

Past Meets Present in Bosal and Hackamore Training

The history of the hackamore and its modern uses in training

By Catherine Madera

LIKE FASHION, EQUINE TACK AND EQUIPMENT IS PRONE TO FADS. Whether it's rope halters, treeless saddles, or "sleazys," our horses are bound to be subject to what's in style at one time or another. A few fads—the leisure suits of the tack industry—hopefully come around only once and then disappear forever. Others are classics that resurface time and again. One such classic is the bosal or rawhide hackamore.



Rawhide hackamore

Far from being a fad, it is believed that the bosal has existed in some form since as early as 2500 BC. First used by Arabs to train camels, the bitless headstall was called *jaqma*, meaning noseband. Later, the Spanish would come to America with their *jaquima*, from which the word *hackamore* is derived.

The bosal and hackamore are essentially the same piece of equipment, although dedicated students of the vaquero method of training differentiate between the two. The vaquero would start the horse in the snaffle bit, progressing to a hackamore, then to a thinner bosal—also called a two rein—with delicate mecate reins. This was worn under the bridle as the horse was transitioned to a spade bit. Prior to the arrival of the British, the snaffle bit was absent altogether.

The hackamore had a thicker noseband, usually 3/8" to 7/8" in diameter, while the bosal was a more delicate 1/4" to 5/16". The bosal functioned not only as a final training tool with the bridle horse but also as a lead and mark of distinction for the horse. This method of training took several years.

The use of the hackamore was specifically to save the horse's tender mouth as well as stay out of Mother Nature's way during the years when teeth were erupting and being shed. For the bridle horse, nothing was more important than preserving lightness

and a soft mouth. The vaquero methods of training, as well as the art of making rawhide hackamores and horse hair mecates, have all but died out.

Form to Function

Today, people seldom take five or more years to finish their horses and few trainers use the hackamore. There seems to be a general lack of knowledge about how to fit and train a horse with one. Beyond fancy show bosals, horse owners commonly rely on the snaffle bit for everyday training and colt starting.

"It is not the tools we use, but the way we use our tools."

Ruben Villasenor, a trainer in southeastern Washington, still believes the bosal is the best way to train a horse. Through his "Horsemen's Western Dressage," Ruben offers insight into bosal training, tips on fit, and his own unique approach to this method.

"A horse with a soft face will always perform better," says Villasenor. He sees no need for the snaffle, a bit that works off the tongue and bars of the horse's mouth. "A snaffle bit moves around a lot in the mouth; it is hard for a horse to find a stable place to be."

Villasenor has always used the bosal and believes a snaffle bit is painful and distracting in the mouth of a horse, particularly a green horse. He believes bosal training is easier for a horse to understand. However, he acknowledges the bosal is not a cure-all, saying, "It is not the tools we use, but the way we use our tools."

For those wishing to try a bosal, fit is critical.

"The bosal *has* to fit the horse and mold to its face. The big ones are okay, as long as they are fit properly," says Villasenor.

To fit properly, a bosal should rest on the lower part of the horse's nose, above the nostrils. To test for fit, find the place on your horse's nose where,



A properly fitted bosal molds to the horse's face

when gently pressed, he drops his head. The bosal sits here. You should be able to slide your hand between the bosal and the horse's face as well as under the jaw. Although he has tried the larger types, Villasenor finds that they often bounce around on the horse's face. He favors the thinner ones, more like the finishing bosal of the vaquero.

It is important to note that a true bosal or hackamore has a nose band that is made of all rawhide. A mechanical hackamore or side pull is *not* the same piece of equipment and does not work the same way. Rawhide is more forgiving, providing "feel" as well as molding to the horse's face over time. Tack stores commonly carry bosals that have a metal core covered in rawhide. These do not work as well as the pure rawhide versions.



Mechanical hackamore

Like any piece of equipment, the bosal can be abusive in the wrong hands. It works off of sensitive areas on the horse's nose and jaw, and release is essential. A good bosal should be firm enough to hold its shape but soft enough to bend with your hands. It should

not be too loose or tight; it should hang well and provide quick release of pressure.

Although Villasenor does finish his horses into a shanked bit, he does not use the spade and favors the bosal for everyday use. His method is a "user friendly" approach to the bosal for those who like the mechanics of it but are intimidated by bridle horse training.

There are many books available about hackamore/bosal training and its rich history. A few include:

- *Starting the Colt* by Mary Twelveponies
- *El Vaquero* by Ernest Morris
- *The Legendary California Hackamore and Stock Horse* by Bobby Ingersoll and David R. Stoecklein.

More about Ruben Villasenor and the training and clinics he offers can be found at www.horsemenswesterndressage.com. **NWHS**

About the Author



Catherine Madera is a freelance writer living in Acme, WA. Her writing has appeared in *Arabian Horse*, *Arabian Horse Lifestyle*, *Horse of Kings*, and *Equus*, as well as several anthologies, including *Chicken Soup for the New Mom's Soul* and *Mother/Daughter Soul II*.