schooling shortcut? Nicky Moffatt talks to riders and trainers to discover their views

The subject of nosebands, and whether they are actually necessary, is a common cause of debate within the horse world.

While many years ago a cavesson was the choice of most riders, it seems more and more horses these days are ridden in 'corrective' pieces of tack that are designed to keep the mouth closed.

Many riders claim they can't live without Grakles, cranks, flashes or drops, while others feel they are an unnecessary tool and potentially a cause of stress, discomfort and even pain.

Riding your horse in one of these nosebands or similar doesn't mean you are compromising his

welfare, but there are concerns over how tight they are fastened and whether they will affect breathing or mask a physical or behavioural issue without addressing the root cause.

Comfort matters

As owners and riders, it is essential that we ensure our horses remain comfortable when performing the work we ask them to do, whatever tack and equipment we use.

Most of us spend time and money making sure we have a well-fitting saddle and many riders enlist help from an expert when it comes to choosing the best bit. But how many of us pay such close attention to nosebands?

When a schooling issue occurs, our instructors or well-meaning friends may suggest a stronger bit or a tighter noseband. But before reaching for a 'harsher' piece of tack, we should be looking at why the horse is opening his mouth, crossing his jaw or evading the contact.

"Of course, a rider's safety must be considered," says advanced dressage rider and trainer Serena Gordon. "If a horse is displaying naughty, potentially dangerous behaviour and all health checks have been carried out, then using a flash or drop noseband may well break the habit, once the horse learns he can no longer carry out this behaviour."

"However, I hate to see nosebands done up too tightly and I believe this often leads to worse problems. Whatever tack we use, it must be fitted correctly, with the horse's welfare taking priority."

The real issue

Equine behaviourist Justine Harrison has studied research into the misuse of nosebands.

Most commonly used nosebands

Cavesson – the plainest form of noseband, it should sit approximately two fingers width below the horse's cheekbones, and there should be room to fit two fingers width between the cavesson and the nose.



nosebands in the equestrian world, due to the fact it can easily be over-tightened.

Flash – a small strap attaches to a cavesson or crank noseband and is secured below the bit, under the horse's chin. It is used to prevent the horse from opening his mouth, crossing his jaw or putting his tongue over the bit. The cavesson part of the noseband should be fitted firmly enough so the flash strap doesn't slide down, and the flash strap must be high enough over the nostrils not to interfere with the horse's breathing.



Crank – this has a strap that doubles back on itself to allow the rider to fit it tighter. When used with a flash strap, it helps to keep the cavesson in place so the noseband doesn't slip down. The crank is arguably one of the most debated



Drop – this noseband fits below the bit to help keep the mouth closed and prevent the horse from getting his tongue over the bit. It is a popular choice with dressage riders, but



care should be taken to fit it higher than the nostrils, to ensure the horse can breathe properly.

Grakle – a popular choice with event riders and showjumpers, a Grakle crosses diagonally over the horse's nose. It acts by keeping the mouth closed and helps to prevent crossing of the jaw. As it sits relatively high on the horse's face, it is unlikely to affect his breathing.



Ensure a horse's comfort by checking you can fit two fingers under the noseband

"It has become common practice for many owners to use crank, drop, Grakle, Mexican or flash nosebands to close their horse's mouth," says Justine. "So much so, that it is difficult to find a bridle with a normal cavesson noseband in tack shops – bridles now seem to come with a flash noseband as standard."

Justine believes if a horse develops a training issue he is trying to tell you something and using a tighter noseband can escalate this behaviour.

She states that it is better to get to the bottom of the problem by listening to your horse.

"A horse with a specific training issue, such as opening his mouth or putting his tongue over the bit, has a problem with what is being asked of him or is trying to avoid pain," she says.

"If the horse is performing the behaviour to avoid pain or discomfort from the bit, then using a noseband that tightens around the mouth will prevent him from opening his mouth and mask the symptom, rather than address the cause.

"Tightening the noseband may also magnify the problems with the bit – for example, make it more uncomfortable – and make matters worse.

"When a horse's mouth is strapped shut in this way, and his behaviour is ignored, he may communicate his discomfort in more dangerous ways, such as bolting, bucking or rearing.

"We should be looking out for these behaviours in our horses, recognising there is a problem and addressing it by having the horse checked over physically. Then it's up to us to get the right help with our schooling in order to iron out the real issue."

Every horse is an individual

While every rider will agree we need to listen to our horse, Serena adds that sometimes a habit can be nipped in the bud through the use of a different noseband.

"It's important to treat every horse individually," she says. "I have a feisty chestnut mare who used to open her mouth wide, launch into the air and run for the hills. After getting her checked over and feeling satisfied she wasn't in pain, I found a drop noseband gave me more control over what was a potentially dangerous situation. Very soon, this habit stopped.



Correct schooling can iron out most training issues

"On the other hand, I once bought an older horse and I was told she needed an extremely tight flash noseband to stop her getting her tongue over the bit.

"This mare gave me a horrible, 'dead' feeling in the rein, so I immediately loosened everything. This meant she could get her tongue over the bit, but I learnt that she did it more often when she was stressed.

"Gradually, as she became more relaxed in her training, she flipped her tongue less and less, so a flash noseband was a bad idea in her case."

Revealing studies

Researchers from Ireland and Australia have just completed the preliminary development of two methods of measuring noseband pressure, which could impact on the welfare of ridden horses.

The study was carried out on the basis that some riders believe a tight noseband enhances bit pressure, allowing rein aids to be more effective.

However, this goes against the standard recommendation for adjustment of the noseband, where the space between the noseband and the nasal midline should easily allow the insertion of two fingers – so jaw movement is not restricted.

Orla Doherty of the University of Limerick, Ireland, and her research team investigated the level of noseband tightness being used at equestrian competitions.

The team studied 850 showjumpers, and found only 20 per cent were ridden in a cavesson noseband – the majority of riders used flash or Grakle nosebands.

"We are also interested in how tight nosebands are being fastened," says Orla. "Of 201 young event and hunter horses studied, only 12 per cent had nosebands loose enough to fit two fingers underneath, and 47 per cent had nosebands too tight to fit any fingers underneath."

She says that in addition to the possible physical damage this could cause, using



Make sure your horse's noseband is comfortable for him

excessively tight nosebands could impact negatively on the safety of horse and rider.

"A horse experiencing pain while being ridden is more likely to display flight and fear responses, such as head tossing or bolting," Orla adds.

The study shows that more data needs to be collected to validate the measurement technique and demonstrate correlation between high pressures and animal welfare and behaviour.

Orla and her team are currently completing the research and hope to publish results over the coming year.

Visit: www.equitationsscience.com for more information.

Is your horse happy?

If you're concerned your horse isn't comfortable in his work, or may be evading the noseband you are using, Justine Harrison has the following advice:

- Look for signs such as opening the mouth, head tossing, pulling the reins out of your hands, teeth grinding, crossing of the jaw, poking the tongue out or putting it over the bit, the horse rubbing his face on his leg – or on the rider once you have dismounted – and tail swishing.
- If your horse is demonstrating any of the above signs, go back to basics and ride him in a plain cavesson bridle – or even consider a modern bitless bridle – to see if there is an improvement in his behaviour.
- Check your tack fits and nothing is too tight or rubbing your horse's face. The noseband should be fitted correctly with at least two fingers gap between it and the horse's face.
- Have your horse's mouth regularly checked by a registered equine dental technician or your vet. Horses may have been caused pain where a tight noseband has applied pressure to an underlying tooth issue which the rider wasn't aware of.
- Always question why something is happening and enlist the help of a good trainer who can offer you constructive schooling exercises to improve your horse's way of going. ■

"We should look out for behavioural problems in our horses and then address the issue"



The aim of some nosebands is to prevent the horse opening its mouth

CASE STUDY

"I lack control without my flash noseband"

Anne Goodman from Manchester says her 15-year-old mare Nonya Business has always worn a flash noseband.

"When I tried my mare out, she had a flash on, and I didn't ask why at the time, which was a little naive of me perhaps," says Anne.

"When I've taken it off, however, I do notice a lack of control, especially when she throws her head up. She tends to work better with it on."

"As she has always had the flash noseband, I'm unsure whether it's covering up a training issue or whether she knows I'm not in control without it.

"To make sure she is comfortable, I ensure it's not so tight that it interferes with her breathing and when I've finished riding I loosen it straight away.

"If I had a young horse to break in, I'd make sure all possible training methods had been tried before using a flash, but I feel it's better to keep things as they are for my older horse as she is happy in her work and a flash gives me more control."

CASE STUDY

"You see cranks and flashes used everywhere"

Dudley-based Ange Moore says flash and crank nosebands have become ubiquitous. "You see them used everywhere, frequently because they 'came with the bridle', with little thought given to how they work," she states.

"If asked, some horse owners answer that their horse opens his mouth, so their solution is to strap it shut.

"But shouldn't we ask why the horse feels the need to open its mouth in the first place? The mouth is made up of soft, vulnerable tissue often lying thinly over bone, and it can be so easily bruised and damaged by a tight noseband.

People need to consider how they ride. Hard, unforgiving and backwards hands or a horse that is out of balance and is falling forward gives the horse no choice but to reduce discomfort by opening the mouth. The sad thing is, this can so easily be improved through patient and correct schooling.

"In my opinion, a well-trained horse should be light and attentive without a noseband, and forcing the mouth to stay closed results in pain from the bit."



Have your horse's teeth checked regularly by an expert