

Let Go!

By Myrna Rhinehart

In Carriage Driving, we sometimes tell passengers and navigators to “Hang On!” That is an easy reflex to say, teach, and do. It is not as easy to teach someone to *Let Go*, or in more correct horsemanship terms, *give*.

We purchased Iowa Valley Carriage exactly nine months ago as I write this. We have a plethora of bits in our store. Now more than ever, I find there are a whole lot of people looking for that “perfect bit”. Let’s clear something up right away...*there is no such thing*. There are as many forms of conformation of horses’ mouths as there are legs, hence why there are so many forms of bits. There are also pressure points in the horse’s mouth and head to consider, but that is a completely different article (see “**Driving Bits – Their Selection and Use**”).

The concept that I would like to introduce with this article is *Hardware* and *Software*. Anyone who works with computers may know that the “box” that the computer is made up of, as well as the monitor, keyboard, and any peripherals, are known as Hardware (ok, techno-junkies, there might be more correct terms for that stuff, but I digress). The Software are the programs that make the computer actually record information, process calculations, and type this article. So with that in mind, think of the bit (and other pieces of tack) as the Hardware, and you and your hands as the Software. They are both necessary to make the horse perform the duties you ask of it, but they are completely different forms of material.



The Hardware (bit) by itself is not going to make the horse do anything. The Software (your hands) by itself (not touching the horse) is not going to make the horse perform the way you want. However, together, they become a form of communication to get the *output* (performance) you desire. Unfortunately, some people’s Software programs (hands) are considerably less powerful (less experienced) than others. They have the basic capabilities to get a simple job done, but they lack the finesse required to have the hardware (bit) communicate the various nuances that really get that awesome performance out of your horse. Ok, so hopefully now you understand the importance of your hands when it comes to the performance of your horse. We can move on from here.



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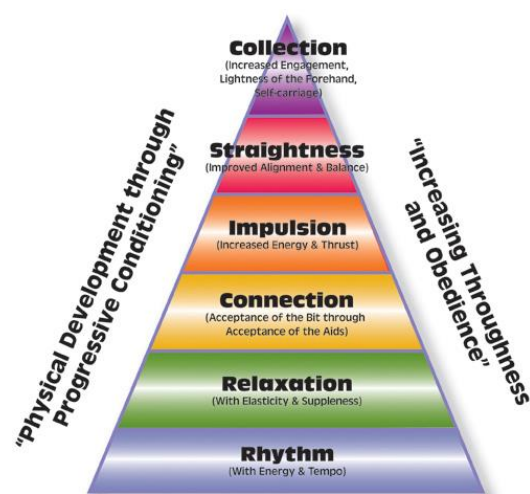
Any bit in the wrong hands will give a less-than-superb performance, and in a lot of cases, is cause for a potential disaster. This is where the idea of *giving* comes in. Lately, I have seen a multitude of people who want to *hold* their horse. Quite a few years ago, I was at a seminar being taught by Hardy Zantke. One big visual I remember him describing is one of holding a cat's tail. If you grab a cat's tail, invariably it will try to pull away from you. However, are *you* pulling or is the *cat* pulling? If you walk with the cat, is it still pulling? This is the same principle for people who *hold* their horse. Are *you* pulling or is the *horse* pulling? What happens when you *let go*? Ironically, many times the very same people who hold their horse are ones who have a certain fear of their horse. They are afraid if they let go, their horse will get away. They are expecting that the bit will keep their horse from fleeing, hence they are looking for that Miracle Bit (remember, the one that doesn't exist?).



Another concept I remember Hardy mentioning is that, "Horses don't stop with their mouths, they stop with their *brains*." The bit is a *communication device* to help you indicate to your horse what you want them to perform.

So why *Let Go*? Well, at this point we need to introduce what is commonly known as the Dressage Pyramid. (You can download your own copy of the Pyramid of Training on our Educational Articles page.) It is a system of training which uses basic principles and builds onto the next level. You don't have to actually do dressage competitions to utilize the principles in your training process. Much like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs we learned in Psychology class, the Pyramid of Training expects that the top of the pyramid will not be in place without the bottom. We can see at the bottom are Rhythm and Relaxation. Now back to that cat we are pulling...how relaxed do you think he is when we are pulling his tail? How relaxed is our horse when we are pulling on his face? Most horses I see where the driver's software is out of whack, the horse is basically trying to "run for his life" or tolerating the driver at best.

Pyramid of Training



I'll give you a recent example. We started our Arabian/Dutch Harness mare to drive. She is more than likely never going to be that horse you take out on a leisurely, strolling drive. She was bred to be a very forward show horse, and that is what she is. However, that doesn't mean that she can't relax. We had her put to the vehicle a few times one summer, and then realized that she is going to need more time and miles than we had time or room for. So she went to Mr. Yutzy's house for a while to get some miles.

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While there, the mare went eight miles a day for five weeks. She was *broke*, but not *trained*. The mare knew *Stop* and *Go*. Now she needed to learn *Go Slow Trot*, *Go Working Trot*, *Go Strong Trot*, and *Go Relax* (we are not working on canter, yet). So we had to go back and develop the principle that, yes, she can move off without popping into the traces. She can walk calmly instead of bolting into a 15 kph trot down the road. She can stop and wait even though we haven't worked a half an hour. She didn't know that was possible when she was basically hooked and trotted down the road to the neighbor's house that fall.

Regardless, when we put her to the next spring, she felt like she was a moment from explosion because she had been *taught* that when she is put to the vehicle, she goes eight miles down the road at a good clip, and we were asking her to walk. John Lyons has said that a horse has a harder time being stressed with its head down, so he teaches the "Head Down" cue. While I was on the ground and my husband, Chad, was on the box, I was at a vantage point where I could see that the mare needed to be able to put her head down to relax. With Chad taking up the rein to have the contact he felt he needed, the mare folded herself up like an accordion with her head up and nose in her chest. She *couldn't* put her head down!



I had to convince Chad that she needed more rein, but he was concerned that she would be apt to go faster than he wanted.



However, he finally did give more rein, and the mare dropped her head to the bit. When she would get a little fast, I asked him to "wiggle" or "pop" the outside rein a little bit to encourage her to maintain her rhythm without increasing pace. (Remember, she was still at the bottom of the pyramid and hadn't really learned true bit acceptance, yet.) After half a dozen drives just at a walk, she learned that it really is OK to walk off calmly. We started working again at the trot, being careful to maintain a relaxed rhythm. We can't move up the pyramid if she loses the relaxation.

(Notice in the photos that there is a red piece of tape around the rein at the mare's hip. See how far forward the tape "moves" when she drops her head. This shows how much rein was needed to be given to have her go "long and low". She has to go down before she can effectively be taught to carry herself in a more upright frame in a later stage of her training.)

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Another instance of a driver who needed to learn to give involved a friend of ours with a similarly trained mare who felt she needed to bolt into the traces once put to the cart. She was relaxed on the long lines, but anxious when put to the vehicle because that is basically how she was taught. Going back to the principle of *give*, the mare is now able to walk off without looking like a flight risk. We worked on taking a few walk steps and stopping. We also worked on letting the mare have more rein once in a working trot, so that she did not expect that she will get her mouth yanked on as soon as she moves off. She is learning that relaxation is a good thing. And the driver is learning that the horse can relax if she isn't pulling on the mare's face. There is *communication* happening with the bit, instead of an expectation that the piece of metal is going to stop the horse.

I also see horses and drivers in competition who perform wonderfully in the warm up arena, but nerves of either the horse or the driver or both come into play as soon as they hit the show arena gate. The horse's head goes up and the driver clings on for dear life, looking like a potential runaway to the judge. If the driver's hands are at fault, oh how wonderful it would be to have that driver *Let Go* and enjoy the drive! More than likely, the driver doesn't even realize how sensitive her horse is and that her own nerves, transferred to the horse through her hands, affects the horse's own nerves and lack of relaxation.

So how is your Software (hands)? Are you pulling your cat's tail? Is your *cat* trying to run from you? Are you trying to hold your horse when what he really needs is the ability to be able to lower his head to learn to relax? Are you creating the anxiety in your horse with your Software? Does your Software need an update? If you answered yes to any of the above questions, consider scheduling a date with your favorite instructor to learn how to develop the finesse in your hands to create the horse you want.