

The 'Little Bit' Slow Feeder – a Closer Look

by Karen Diehn



Hay nets are a good means to feed roughage in a way that keeps horses busy for longer. One of the relatively new products on the market to increase 'chew time' is the hay bag from the Netherlands, 'Little Bit'. Tölt.Knoten author Karen Diehn road tested the model.

"All you can eat" principle at the hay feeder. Regulating the amount of food is only possible by restricting the amount of hay or feeding time. The principle of the slow feeder in contrast is based on horses eating their roughage slowly and in smaller bites.

What type of roughage and in what it is served has a significant influence on the feeding speed.

Free choice roughage, either in a round bale feeder or on the ground, allows an almost unstemmed buffet style feeding frenzy. In addition this type of food offering can waste a lot of the hay as it is being trampled or soiled.

Hay nets were long considered to be the be all and end all to increase feed times, even though – experienced users are aware of this – they do have some disadvantages. Filling them can be awkward and almost impossible to do one handed; the nets constantly constrict. The extra time involved is one of the reasons why hay nets are rejected by some stable owners. There is some potential for injuries for shod horses since the end bars of the shoe can get entangled in the mesh of the net. Depending on how and where the net is attached, feeding posture may no longer be natural, i.e. downward with long straight neck. Large hay nets are easier to fill and allow several horses to feed at the same time.

When it comes to filling any of the nets, the hay bag 'Little Bit' earns its first point: the bag is made of canvas like material making it stable enough, there is no mesh and therefore no unwanted distortions. The handles on top allow it to open and be filled without problems. Carrying a full 'Little Bit' is no problem either; the handles make it possible.



A hay net with a mobile mesh – openings are side by side, compared to stable openings made with straps and distance between them. 'Little Bit' and hay net in direct comparison.

The second plus point, especially when compared to other hay nets on the market, is the mesh: a grid made of straps and located only on the front side of the bag. Other manufacturers seem to have geared their products more to the feeding of snacks, for example at shows, but not as a main means of feeding roughage that can be stored in the bag. Therefore, most other hay bags do not hold a lot of volume. Models with a large opening in the front probably don't extend the feeding time to any valuable degree.

The designers of the 'Little Bit' offer two types of their bag: the larger model has a significant capacity

(measurements are 65 x 85 x 18 cm or 24 x 34 x 7 inches).

During our road test it 'ate' between six and eight kg of hay (13 to 18 lb) depending on the structure of the hay and whether it was loosely filled or stuffed to capacity.

The openings of the 'mesh' are about 3 x 3 cm (1.2 x 1.2 inch), but they are not tightly spaced. During the test this seemed especially sensible since fewer openings meant less access to the hay meant smaller bites more often. The looser the hay in the bag, the more the horses had to really work for every bite of food.

The attachment of the bag is also practical. 'Little Bit' can be hung to a beam, fence or stall wall either by the solidly attached handles (via for example a karabiner), or with a rope threaded through existing eyelets around the edge of the bag. The attachment is simple, but even more important is the correct height. If the bag is too low, the test subjects



The hay bag has practical handles and a karabiner can be fed through them. Incorporating a break away system is recommended; there is none in this photo!

tried to eat out of the upper fill opening that is of a generous size. It is recommended to use a breakaway system when attaching the bag to minimize the danger of injuries.



'Little Bit' during the test, attached through the stall wall. The upper opening is pulled closed with a rope but often tempts the horses to grab bigger bites.

Similar to other hay nets, 'Little Bit' is especially effective as a slow feeder if it is attached in a way so that it can swing a bit. Attaching it in a more stable fashion (e.g. in a corner of the stall) allowed horses during the test to chomp more energetically and get larger bites. Having the bag swing freely makes eating more difficult, but is not impossible for horses with hay net experience. It should be noted though that the eating posture – similar to hay nets attached in this fashion – was not anatomically ideal.

Still, 'Little Bit' proved itself during the test period, especially for serving the night rations in stalls. It was attached swinging freely, but with some restrictions to avoid twisting and moving too much, and was generally accepted well and the entire contents eaten. The remainder of the daily hay rations were fed in a way that allowed a natural eating posture. Feeding a mix of hay and straw proved to be no problem either, but we found

that the straw was usually left. This means that selective eating, just like it would happen in nature, is also possible.

The two test horses managed to eat side by side off the hay bag, but the usual large hay net (2.5 m wide) obviously allows more personal space for each herd companion. To feed more than two horses will require more than one 'Little Bit' and in that situation the hay bag is quite expensive to purchase (about 50 Euros). In comparison, large hay nets with a small mesh that allow generous feeding space for two horses and can be filled with a daily hay ration, cost between 30 and 100 Euros, depending on the manufacturer. Regular hay nets with a mesh of 3 to 4 cm and a similar capacity to 'Little Bit' are available from about 10 Euros.

More information about 'Little Bit': <http://www.equilin.nl>

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