

ASK THE EXPERT

TONY BOTELLO



Tony Botello riding RDLP Amatista.
Photo courtesy of Tony Botello.

Tony Botello

Tony Botello is our guest expert on working your horse in the bit. Tony is best known for his gentle hand and putting an excellent rein on a horse so here are his answers to your questions about work in the bit.

Q: How long should a horse be in “four reins” [both the bit and bozal]?

A horse should be in four reins for as long as he needs. Every horse is different so when the horse does everything he should in the bozal (stop, back, turn, etc.), use the bit a little more and see how the horse responds. If he is calm and responds well, you can move to the next step of his training. It’s very important that the horse is calm and willing – don’t force a horse to do something. It’s better to try a little bit at a time.

Q: What’s the difference between training a horse for the show ring and training a horse for the trails? I see that in ranch ads all the time.

For me, the training is basically the same. Horses for the trail need to be gentle and safe (show horses too). To help with this, I tie a plastic bag to a whip (any stick will work) and touch them everywhere with the plastic bag until they are comfortable with it. I also practice taking off my jacket or hat – things that may happen out on a trail ride. Trail horses tend to take a little less time since show horses need a little more “polish” in their training but both types of horse need to be safe, calm and soft in the mouth.

Q: What’s the proper way to ride one-handed? I see people with the palm facing up and some with the palm facing down.

How a horse is ridden one handed, depends upon the horse and how they are trained. “Rienda pareja”, the style of riding when the palm is up, can only be done properly when the horse is trained to neck rein. “Rienda coja” is the style of riding with the palm down and the rider has direct contact with the horse’s mouth. A neck reining horse is trained with more body commands where a rienda coja horse takes more of his cues from the bit.

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Tony with DR El Patron showing false collection. Note the lack of roundness in the body, particularly in the neck and the rump. The headset is also too high and the gait not as synchronized as it should be.



Tony with Patron again but this time the horse is properly collected. The body of the horse is round and the headset is much better, even with a relaxed loose rein.

Q: How can a horse be “collected” if the reins are loose? Maybe I don’t really understand what collection is but I thought that when you collect a horse, you tighten the reins.

Collection involves the whole body of the horse and making it round and supple. Just pulling on the reins will not do that. It actually does the opposite, hollowing out the back, making the horse stiff. Collection is roundness of the horse’s whole body.

Q: What makes the Peruvian bit “just right” for the Peruvian Paso? People tell me it’s the only bit I can use on my horse.

In my experience, you don’t have to use a Peruvian bit. If the horse works well in the bozal, they will work well in any bit. For example, I sometimes use a Pelham bit to help a horse drop his head, walk and relax. I then move the horse to a Peruvian bit once the horse is secure, quiet and light in the rein.



Tony getting DR Aniversario de la Vega accustomed to the plastic bag all over his body, so he will be relaxed despite an encounter with an object that would ordinarily startle him.



Aniversario with a cabeson. Note the looseness of the side reins and the flexion of the neck.

Q: What do you do to retrain a horse when they are hard in the mouth? I have a gelding I just bought and he pulls so hard I think my arms are going to fall off. Any tips are appreciated. Thanks!

It's harder to retrain a horse than it is to train a young horse from the beginning but the best thing to do is to put your horse back into the bozal or four-reins, depending how hard they are in the mouth. I do a lot of slow work with this type of horse – sidestepping, big circles and other exercises where the horse bends his whole body. I also work to get the horse to drop his head and a lot of walking so the horse will work and be totally relaxed. Slow, patient work is important when working with this type of horse.





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Q: I am working a horse in the bit and she will not stop stargazing. I have tried putting her back in bozal, lots of circles and even resorted to using draw reins. She won't stop! What can I do to get her to bend her neck properly?

For horses like this, I do a lot of groundwork with a cabeson and side reins. I teach the horse to side step and work in large circles so the horse bends his body. I do this to help loosen his back. Remember that a horse is working from the end of his tail to the top of his head so if any part of that is tense, he will not collect properly. A horse must bend at the pole to collect properly. If they are loose and relaxed, they will bend at the pole and engage their hind end. When they engage their hind end, they over reach more and are lighter in the front end because they are driving from the rear. I use these ideas to get the most out of a horse based upon his natural ability and conformation and not push them beyond their limits. I have found that horses last longer when working them this way. **TPC**