



## Catching Hold of The Bit (Shank) By Cindy K. Roberts

Typically it is young mules that develop the habit of grabbing hold of the bit shank while raising their head which is due to nervousness or perhaps because of teething. However, I have seen this type of behavior in older mules as well; the mule may have developed this habit when he realized it is an effective way to minimize the rider's control while working/schooling under saddle. Gymkhana mules tend to easily pickup the habit of catching hold of the bit shank simply because they are wired to run and perform.



I have heard of riders/trainers smearing objectionable tasting matter on the bit cheek piece only (*never the mouth piece*) such as cayenne or old-fashioned liquid bitter aloes. I would never recommend doing this because it can easily create bigger problems for the handler. For one, the mule can easily become difficult to bridle. (Bridling issues are covered later in this book.) Should the mule become quick and agile enough to grab hold of the reins, then I would apply something like hot-sauce onto the reins to nip this habit in the bud.

The rider may be the cause of the problem in which the mule could be catching hold of the bit cheek to seek relief. Make sure that you are not trying to balance your seat by holding onto the reins. Keep your hands light and work on effective communication through feel; give and take with your hands starting with the mule's mouth, all the way through your fingers, hands and to your elbows.



Using a true snaffle bit such as a D-ring (pictured left) would be ideal as the mule has nothing to grab hold of. Young mules should be started in snaffles and therefore this catching hold of

the bit business should not be an issue. Another option for an older mule would be to use a Kimberwick bit (pictured right.)



Sometimes nervous mules do well in a curb bit that has a roller on the mouth piece. Rollers on mouth pieces can help your mule to relax because he has something to play with in his mouth. Some bits have a single cylindrical joint in the centre. This encourages mules to move it with their tongue. That small movement can be enough to stop them from tightening their jaw.

Bits can be severe when it has square edges, rollers that spin from side to side or twisted mouthpieces that are used. These type bits should be used with caution as they sit directly on the mule's tongue and if used in the wrong hands will do much more harm than good. Try