



PART 4 - TEACHING ABOUT THE BIT

by Heike Bean

Thank you to Ms. Heike Bean for giving permission to reprint this article

A thank you to Regina Loubier for seeking out Ms. Bean

The article will be divided into four parts so keep a lookout for the next parts

TEACHING ABOUT THE BIT

As this is the most important aid in driving, I will spend some time now sharing my thoughts and experiences regarding the application of the bit.

The very first step is ground driving.

GROUND DRIVING

By now the horse has learned all the ingredients for successful ground driving. There are two stages to this, ground driving using the halter and ground driving using the bit.

At this point I also would like to mention that I teach everything first without blinders, and when the horse has gained confidence and understands the concepts, I repeat everything with blinders.

What is the horse supposed to learn at each stage?

Using the halter

In this stage the horse is supposed to learn the ability to walk ahead of the trainer, learn the basics of steering and the basic balance of moving on straight lines and around turns. He also learns about voice and whip commands.

As a horse at this stage is quite wobbly, won't be able to keep a steady rhythm, may be quite timid about being sent ahead, it would be unwise to start him on a bit. One has to correct too many of his actions, and this would only hurt his mouth.

He can carry the bit in his mouth to get used to the feel, but the reins should not be attached to it.

I like using a side pull bridle for this, it gives more control than a halter and has rings sown on each side of the face to attach reins to.



Side Pull



The only other equipment is a surcingle with large rings on the side and higher up, where normally the rein rings are located on a driving saddle, or a driving saddle and long lines or driving reins.

For better control of the hind quarters, the reins are at first run through the rings on the side or the tugs on the saddle. When the horse steers reliably and walks well forward on straight lines, does his transitions well and walks over scary objects without hesitation, the reins can then be run through the top rings. This is very important as we want him to learn steering like he will feel it later on from the carriage, and we don't want to teach him to be laterally confined by rein contact. Although necessary at first for the very basic controls, running reins through the side rings or shaft tugs should only be a short transition period.



Ground Driving With The Side Pull Wearing A Bit



During the halter stage, you can ask many different things from the horse like performing transitions, negotiating turns, stepping over and through obstacles, conquering scary sights, taking him on long walks on trails or quiet roads, and the introduction of the whip. The more you get him used to, the more you can teach him at this stage, the easier it will be for him once he is controlled by the bit.

Using the bit

In this phase of his training the horse needs to be made familiar with all the basic commands the bit is supposed to convey, and needs to learn to willingly accept the bit and trust it.

Most of the work will be done at the walk, as it is difficult to keep up with a horse at the trot, but if you are athletic enough you can certainly do some trot work, and especially work on transitions. Just be sure not to balance yourself on the reins or restrict the freedom of the horse's neck.

More detailed trot work will have to be done from the carriage.



Ground Driving With The Bit



Bit commands

So what precisely is the bit supposed to tell him?

Obviously, we use the bit to control forward motion and to steer the horse, like we did when ground driving on the halter. It is the principle of yielding to pressure again.

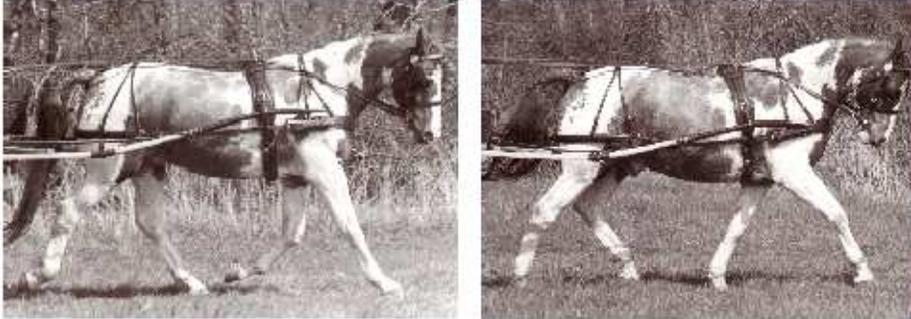
Not so obvious, the horse should accept the bit as a safe haven, as his trusted place to go at all times, in other words a constant goal toward which he can work in confidence and relaxation. We should not give him any reason to dread the bit, to fight it or to hide behind it.

I like Dr. Deb Bennett's phrase: Being on the bit is not something that the bit does to the horse, but that the horse does to the bit.

I also like her statement that a horse only likes to be where he feels 100% OK, and that he only can learn when he feels that way. If a horse is not comfortable, all he can think of is that he would like to be where he could be comfortable, where ever that is: with his buddies, in the barn, back home etc. etc. Really just like us.



Horse 100% OK And NOT OK



Backward function of the bit

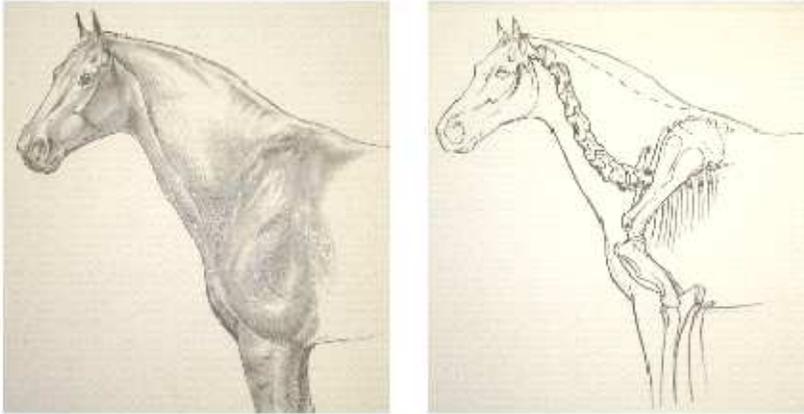
It is common knowledge that bit action has backward function, by the very fact that it is at the very front of the horse and that its activation is either unpleasant or restricting to the horse, or both, if not used properly.

One might ask, is it really restricting? Horses keep running or even taking off when lots of bit pressure is applied, so it can't be all that restricting, right?

What restriction means here is that it impedes free and relaxed forward movement, it stiffens joints in the horse's body and does not allow him to move unrestrictedly, a state where all joints have free range of motion.

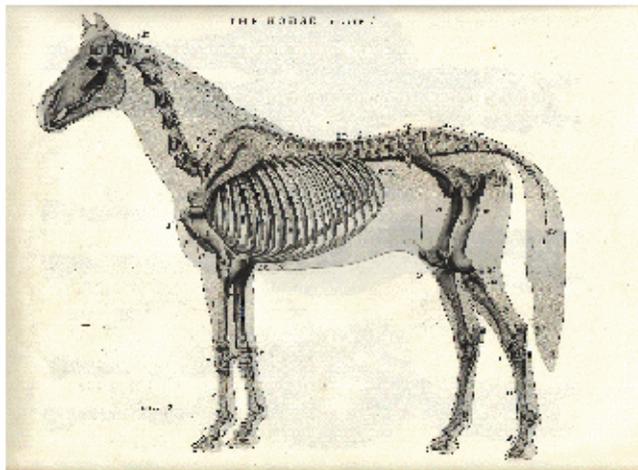


Horse neck/spine



What it mostly restricts directly is the poll and neck, as the neck is highly mobile, and this in turn restricts the entire horse.

Skeleton





Why is this so bad?

Because it makes the horse uncomfortable, makes him physically and mentally tense, makes his body crooked and his energy difficult to contain, and causes bodily injury over time.

Needless to say, it also makes the horse a very unsafe partner to be with. How would we like to spend time with a person who makes us feel like that, or accept being controlled by such a person? I am sure we would look for a quick way out of this unpleasant situation.

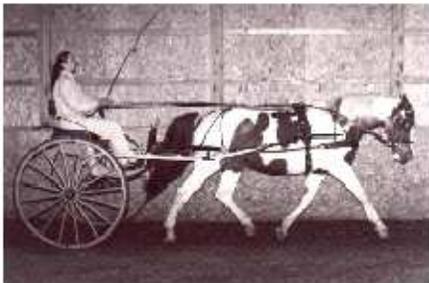
Forward function of the bit

So how does one turn this restricting backward function into an inviting forward function, and is it not dangerous, at least in the beginning of the training?

To answer the first part, we ask the horse to stretch to the bit in a forward downward direction, take it literally out front with his mouth and learn to use it almost as a crutch for insecurity and a still shaky balance. At the same time he needs to learn to soften his poll and not lean on the bit. He is supposed to take up contact with it, but also yield to it. The way he can accomplish this is by pushing a little against the bit through the top of his neck while keeping his poll relaxed and supple. As a result, the horse (with the help of the driver) will establish a very light and elastic contact, and his body will be in longitudinal balance,

something one also calls self carriage, and this in turn allows him to become straight and laterally balanced.

Stretching To The Bit



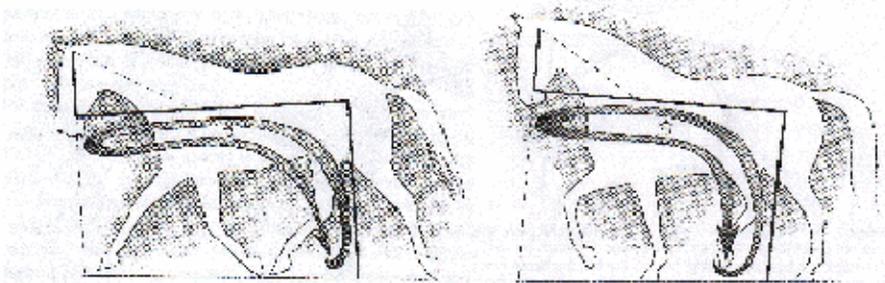
The reason this is not dangerous is that we first train the horse to do this during ground driving, and because he stretches and relaxes his spine which in turn relaxes his mind, he actually controls himself. A



tense horse is constantly producing adrenaline which stimulates the flight reflex. A relaxed horse feels safe in his surroundings and does not think of flight. His mind will stay clearer and his reactions will be a lot more thought through should he become startled. Also, when he is working toward the bit, all his energy is really contained by the bit, so if something does startle him he is in direct contact with the driver, his energy is contained between his rear end and the bit, and the driver can quickly adjust rein length or whatever is

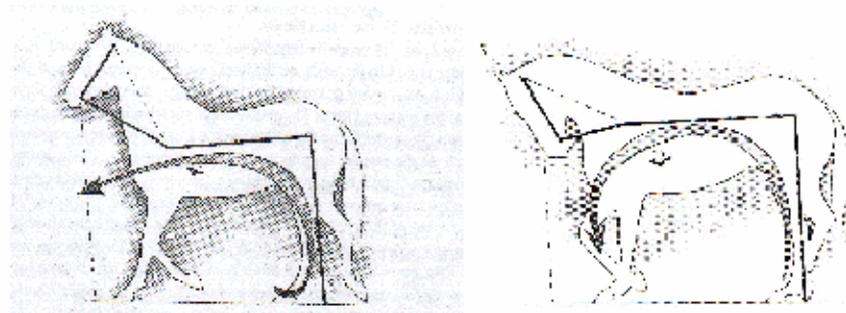
necessary to keep the horse under control and restore relaxation. And of course, we work the horse in a safe surrounding so even if he would take off for some reason, like snow sliding off the roof of an indoor, he can't go far and can be brought back under control quickly.

On The Bit



Look at it as if you were at his head leading him. It is about the same principle. When you are at his head,

Above The Bit Behind Or Against The Bit



you are holding the bit, and he submits to this control, and follows you; when he stretches to the bit he is holding it (and you do too, at the other end of the reins), so it has the same effect for him.

This very effect also enables precise steering. As the horse keeps carrying the bit out in front of himself, he can follow the slightest directional

indications of the driver. It is as if someone would keep leading him along by his nose.



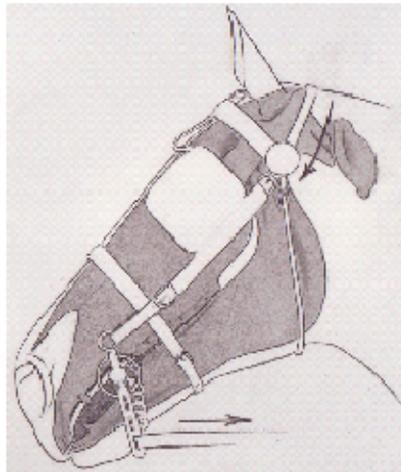
Another benefit of this forward action of the bit is that when you really need to stop your horse quickly for whatever reason, the backward restriction that you apply in this case by taking back with both reins firmly, has a lot greater effect. As an aid, it will only come into use on such occasions, and the horse will be a lot more responsive to firm backward pressure, as the usual light forward contact will not have dulled his nerves and reactions.

Choice of bit

What logically follows out of the above is that the choice of bit is extremely important.

Lever action is very counterproductive, we need to know exactly how what we do affects the horse, and we want to make sure that the lightest possible amount of bit is applied to get the required result. What may feel light to us on a lever bit, may actually be a severe aid to the horse.

Curb Bit



Aside of that, we need to laterally supple the horse at all times, this is what will keep him from leaning on the bit, avoiding it or hiding behind the bit. If one would use a bit with lever action for that the horse would constantly get pinched on one side of his mouth and then the other. Besides, lever action always has restricting function.

Needless to say that none of the above would further comfort and relaxation.

What we need is direct and constant contact with the horse, and we need to be able to feel both sides of his mouth at all times. The best way to achieve this is with a double jointed snaffle. It conforms well to his mouth and enables us to do all the “talking” we have to do, back and forth, to keep up the communication.



There are lots of different double jointed mouth pieces available, and many of them are not comfortable either due to the size of the joints, or the length or shape of the middle piece.

The best bits are those that have very small joints and a fairly short, smooth or even egg shaped center piece. They affect the roof of the mouth the least if at all, and lie comfortably on the tongue. They should also not be too thick or too thin. Somewhere in the range of one's ring finger, unless you have very thick or thin fingers.

Comfortable Bits



Space For Bit



Only direct bit contact conveys precise steering, as soon as lever action is involved the steering is always combined with other pressures which do nothing to help the horse. The only thing they do is make him tense as he is trying to avoid pain, and thus his steering will be a lot less precise.

I want to emphasize it again, like I have so often in the past: lever



action is acceptable for straight forward control like driving on roads or trails, and after the horse's mouth has been fully prepared on a snaffle bit. It is never to be used on a young and uneducated mouth, and it is not a tool to teach a horse longitudinal bend, lateral suppleness or steering. Just because a lot of people do it does not make it right for the horse. So if we want to train a horse to be good in classes and events that require a lot of turning, lever action makes no sense in my view. And if we want a pleasure horse to be truly relaxed and comfortable, and thus safe, it does not make sense either.

If for whatever reason more control is needed in events that require lots of turning, the least amount of lever action should be used, the bit should be as comfortable as possible, and the horse should be well prepared for it.

Allowing the time it takes

It may take quite a bit longer to train a horse the relaxed way with a mild bit, and it does require more skill from the driver, but in every aspect it will be well worth it.

Again, horses do not mature mentally until about the age of 8, so why would we overload a young mind with extreme challenges if there is a better way. I do realize that impatience is one of our foremost human traits, and in general horses at the age of 4 or 5 are expected to cope with all the physical and mental stresses that go along with competition, but I also feel that if people know exactly what they are asking of a horse they will reconsider. I used to be very ignorant and very impatient, and I am very ashamed today what I did to horses in the past. I just did not think about it and did not know better. Today, we have so much information at our finger tips with the world wide web, so it has become a whole lot easier to obtain information from lots of different sources.

How to establish correct bit contact

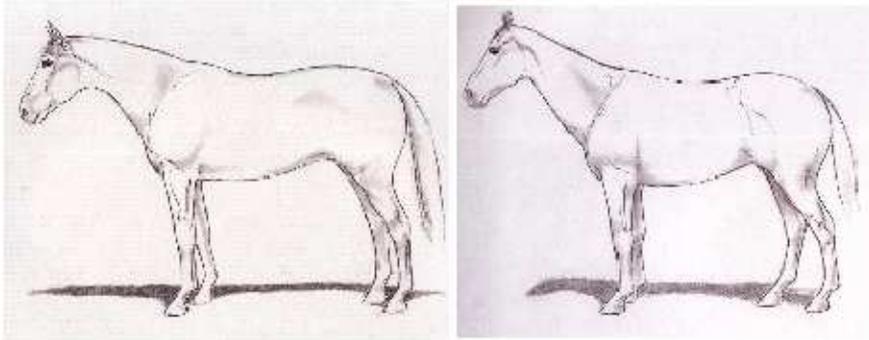
It really is quite hard to explain with words, especially as every horse has its very own needs and requirements, but I will do my best.

A lot depends on neck conformation, body conformation, state of training, temperament and surroundings. And of course on the health and soundness of the animal.

A thick throat latch needs different consideration than a thin one, a ewe type neck will be much different to deal with than a high set on neck, a rump high horse will have a very different balance from an uphill horse etc..It matters what experience, if any, the horse had already with the bit, what his basic personality is, if he likes to please or if he does not want to listen to anything the teacher suggests, and if the surrounding is either distracting or comforting.



Neck Conformation



Especially important is that his teeth have been attended to and that there is no joint or muscular pain anywhere in his body.

Teeth





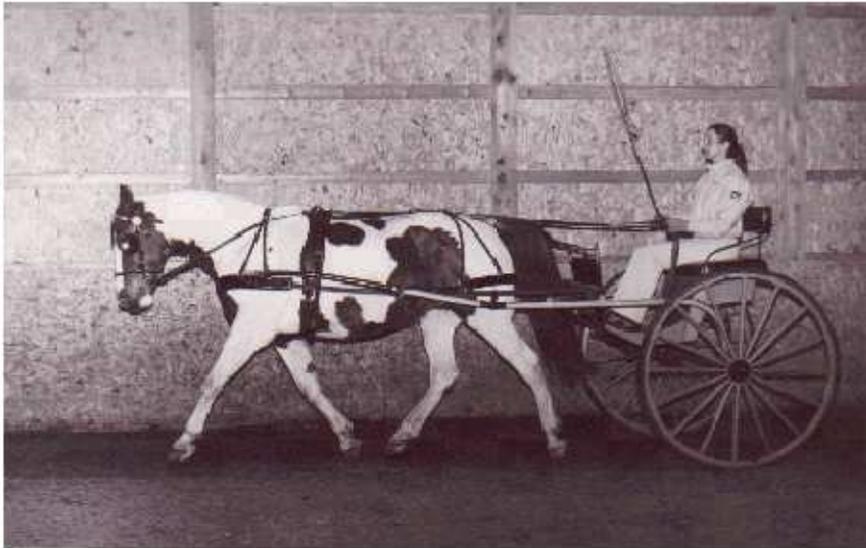
In my book I explain quite a bit about the above so I will have to refer you to that as I only have limited time here.

Below, I will discuss a relatively normal situation.

What do I mean by correct contact?

When talking about correct and beneficial rein contact between the horse and the driver, one means the constant connection between the horse's mouth and the driver's hands, where neither is pulling on the other, where each constantly listens to the other, and where the driver is constantly trying to make the horse as comfortable as possible. It is sort of like a continuous circle of energy.

Elastic Contact



It is a place where both feel connected with each other, and both are perfectly comfortable and at ease.

Both feel each other, constantly communicate with each other and accommodate each other.

The quality and consistency of the contact that the driver should be striving for I like to compare to a seeing person (the driver) guiding a blind person (the horse).

The horse may not be blind but we want the same responses from him. We want him to totally concentrate on the bit, on the connection and totally trust it for support and guidance, at all times.

Interrupting contact, changing its consistency a lot, not being thoughtful of the "person" on the other end of the reins, will quickly ruin trust and comfort.



Good contact is elastic, as light as possible, always allowing, not hindering, loving and compassionate. It conveys confidence from the driver and instills it in the horse.

In return, the horse will gladly accept his end of the deal which is like a handshake, a willing and trusting "hold" of the bit. As mentioned earlier, he takes it forward with him to a place where he can be in relaxed balance and mental and physical comfort.

When the contact is right, it feels really good, and it gives the driver the feeling that he can now fully relax and there is no need to worry about anything, like the horse drives himself. It is a very liberating feeling. And I am sure the horse feels the same.

How to create this contact

There are four basic rules I want to mention first:

- *The only reason we take back on the rein is so that we have something to give.
- *The basic idea of this connection is that the horse establishes it and we aid him in doing it.
- *The basic effect of the reins is always forward and allowing, even in down transitions.
- *The reins really belong to the horse, we are merely there on the other end to keep the slack out of them and to aid the horse in making the right decisions.

Exactly what creates and maintains this contact? A certain amount of pressure on both ends of the reins. I am talking ounces here, the fewer the better. But if any side gives too much, contact will be interrupted, at least momentarily. If either side pulls too much there is no longer mutual freedom, connectedness and acceptance, instead the horse feels restricted and the contact is rigid.

How does one teach that?

a) at a standstill

If the horse is totally new to bit contact, one can teach him to yield to bit pressure at a standstill by taking the slack out of one rein at a time and holding it into the direction of the rein rings on the saddle. This is very important, as we want to teach the horse to respond to pressure by applying first some counter pressure and then yield to it. And counter pressure can only be applied in the opposite direction of where the pressure is coming from. Since we want for the horse to learn to reach forward downward with his head and neck our rein pressure has to come from upward backward. We do NOT want the pressure coming from somewhere at his side, this would only teach him to be pulled together by the bit.

Then, one can vibrate the rein lightly until the horse yields just a little in his poll and jaw. Usually the horse will first respond by putting a lot of pressure against the bit and look for all kinds of possible evasions. As



soon as he starts softening his pressure, without totally interrupting it, he needs to be rewarded with a softening of the connection, or at first, a total give on part of the teacher if the horse is very sensitive.

b) with the help of side reins

Another way of introducing bit contact is with help of the sliding side reins as outlined in my book. This can be started while ground driving the horse from the halter while wearing a bit. I prefer this way as it can be done during motion, and the horse can make up his own rules and timing about how to deal with contact and pressure. It is always preferable to introduce rein aids during movement as at a halt they very quickly turn into a backward aid. While in forward motion, the momentum of the movement much easier overcomes the initial backward nature of the bit.

Teaching Contact



While the sliding side reins also still have the drawback of not always allowing full freedom of the neck, they are still very preferable to any other type of side rein, and when the handler is not very skilled at first, they are a very good crutch to help out both, the horse and the teacher.

Sliding Side Reins





The best way is to not having to use any auxiliary reins. But before I got good at it the side reins made life a lot easier for me and the horses I started.

c) starting with ground driving

When I start with the reins directly from behind, the horse needs at first to ground drive perfectly from the halter, with the reins through the rein rings on top of the surcingle or saddle.

Then, for the first time, when I hook the reins to the bit, I start with guiding them again through the side rings of the surcingle (or the shaft tugs on the harness) until the horse gets used to the contact on his mouth. As soon as I feel that the horse understands that he still can move ahead straight, I rearrange the reins to the top rings. As mentioned before, we want the horse to learn to stretch his neck and head forward downward, not suck it back to his chest.

I will start by taking the slack out of both reins, just so I can feel the mouth on both sides and start moving the bit a little from one side to the other, sort of like jiggling it in the mouth or like massaging the mouth. After a few seconds of this, I will hold the hands still or almost still and ever so slowly and gently reach forward with both hands to encourage the horse to stretch forward. Depending on whether the horse takes the bit forward, this may be very little or quite a few inches. A lot of different responses may come forth from the horse. he may ignore all this, he may try to rip the reins out of my hands, he may lean on the bit, he may hide behind it or he may stick up his head in the air.

He may also take the bit forward downward a little and soften his poll and jaw a bit. Needless to say this is the response I am looking for.

I reward this response by being quite passive until he stops doing the right thing. If he did not offer the right thing to begin with, I just keep encouraging in the above way until he figures out what is best for him. Important is to never interrupt the connection, to not show the horse loop holes where there might be no rein contact at all. For this, the hands need to follow the horse everywhere his head is moving to.

The closer the horse gets to do the right thing the lighter the contact becomes, the more he tries to evade the more restricting it becomes. But it is very important to keep this restriction ever so brief and always offer the horse the way out again by jiggling the bit again and reaching a little forward. Otherwise he may get himself stuck in a place where there is no way out for him.

So what I am looking for in essence is that the horse takes the bit from me forward, and if he no longer does this I will put a little pressure onto the bit and play with it in his mouth, and when I feel the slightest inclination of him to take the bit and/or soften a jaw or his poll, I allow him all the rein again he needs/wants to be comfortable.



So it really is sort of a game: here, horse, the bit is all yours as long as you take it forward downward, but also give a little to it. If you stop taking it, I will have to take it back, so are you sure you would not rather keep it yourself?

Ground Driving With The Bit



Horses figure this out quite quickly, esp. if the teacher is skilled enough to maintain a contact throughout and always allows the reins to act forward.

And I think it becomes now very clear why curb action or a severe type of bit would be most counterproductive for this process.

Frequency of rein aids

Horses will always have to be reminded to do the right thing, even if ever so lightly. Seldom they will do all the right things for more than a few steps in a row, so we always have to be vigilant and supportive to help them back to the right place. This becomes esp. important in an arena with all the turns to be negotiated. Every new turn needs to be prepared and rebalanced, every new direction or movement needs assisting.

The more comfortable, balanced and wise the horse becomes about all this, the less the driver has to do, and often it will be just the slightest movement on the reins, totally invisible to a bystander, that will tell the horse to do a lot of things at the same time like, for example: I would like you to round up your top line a bit more, I would like you to put a bit more energy into your stride, I would like you to go onto a circle now and bend softly and evenly, and I would like you to keep your attention with me and not look what is going on over there.



This is an enormous amount of information that the horse has to deduce from some tiny rein movements, but when he is relaxed, comfortable and willing, and he has been taught with patience and consistency, this is no problem for him.

I could continue to discuss this subject for a long time, and I am sure what I covered left a lot of questions in your mind as it is such a complex subject with so many variables, but I hope I was able to at least put some good thoughts into your mind. Just one last word:

Always consider who is on the other end of your reins

In the pursuit of teaching the horse it can be very easy to forget exactly who is at the other end of our reins. It really is just a horse, not some supernatural being who is perfect all the time. Just like we are only human, with all our faults, and our human ego that so quickly gets in the way. We want our way and we want to look good as a trainer, and we often tend to lose sight that a horse also has lots of limitations.

What always needs to be foremost in our mind is that horses are complex personalities with very much the same feelings we have, and that not considering their point of view at all times is just like treating a good friend in a bad way. They have good and bad days just like we do, and if they don't do their best for us on a given day they always have a very good reason. They don't do anything on purpose, just to annoy us or make us look bad. It is up to us to be forgiving and understanding, and to figure out what the problem might be.