

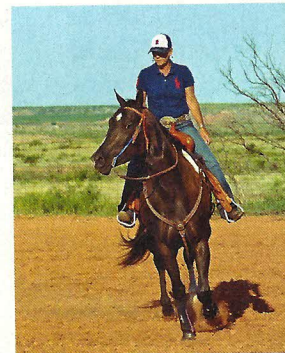
Dena Kirkpatrick prefers to transition young horses from a snaffle bit into a Loomis gag.

Training to

Win



Veteran barrel horse trainer Dena Kirkpatrick discusses her personal bit preferences and how keeping a horse light enables her tools of choice to remain effective.



By Laura Lambert
Photos Courtesy of EquiBrand

Dena Kirkpatrick believes in keeping her training methods simple and she employs the same philosophy when selecting the bits best suited to different stages of barrel horse training.

"I get a lot of questions about what kinds of bits I use and it doesn't take me long to explain because I keep things simple," says Kirkpatrick. "I have a few bits that are my favorites and I stick with them."

Top tools

Kirkpatrick uses specific bits in early stages of training to establish solid fundamentals.

"When I start a horse [on the barrels], I put them in a ring snaffle. This happens as soon as I get them back from the colt starting guys. I want the horse to know how to back off the bit and move its shoulders.

Before patterning on the barrels begins, Kirkpatrick contends that she must have a colt soft and flexible in each direction, responding well to leg pressure, giving to rein or neck pressure and tucking his rear end to stop when she sits. Ideally, Kirkpatrick says you should be able to control the horse's body from "lips to hips."

Bit Basics With Dena Kirkpatrick

"I will start a horse on the pattern in a ring bit but as soon as they learn how to back off and move, then I put them in a Loomis draw gag," says Kirkpatrick.

Desiring more control and lift in the shoulder as the horse progresses through training, Kirkpatrick is a well-known proponent of the Loomis draw gag, which works off the horse's poll as well as the corners of the mouth.

"I can't live without that bit," she says.

Learning to use the Loomis literally as it was developed has drawn Kirkpatrick back to this tool time and time again.

"This bit was developed by a legend in our business, Joyce Loomis, and I am blessed to have learned how to use the bit effectively from her and from Celie Ray."

Kirkpatrick uses the draw gag to lighten a horse up, teach them to relax in a bit, gain flexion and to essentially achieve more shoulder control than she has with a simple O-ring snaffle. Simply put, the Loomis draw gag is used on a daily basis in Kirkpatrick's training program.

As each horse progresses around the barrels, Kirkpatrick says that her goal is for them to ultimately perform with very little help. Preparation and clear teaching methods in the horse's early foundation allow her horses that freedom as they mature.



Recognizing that she relied heavily on the Loomis draw gag as part of this process, Kirkpatrick realized that she needed to search and find other compatible bits to incorporate that would compliment her training style, providing the desired feel that

she wanted from her horses. While at first it seemed like a struggle to change, finally Kirkpatrick came across a bit developed by Carol Goostree called the Simplicity that worked for her purposes.

The Simplicity bit offered her the feel

Dena on Overcoming Adversity

While some barrel racers seem to be defined by an endless string of success, Dena Kirkpatrick has experienced her fair share but it hasn't come without a few setbacks along the way. Overcoming the odds when they've been stacked against her has given Kirkpatrick a sincere appreciation for her career.

In 2007, Kirkpatrick got a wake-up call.

"It's easy in life to come to a place where you are burned out with your job. It's easy to forget how blessed you are and to start to focus on the negative instead of the positive things. I think this happens to a lot of people and I made the mistake of letting it happen to me. In other pro-

fessions, this may just mean that you are making your co-workers miserable. If you are a horse trainer, your co-workers are horses and they will definitely be affected.

Having come to a place in her career where she reconsidered being a barrel horse trainer, Kirkpatrick describes her attitude then as one of disillusionment.

"One of the horses I was training at the time was a mare with a particularly bad disposition. I was working with her in the round pen and she managed to kick me really hard with both hind feet. When I hit the ground after the kick, I realized I wasn't dead, but that I had a badly broken leg. I thanked God for

not letting me die, and then prayed that I would be able to ride again. I'm ashamed that it took an accident like that to make me appreciate all that God had given me, but am thankful He allowed me to recover and continue working with horses. By the time I could get back in the saddle, my enthusiasm was restored. It was going to be a challenge, but I was determined."

Kirkpatrick humbly says that she considers the biggest setback of her career to be her fault.

"I allowed my attitude to get in the way of my sense. It took God facing me with losing the thing I truly loved in order for me to realize the value it had in my life. All of the sudden, I wanted to train horses and looked forward to getting to the barn every day.

My life had actually gotten harder because of my broken leg but there was nothing that could stop me at that point."

Kirkpatrick came back from the injury with renewed determination. She has been incredibly successful since the accident and truly appreciates every day.

The Post, Texas, cowgirl has an undeniably good attitude, which translates to her horses. Her outlook on each horse is positive and she allows horses to do things on their own without using force.

"My goal is to help each horse I train to be the best he or she can be with as little force as possible, and always keeping in mind that each individual is different, and will have talents that are unique. My job is to find those talents in every horse I touch."



These days Dena Kirkpatrick shares her philosophy at clinics across the nation and internationally.

Bit Basics With Dena Kirkpatrick

she wanted but also provided the horse with added stability for different competitive conditions.

"When you start going to rodeos on a horse, sometimes you just need more bit. The ground and the atmosphere is much different and you need to be able to help your horse more than you can in the Loomis gag," Kirkpatrick says.

Kirkpatrick says that many of her horses move into the Simplicity bit, which comes in a variety of mouthpiece options.

"Having a bit that is offered in several different mouthpieces is important because horses are individuals and as such, their mouths have varying levels of sensitivity," Kirkpatrick advises. Some horses need a little more bit than others.

At the same time that she was searching for alternative bits to the Loomis, Kirkpatrick was also faced with the challenge of having suitable tools available to individuals who purchased horses from her that they could learn to use immediately. She discovered that the Simplicity fit the bill because it was user-friendly enough for riders not yet experienced with the Loomis.

Other options

While the O-ring, the Loomis gag and the Simplicity are obvious favorites in the Kirkpatrick tack room, there are other tools she turns to as horses progress through various stages of their training and competitive careers.

The Ed Wright lifter bit in the medium-shank with the twisted three-piece mouthpiece is among them. The Carol Goostree double-gag is another favorite option that Kirkpatrick considers, particularly in situations where she is pairing a horse with a new rider. Knowing that horses will react differently to other people and to differing amounts of hand pressure, Kirkpatrick takes the time to test these bits with different riders to see which tools are most effective and the easiest for people to use. The Ed Wright and Goostree bits have passed muster, and she often uses these two bits in addition to the Simplicity during the transition process.

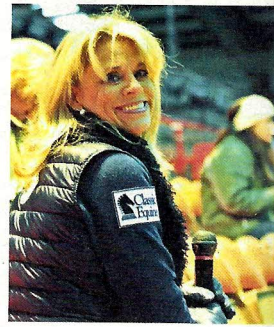
When a horse requires a slightly heavier bit, the Sherry Cervi short-shank with a twisted mouthpiece is the next step up.

"I like this bit for older rodeo horses because it is weighted and has an added amount of stability. I think this is a great

Meet Dena Kirkpatrick

Dena Kirkpatrick is a professional horse trainer and clinician who has been in the business for decades. She married Cliff Kirkpatrick in 1983 and together they have two daughters, Sarah, 23, and Hannah, 18.

While Kirkpatrick may have gained a great deal of recognition in recent years as the trainer associated with the formative years of Sugar Moon Express, Kirkpatrick has trained numerous winning mounts, among them the great Willy Nick Bar, Chicago Moon Express, Levin Lucille, DJ Nick Bar, Fols Classy Snazzy, Ima Nonstop Princess and Lady Perks. Kirkpatrick is an American Quarter Horse Association World Champion, Barrel Futurities of America World Futurity Champion and Old Fort Days Futurity Reserve Champion. Her win record is littered with numerous other futurity and rodeo titles. She and Willy Nick Bar hold the record as the only horse and rider duo to win all three go-rounds of the BFA World Championship Futurity. She was ranked among Equi-Stat's Top 10 Futurity Riders for 10 consecutive years. Kirkpatrick currently trains a select group of young horses and travels extensively conducting clinics and giving seminars.



competition bit," says Kirkpatrick.

There are situations with certain horses when it becomes necessary think outside the "bit box" and reach for something else entirely. "When taking the bit out of the horse's mouth, I have two favorite Hackamores: one designed by Jim Warner, and one by Goostree." In Kirkpatrick's experience, both Hackamores still allow the rider to achieve the desired amount of flex that most barrel horses need.

Additionally, Kirkpatrick isn't afraid to put more of a roping style bit in a horse's mouth when necessary.

"Sometimes, a horse just does not like a gag bit, so control has to come from another source, which would be leverage. Using a bit with more of a shank and no gag will really let you keep a horse stood up, yet, depending upon the horse and the rider's hands, will still allow you to get the flex we desire in the turn," Kirkpatrick says.

The right bit fit

Kirkpatrick says that in her opinion, the bottom line when it comes to bit selection is finding what works the best for each individual rider and, of course, for each individual horse. She feels that how you use the bit is more important than what bit you choose. Keep in mind that any bit can be severe in one person's hands, while it may not be severe at all when used by a light-handed rider. It's necessary for riders to assess their abilities, their individual habits and consider how much pressure they apply, in turn analyzing how the horse responds.

Kirkpatrick adds that placement of the bit

in the horse's mouth is also very important in order for any bit to be effective. Bits such as the Loomis or the Simplicity must be adjusted properly in order to make contact with the horse's mouth as soon as the rider lifts on the reins. Keep in mind that if the bit is hanging too loosely in the horse's mouth, leverage is lost because the gag action is overly delayed. For riders who are inexperienced with proper bit and curb adjustment, she suggests getting a qualified professional to assist.

Education is key in choosing bits and understanding what will work, emphasizes Kirkpatrick.

"I have had many people help me learn to use bits and I'm very thankful for the knowledge I have gained. Sometimes people ask me why I don't have a bit line with my name on it. Why reinvent the wheel? People before me have done a great job of designing effective bits," says Kirkpatrick.

No matter what bit you choose, Kirkpatrick says that a good foundation must be in place on any barrel horse so they are broke enough to be responsive to the cues that are given.

"Work ethic is everything and you get out of your horses exactly what you put into them. I believe that instilling a solid foundation is the key to the success and longevity of a horse's career. That is my job as a trainer."

To learn more about the intricacies of the authentic Loomis gag, visit www.barrelhorsesnews.com/training/training-articles/3262-understanding-the-loomis-gag. E-mail comments on this article to bhneditorial@cowboypublishing.com.