

Chewing the Reins Out of the Hands by Kristin Hermann



When I discovered the intrigue of dressage I studied with an FN trainer from Germany.* A FN, certification to teach and train from the Germany, is the highest degree for an equestrian. This man used to stand in the middle of the ring and ask the horse to *chew the reins out of his hands*. I was amazed at how the horse's he touched simply gave at the poll and gradually lowered their head. These horse's did not pull the reins out the hands or tug to get free from the contact. This equine master could even run next to the horses we were mounted on and keep them "flexed and on the bit," with two fingers. Meanwhile, astride the horse with both hands and all of our aids in action we were still struggling to get our horses round.

Years later, I figured it out through trial and error and sheer determination. Not only could I now run next to a horse and keep it flexed with two fingers, but quietly ask the horse to softly chew the reins out of the hands. At the time of my discovery this technique was the opposite of what most other aspiring dressage riders were attempting. I was taught to ask the horse to stretch down and into the contact. Many other riders were trying to pull the horse's head in, which resulted in a taunt contact and instead of the horse being in self carriage, it was leaning on the rein. It was the difference between an independent contact where the horse was in self carriage and a codependent contact where if the rider dropped the contact, the horse would lose balance and fall on its forehead!

Within my thirty years of discovery, I have rarely, accept that one trainer, seen trainers show riders how to teach the horse to chew the reins out of the hands. However, recently I was showing a horse to a client who was accompanied by her trainer and she was having difficulty getting the horse soften in the poll. I started to show her how to ask the horse to chew the reins out of the hand from the ground. Her trainer said to me, "I never saw someone do this from the ground, only while mounted" She was also trained in chewing the reins out of the hand, just not from the ground. My reply was that over the years, I discovered that teaching students from the ground with their hands close to the bit, then near the horse's shoulders (with a longer rein) and then while mounted seemed to enhance the tactile sensation of asking the horse to chew the reins out of the hands. In my amazement of her noticing what I was doing, I told her that I rarely even saw this being taught and always felt like the black swan and I asked her where she trained. She said she trained in Florida through out the winter and trained with the best! Well, that made me feel less like the ugly duckling in Western Pa., I was not alone in my technique anymore.



Through out my journey it fascinated me as to how others made their horses round. Hearing confirmation from this trainer that I was not alone in my technique was thrilling because my FN trainer from 1978 has since moved out of state. Then again, over the years I took clinics with over 18 international riders and never once was chewing the reins out of the hands mentioned. Since my initiation to dressage, I started to work harder to gain a living other than continue with my education. Therefore every time a new student came to my barn and rode dressage, I would ask, "how were you taught to get the horse soft and giving at the poll, round and on the bit?" The most common answers have been to half halt and ride the horse forward and drive with the seat. Once I was told it was done by turning a key, boy I wish I had that key!

Individually, the answers above are not the one solution to get a horse round. Getting a horse soft and on the bit is a combination of all of the above answers, and then some. Riding and having a horse receptive to the aids or on the bit does not just involve leg, seat or hand, but the perfect combination of all working in unison. The harmony of roundness includes, just enough forward so the horse does not slow down when contact is established, just enough leg so the horse stays in front of the leg using its whole top line (thus back) and tracks up, and just enough hand or rein contact all combined with a following seat that does not inhibit the horse from raising its back up to meet the seat.

Stefan Peters wrote that the first thing he does when he mounts a horse at a clinic is to ask it to soften in the poll."In the halt, the horse needs to learn that when the rider closes his leg and applies a little bit of pressure in the hand, he should give in the poll. Then, if my horse gives me a lighter contact, I go forward in the walk. If the horse starts pulling, then I go back to the halt."¹ I suppose this Olympic rider has the key! A horse that is not soft in the poll will not be responsive to any of the rider's driving aids, let alone a half halt. So establishing a soft mouth sounds like a great idea.



Here are a few photos of a rider asking the horse to soften at the poll and chew the reins out of her hands. In the first photo, the rider is standing at a halt with her aids securely and correctly talking and listening to the horse at the same time. She has a straight line from her ear, shoulder, hip and ankle and a straight line elbow to bit. The horse is attentive and listening to her. She is not stiff in her position so she will be more capable of being receptive and influential to the horse.



In the second photo, you can see that her steady elastic pressure to the bit caused the horse to give at the poll and "nod" his head just a smidgen behind the vertical. This is the biomechanical reaction that will happen after the horse gives to the pressure of the rein by nodding at the poll, he nods below the vertical. After the horse gives, or nods the rider gives the horse permission to stretch down when the finger's open and say "okay." The reins then start slipping through the fingers.



Gradually, in photo three, you can see how this horse is beginning to chew the reins out of the hands, and is lowering its head. The horse has been taught to wait for the rider to ask for this and is not rooting or pulling the reins out of her hands. If the horse were to stop stretching down, the rider would establish contact again and repeat asking the horse to flex, give, nod or yield. (What ever adjective you choose to describe this.) Preferably the contact is not dropped but is always slightly maintained as the horse is allowed to stretch down.

In photo four, within seconds the horse successfully has chewed the reins out of the rider's hands! His nose could come a little forward but you can see he is still gradually stretching.



Eleven years ago, in 1991 the "stretchy circle" was applied to the USDF tests, yet I learned this stretching technique in 1978 when it was called "down and out," or "plowing potatoes!" Granted our demonstration horse is standing still, but teaching chewing the reins out of the hands at the halt is a place where horse and rider best develop the feel of chewing the reins out of the hands. It is a biomechanical reflex between rider and horse that needs to be learned. The rider has to develop the individual feel with the contact per horse as the horse too learns to give to the slight even pressure of the rein. The horse also learns to differentiate between the rider's fingers staying closed or when the fingers

open saying to the horse it is okay to stretch down. If the fingers stay closed the horse is suppose to stay soft, round and submissive to the contact. When the finger's open the horse is allowed to stretch. The rider then has a horse that is like silly putty between the aids and only stretches when allowed.

Teaching the horse to chew the reins out of the rider's hands sounds easy, but applying it is difficult because it requires the rider to feel when the horse gives or nods and has the exact timing of when to allow the horse to stretch and when to say not now. This is why chewing the reins out of the hands at the halt is done before trying to coordinate all these subtle signals while trotting.

In the photos of the white horse, the rider is allowing the horse to chew the reins out of the hand at a trot. In the one photo the horse is both up at the poll and round, granted it could be more "through," or tracking up, but you can see it is light in the contact and the rider is not pulling it together. In the photo stretching, the same horse is now tracking up, still soft in the bridle as the rider has allowed her to stretch down. The horse's head is tilted a little: if the rider releases more rein the horse will likely extend its neck further down and stretch evenly through both sides of the neck and back, thus removing the tilt.



Another illustration of stretching is on the sorrel horse chewing the reins out of the rider's hands at a trot and then also being ridden up and into the bit with a soft contact. Notice there is no flash or crank nose bands to keep its mouth shut. Just a happy horse.

This technique of stretching, or chewing the reins out of the hands, can even be applied for horses at the canter, if need be and the rider is willing plus capable!



For more information about chewing the reins out of the hands, refer to Eric F. Herbermann's book The Dressage Formula. He has average horses both stretching and chewing the reins out of the hands and then collecting into piaffe! Also buy a copy of The Calvary Manual of Horsemanship and Horsemastership. Refer to the chapter 'The Application of and Action of the Reins.' This book is highly recommended but not seen too often for sale, as it likely out of print. (Go to amazon.com and buy used)

1. **Dressage Today** February 2008 (pg.30) That Perfect Connection An Interview with U.S. Olympian Steffen Peters by patricia Lasko

* www.robertomayerdressage.com

