

Last Chance **By Marie Hoffman**

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Debbie called me to learn more about the TT.E.A.M. roller bit. She had read about it an article about bits and how they work.

The TT.E.A.M. roller bit is a bit that looks like a western pelham. It has all the qualities a bit needs to encourage a horse to travel with a soft jaw or poll. The shanks are swivel; the smooth mouth piece is curved so that it is very comfortable for the horse to carry. It has a port with a roller set in the port high so the horse has tongue room. The make of the bit encourages the horse to use his tongue and softly mouth and or carry the bit. Thus allowing the tongue to move enables the horse to swallow and the muscles in the TMJ area of the jaw are allowed to stay soft. It is ridden with four reins much like a double bridle.

Deb's horse that she liked very well had become unrideable. Once he cantered he pulled and would not relax after that. He wanted to go forward pulling on the bit and was very tense. Unable to ride him without a struggle, Deb and her trainer had tried many bits and training methods, and she decided that if this did not work Sam would need a new home. We settled on a time and Deb hauled him out for a lesson to see if the TT.E.A.M. bit would help.

Her horse, Sam, was a sorrel TB gelding. He had an interesting head shape. He had a sloping muzzle that said he asked questions; his forehead and bridge of his nose said he could be willful, yet was timid. Deb agreed that was his personality.

I did a full body exploration to see if I could find any pain in his body. Many times the horse will react in what may seem like a training problem, yet they are in pain somewhere. I did a flat hand exploration, looking for any hot or cold spots, lumps or places that the muscle feels different. Then I did a deep exploration where I pressed in and out quickly with my finger tips along the main muscle groups of the horse's body.

On Sam I found that he was sore, tight and puffy right behind his withers. His loin was a little sore, and the rest of his body was in good shape. When a horse is tight right behind his withers, this is the area of flight. These horses tend to be very forward and easily go into their instinctive stage of flight.

I had Deb and her trainer put their saddles on him without pads. The trainer's saddle fit well and Deb's was not tight where you usually check for tightness but it rocked pivoting in the same spot that Sam was sore. Sam had a history of riding quiet in the beginning of the ride and then becoming too forward after about 20 minutes with Deb. This could be triggered by the saddle rocking on the spot he was tight, triggering the flight instinct in Sam. He was moving (trying to run away at times) to get away from the uncomfortable pressure of the saddle on his back.

I did python lifts on his back from his withers to his loin. A python lift is where I press with the palm of my hand, pressing the muscle toward the spine. I keep my other hand on the horse, and press firmly but not hard enough that the horse wants to move away or show any signs of discomfort. I took breaths while I counted to 4 or felt the muscle release under my hand. Then I VERY slowly released while I took breaths and counted to 8. The release is the most important part of the python lift. I repeated the python lift several times while the muscles released in degrees.

When I felt I had as much of a release as the muscle could do at this time, I had Deb run her flat hand over the area to feel the heat from the increased circulation and to feel that the lump and swelling went down. I then went around to the other side and worked on his off side where he was sore. This side had released a little already from my work on the first side. It did not take as long or as many lifts to have the muscles release.

While I was doing this, Sam stretched out his neck also aiding in the release in his back. Deb said he was a very expressive horse and did not hide his feelings. So it was clear that it felt good to him.

We put the trainer's saddle on him. I did several belly lifts to help keep Sam's muscles from cramping back up when he felt the saddle tighten. His muscles remembered the uncomfortable feel of the saddle and would have tightened right back up. By doing the belly lifts, I was giving him a chance to change his body's expectations.

Once the saddle was on his back, I attached the girth on the off side. Then on the near side I held the girth in one hand and the billets in the other. I pulled up on the girth just enough to have him feel it, then released slowly. I did several belly lifts, gradually increasing the pressure on his girth area. The belly lifts are similar to the python lift in that you lift, hold and slowly release all the while breathing. Sam stood quietly and did not object to the tightening of the girth as he usually did.

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It may take only one or several saddlings for Sam to be able to change his expectations about how a saddle will feel on his back. He remembers the pain and it may take a few times for him to realize that it no longer is going to hurt.

We put the roller bit on. Sam had been ridden in curb type bits so he was used to the action of the curb chain. It is important not to just put any curb bit on a horse and ride them. Some horses will over react to the pressure being in a different spot and not understand what is expected. These horses I ground drive a few minutes in the bit first. I also put on a cavason that was not too tight. I was able to easily insert two fingers at the noseband. I do not always continue to use a cavason with the TT.E.A.M. bit but I always put one on at first. The bit was adjusted so it lay about an inch below his molars in his inter-dental space. The curb chain was adjusted so the shank could be pulled back to the pointy part of his chin, or 45 degree angle to his mouth.

In the arena the trainer mounted and rode him around at a walk. She had ridden in a double bridle and pelham before, so she quickly understood that you ride off the top rein that is closest to the horse's mouth and use the curb rein to flex the poll.

We walked Sam around letting the trainer and Sam get used to the feel of the new bit. We did lots of circles and serpentines. Then she asked him to trot and he did quietly.

I instructed the trainer that the TT.E.A.M. is not used with contact like a snaffle. It is designed to let the horse find his own balance and go in self carriage. Sam went very well on the very light contact.

I had the trainer do several transitions trot to walk. Each time she did, Sam's balance improved. Sam's main problem was he started pulling once the rider asked anything of him. Once he started pulling, he fell on his forehead thus causing him to pull more. The rider pulled back causing Sam to tighten his jaw more and continue to pull until the rider could not longer hold him back. With the TT.E.A.M. bit the trainer was able to let Sam find his own balance and break the cycle of rider and horse pulling against each other. Because now Sam could chew and swallow, his jaw stayed relaxed and he no longer felt the strong need to pull (or push into the bit) to enable him to rid himself of the bit pressure. With the TT.E.A.M. bit Sam could chew and did work the bit softly. He did not go into his instinctive state of flight, staying in his thinking or para-sympathetic nervous system enabling him to learn to balance himself quicker and easier.

Once the trainer felt comfortable at the long trot, and Sam was comfortable doing transitions at a faster speed, they cantered. This was the test because before once Sam cantered there was no holding him after. Sam cantered quietly and did several transitions to the trot and then walked quietly, like he did it everyday. We cantered several more times with the same results. This was a first for Sam to be able to do. Deb and her trainer were very pleased. I know Sam was happier too.

Deb asked if Sam would always need to be ridden in the TT.E.A.M. bit. He would not; in fact once he learns his balance she will be able to ride him in any bit. Keeping in mind that to keep him light and balanced she may need to alternate with the TT.E.A.M. bit as needed to rebalance him and keep him light.

Deb was very happy. Sam was now able to be ridden at faster gaits and would go quietly and softly afterwards. She still needed a new saddle for herself that would fit Sam but now she would be able to ride her horse and keep him.

The names have been changed.