

Freedom for the Icelandic tongue?

By Dagmar Trodler

Some time ago, a forgotten bit resurfaced and it is becoming quite popular in the Icelandic Horse Show World: The Icelandic bit as a curb bit.

It was recently named „Verkfæri dauðans – tool of death“ by an Icelandic critic.

Two third of the horses shown at the Four Gait test at the Icelandic Meistaradeild, were equipped with this bit. Conspicuously, all of these horses were bearing their heads numbly – none of these horses danced.



The new fashion for more elevation?

The traditional Icelandic bit is a so called “leverage bit”.

This bit, known since Roman times, is identified, according to Dr. Axel Gelbhaar, by a) flexible cheeks which are connected with the mouth piece and b) a broken mouth piece.

Especially the flexibility, cheeks movable in all directions and the barely present purchase (the upper part of cheek) are distinguishing this bit from the Pelham and the true curb bit.

The Pelham is used with two pairs of reins – one pair of reins is using the ring attached to the actual mouthpiece, the second pair of reins is attached to the shank.

The true curb bit – traditionally having a bar as mouth piece with inflexible cheek pieces – is either used with a bradoon or blank (without bradoon) with two sets of reins – and is always ridden one-handed.

Bit expert Karl-Friedrich von Holleuffer identifies the flexible attachment of the cheeks of the Icelandic bit as pump-leverage-functionality:

The horse is able to lift the bit with its tongue and then places it in its mouth, that results in a variation in the function as a lever, according to the position of the head.

So, the Icelandic bit is a bit of working-style riding, which combines maximum flexibility with maximum severity.

Now, our horses are carrying a construction in their mouths, which is easily distinguished from the Icelandic bit: the cheeks are only flexible on the horizontal level and allow a lateral manipulation against the upper jaw. The mouthpiece isn't broken anymore; it is a bar with an extensive port in the middle.

What sounds so "pleasant" isn't as pleasant according to the measurements of Prof. Preuschoft of the Ruhr University of Bochum: The so called "freedom of the tongue", supposedly offered by this port, is hitting the sensitive palate, as soon the rider takes up the reins.



Skull of an Icelandic horse: see the effects of the traditional bit on the different parts of the mouth.

Combined with the curb chain, the port is literally drilling itself into the palate.

Hereby, very important means of communication are bypassed – the tongue.

According to von Holleuffer, the tongue is a very sensitive muscle that carries the bit like a cushion.



Port drilling itself into the palate

Being the most sensitive part of the horse's mouth, the tongue is predestined to communicate with the rider's hands.

Everything could be so precise and easy.

It is easy to guess by looking at the picture, that the language this bit is speaking is pressure against the sensitive sides of the jaw-bone.

Starting from the poll, the shank, activated by the curb chain, is

compressing the horse's head. On top of that, the popular flash noseband applies pressure from the front and the back of the head.

"Tool of death" hits the bulls' eye: the horse's head is placed into a bench vice.

The horses at the Meistaradeild demonstrated it. They were miles away from being natural and engaged in a supple dance.

Does our riding style make this terror necessary?

Following the common definition, this newer variation is a so called “blank curb bit”. The curb bit’s attributes – a bar, attached curbs and a curb chain – are to be found here.

A question that has to be asked is: Why isn’t this bit being used one-handed like a blank curb bit?

Western trainer and Dysli student Christian Meyer explained that the bar at the cheek was developed for warfare and working-style riding to apply even pressure to the horse’s mouth while riding one-handed.

He says, if one lacks the quiet, fine hand to do so, the bar functions like a bottle opener and can break bones. “Because of this reason, the blank curb bit is inapplicable for two handed manipulation: it gets stuck in the horses teeth”



Without any nosebands, even the traditional Icelandic bit would reveal the truth: how much riding skill is truly to be found behind the reins.

To avoid the pain the horse tries to open its mouth. The rider locks up the mouth with the noseband.

However the Icelandic curb bit in one-handed use would differentiate the true riding master from the dilettante.

Stealthily hidden in the horse’s mouth it is nothing more than an expression of helplessness on the part of the rider.

The FEIF and our judges would serve themselves well to look closer at future competitions.

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