

MICHAEL LANGFORD

# BITLESS *Training*

Michael Langford explains how he uses the side pull and bosal to start and maintain his horses

I have always been interested in the training of young horses. Getting a horse to walk, jog, lope, stop and turn softly without a bit in its mouth is something that fascinates me. Every horse I start begins its ridden education in a side pull before progressing into the snaffle. I use the bosal later on in a horse's training if they are with me for the long term.

The side pull is a bitless piece of headgear similar to the bosal (see box) but works more on the side of the horse's nose. The technique of using a side pull is similar to that of a snaffle so it is a much better option for a lot of people wishing to ride their young horse bitless instead of the bosal, which requires a specific technique and good hands.

Before I progress into the snaffle I like my horses to be able to give their face both vertically and laterally in all gaits, perform basic lateral movements and back up on a loose rein. The better broke I can get a horse in the side pull the better my first ride in the snaffle will be as the horse already understands how to give to pressure and where they will find the release. With most horses this is achieved within the first two to four weeks of their training.

If a horse were to start teething once I had started the snaffle work I would then go to the bosal. I can achieve a much greater level of finesse and softness in the bosal than I can the side pull. Remember the adage, 'a good start is half the finish.'

When we start a horse it is important that we teach them to be soft and work with collection early on. I sometimes see people working in different types of bitless bridles, allowing their horses

to lean and work with their noses poked out. This will often mean that the transition into the snaffle is much more difficult and the horse will fight more than if they had been started in the snaffle at the beginning.

As with everything that I do, I work with the basic principle of pressure and release. I want to make sure that my horse gives and softens to where I want them before I release. I'm very clear about where this is so that my release is immediate when they are good. Some horses can be tough so I may need to bump firmly on the rein before they'll look for the release. Once you have the horse looking for the release things become much easier.

At the beginning I work a lot on lateral bend. I find that if a horse can bend left and right softly, then getting vertical flexion becomes much easier.

Because I have done the foundation work when the horse was in the side pull, riding the older horses in the bosal is pretty straightforward. Although the bosal applies pressure in different places, a horse that has been worked with nose pressure before figures out the bosal pretty quickly.

I'll often put the older horses into the bosal for a number of reasons. On the horses that show a lot I like to give their mouth a break from the bit, especially the ones that show in the bigger ported bits as I think it does their mind a lot of good. I'll often come back from a competition and spend a week riding in the bosal. It is also a good way to test how good your horse is. I'd expect my horse to perform as well in the bosal as it does in the bit. If it wasn't the case then I would spend time refining my bosal work, making my horse much more solid in their manoeuvres.





## THE BOSAL

A bosal is a type of noseband that originated from the Vaquero tradition of hackamore (bitless bridle) training. The name originates from the Spanish word for muzzle and reflects its action, which is on the horse's nose and jaw. The bosal is usually made of braided rawhide in varying diameters and weights. Horses progress from a thicker to thinner bosal for a more refined response.

Attached to a bosal hanger, the ends of the bosal are joined with a heavy 'heel' knot beneath the horse's chin. The reins used with a bosal are called mecate reins and comprise a long rope of around 20–25 feet, which is specially tied in order to adjust the fit of the bosal around the muzzle of the horse. This rope creates both a looped rein and a long free end that can be used for a number of purposes.

The bosal is ridden with two hands and uses direct pressure rather than leverage. It is particularly useful for encouraging flexion and softness in the young horse but can be harsh in the wrong hands.



## THE SIDE PULL

The side pull has a noseband made of rope, rawhide or heavy leather. Reins are attached to rings on either side of the horse's muzzle and, when the reins are pulled back, pressure is placed on the bridge of the horse's nose. When one rein is pulled the horse's nose is pulled in the direction of the rein. Depending on how they are designed some side pulls may place pressure over the poll or under the jaw. You generally don't ride with as much contact as you might with a bit.

Many trainers start young horses with a side pull. This allows the horse to learn directional signals without placing pressure on a sensitive mouth.



## BOSAL - LATERAL FLEXION

Here I am riding an aged horse in a bosal. When using the bosal I ride with open fingers when the horse is turned loose. I ask for lateral flexion by closing my grip and sliding my hand down the inside rein. I then lift my hand and bump 'up' if the horse hasn't given his face. I want to get the horse soft and solid with this before I move to working on vertical flexion. I use my legs in the same way as I would for the work in the side pull for both the lateral and vertical flexion work.

## BOSAL – VERTICAL FLEXION

I ask for vertical flexion by picking up both hands evenly and going to a rocking or bumping motion down the reins. I want that motion to be in time with my horse's stride so it will be different for each gait. I want the horse to give his nose and soften though his neck before I release him.



## SIDE PULL - VERTICAL FLEXION

Here I am riding a two year old filly in a side pull. I start by bringing my hands up and back slowly taking the slack out of the rein with an even pressure. I want my horse to flex and soften through her neck before I release her. If she were to brace against my hand I would bump in a continuous left right motion, increasing pressure until she gives. I want the time between the initial soft cue and the release to be as short as possible so she can associate the two. I always release (put the slack back in the rein) quickly when she makes a good effort. My legs work in a rhythmical motion in time with my hands; if I increase the pressure in the rein I also increase the pressure in my legs.

It's important to look for softness and not just flexing. I want to feel that she will hold herself before I release her. If, when you take the slack out of the rein, it feels like you are coiling a spring then you need to continue asking until you feel your horse soften and relax through their neck.

## SIDE PULL - LATERAL FLEXION

I ask for lateral flexion in the side pull in a similar way to how I ask for vertical flexion. The difference being that I lift my inside hand to create the lateral flexion. Again, I pick up slowly and softly to take the slack out and go to a bumping motion if the horse braces against my hand. I bump 'up' on my inside rein to create the lateral flexion and back on my outside rein to help create the vertical flexion. I still maintain an even pressure down the reins to help balance my horse's face. My release is the same as that when I ask for vertical flexion.

Typically I use a little more inside leg to create the softness through the inside of the horse, again increasing the pressure with the inside leg in time with my hand if the horse pushes against me.

