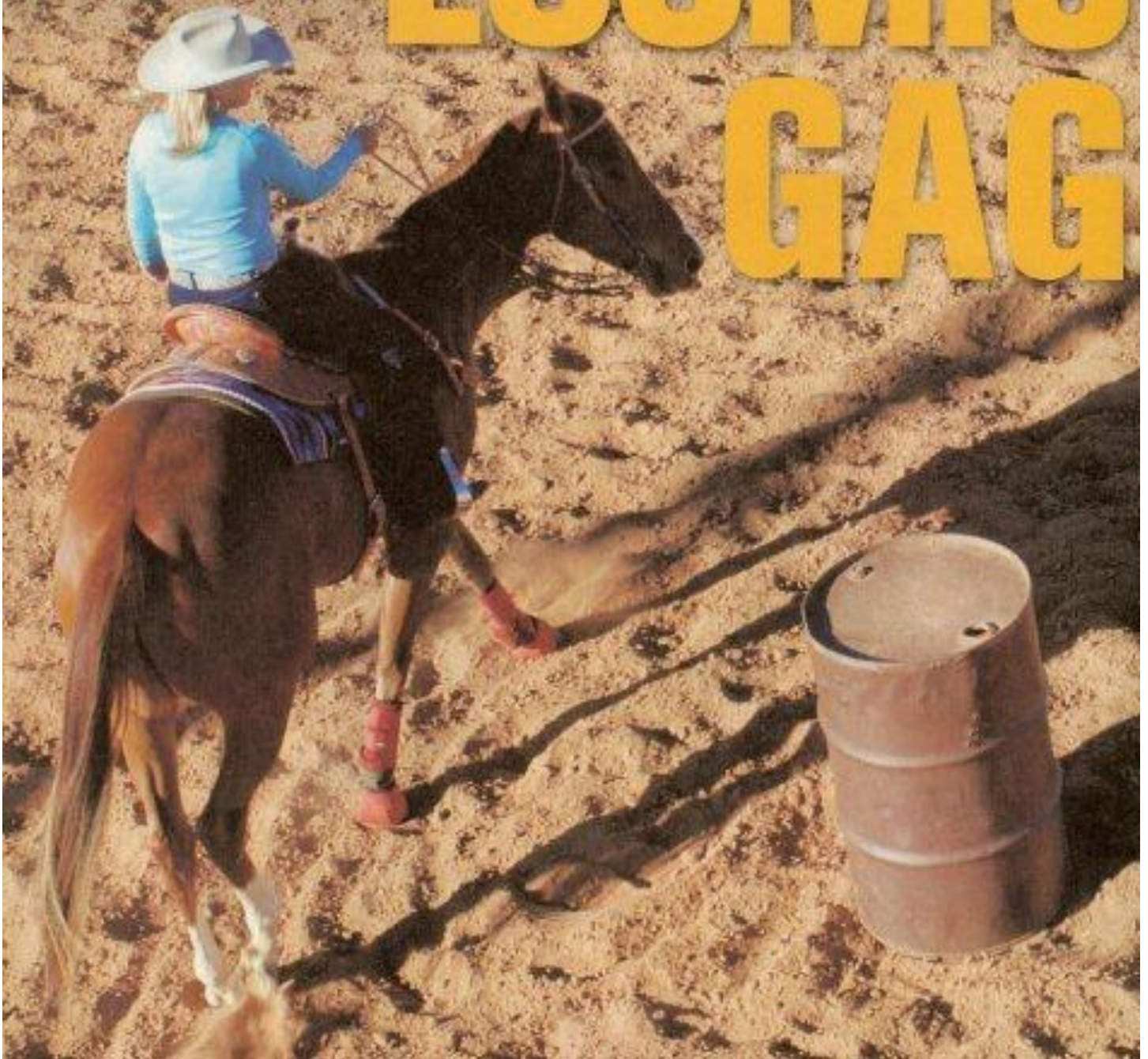


BEHIND THE BARRELS

UNDERSTANDING THE **LOOMIS** **GAG**



This simple, yet effective, bit is a barrel racer favorite for training, tuning and competing, but almost everyone uses it for a different reason.

Article by Tanya Randall • Photos courtesy of EquiBrand

Necessity is the mother of invention. When the Western performance horse industry was hitting its stride in the 1960s and '70s, talented trainers looking to perfect their craft started developing their own equipment, especially bits. Aside from standard English curbs and snaffles, driving bits and grazing bits, choices were pretty limited. Gag bits were almost non-existent.

When 1970 Women's Professional Rodeo Association World Champion Barrel Racer Joyce Loomis Kernek married legendary reining horse trainer Bob Loomis, she was introduced to a homemade gag bit that was a rudimentary prototype of what came to be the Loomis Gag.

"He had taken the mouthpiece out of an English bit and welded it into steel shanks," she says. "We fought over who was going to get to use it every day."

Fellow champion barrel racer and trainer Wanda Bush suggested that she get Ben Walker to make her gag from scratch rather than from spare parts of other bits. A Mason, Texas, peace officer and bit maker, Walker had often made bits for Wanda and her cutting horse trainer husband, Stanley.

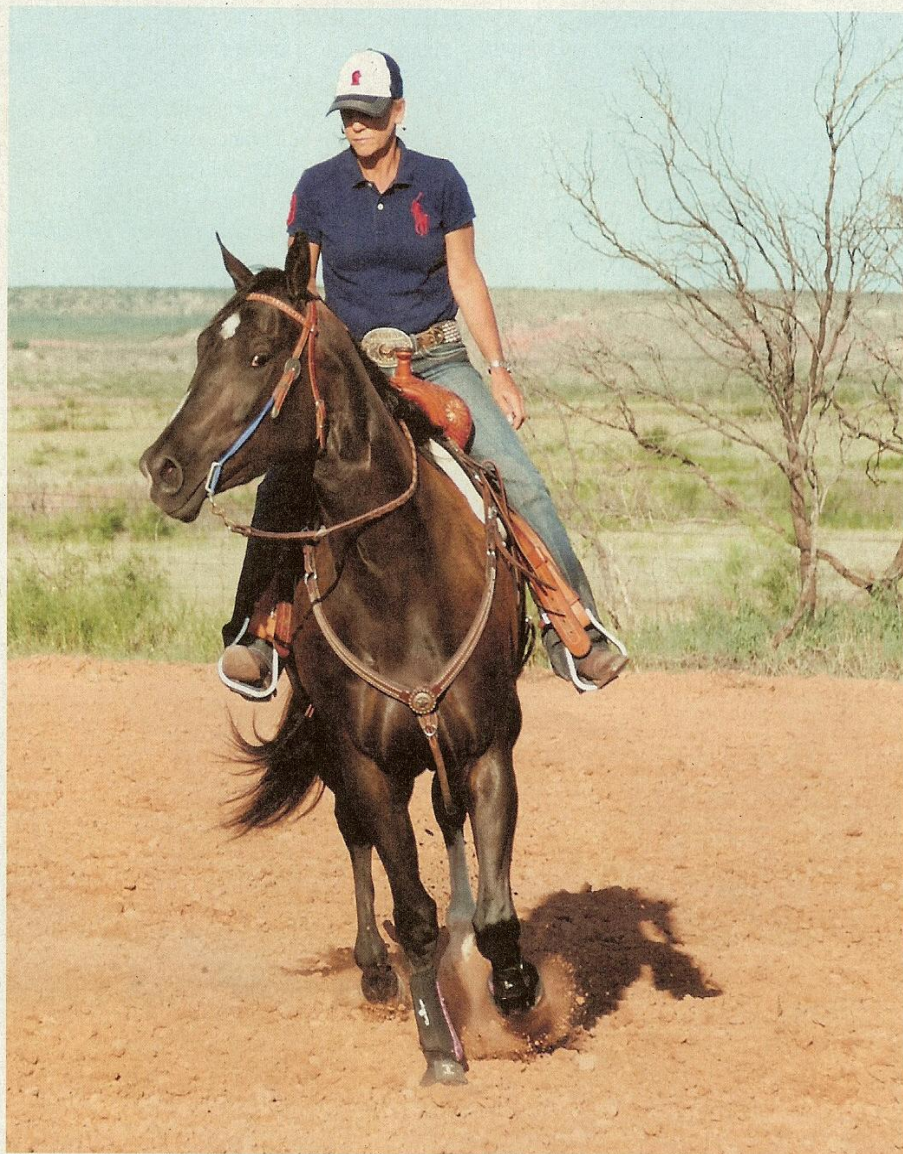
"I started selling them, and people started borrowing them from each other, and they've just gone all over the world," she says. "I've sold it to so many different customers—cutters, reiners, endurance riders."

Loomis Basics

"This bit works on the poll as well as the sides of the mouth," Loomis Kernek explains. "It's a great bit to get the sides of the mouth—one side or the other. If you want to supple on the left side, you put direct pressure on the left."

Although she used to offer a variety of mouthpieces within the gag, today only smooth and twisted are available in authentic Loomis Gags.

"All my bits have identification on them," she says. "Now that Equi-Brand (Classic Equine) has taken them up, they have their identification on them, too."



(Opposite page) The Loomis Gag Bit is one integral tool in Dena Kirkpatrick's barrel horse training program. (Above) Kirkpatrick demonstrates the soft and supple circle described by Joyce Loomis Kernek as her horse relaxes into her hand.

Multiple WPRA circuit finalist and 1992 World Futurity Champion Kim Thomas prefers the twisted mouthpiece, Loomis Kernek says. Thomas likes using the Loomis on all her horses, from starting youngsters to competing on finished horses, because she can get control of the horse's entire body with no resistance.

"Kim's sold me a million twisted bits, because that's what she has her clients in," Loomis Kernek says.

The headstalls vary as well from just plain cotton/nylon rope, wire, nylon and now leather.

"I've always offered them with a nylon headstall," she says, "but my mainstay customers

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have always wanted the wire headstall because of the nerve center over the poll. The wire is the consistency of a clothes hanger; it's not a thin piece of wire. If you put your finger under that wire, you'd see it never rubs a hair when you're taking a hold. It's not a dangerous, mean wire.

"Charlotte Cunningham has also won a lot in this bit, but she only wants the ones with the wire headstalls. She thinks the wire headstall is the key to the whole bit."

Cunningham, also a World Futurity Champion, has rheumatoid arthritis that limits her strength, but she likes to ride really fast horses, and most of her barrel horses have come off the track, so she uses a wire or steel headstall to give the horses a different feel, since they've been taught to run through the bit on the track.

"For me that's like a curb chain," Cunningham says. "If you don't have the poll pressure, they're going to take that bit and run off unless you have an extremely light, broke horse. I like to use it to bring a horse's head up. Not to where their ears are in my face, but to where their heads are up in my hands. If you've got a horse's head up, you have control of their

face and their body. The Loomis allows me to pull their head up and have their head in my hands; it's a different kind of pressure than they've ever had before."

Loomis Guidelines

The first rule of using a Loomis gag is to make sure your horse's teeth have been done properly.

"If you've never used one before, you have to make sure your horse's teeth are right because that gag bit rolls the cheek right up against the teeth," Loomis Kernek warns.

Proper placement in the mouth is a "smile-and-a-half."

"I see people that hike them up so far to where their lips are stretched," she says. "You don't want the corners of their lips sore. You want to have about a smile-and-a-half. Too little is not good, and too much is not good. You want to make sure it's adjusted right in the corners of the mouth, so it's comfortable."

Loomis Kernek also puts Vaseline on the corners of her horses' mouths to keep them from getting calluses from the bit, thus losing softness and lightness of contact.

Using the Loomis

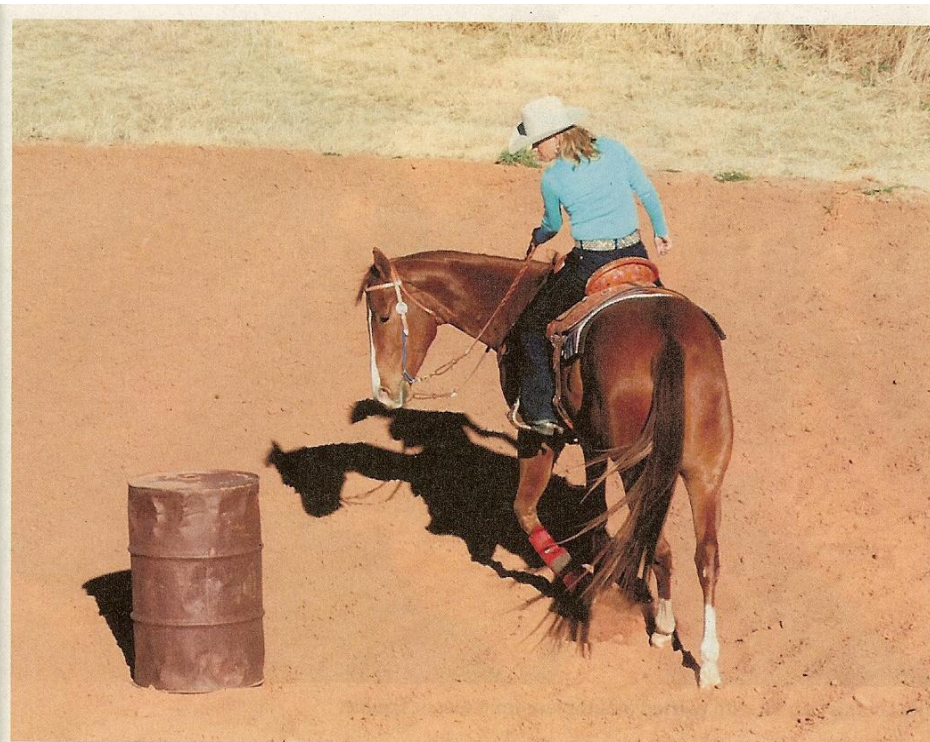
The best way to learn to use a Loomis is to ride with someone who uses them a lot. If you have to experiment on your own, Loomis Kernek has some rules to ride by.

"When using the Loomis, you work one side of the mouth and then the other, never both at the same time," she says. "It's one side of the mouth and then the other. It's not a one-rein bridle that you can pull straight back with. I always caution parents not to put their kids, who pull straight back, on a horse with a gag bit because the horse will just open their mouth and move straight forward."

For example, to teach a horse to stop, Loomis Kernek sits her body down, says whoa and works the bit from side to side. This is a slight give and take motion on each side. She dislikes using "see-saw" to describe the technique. If what you're doing with your hands can be described as "see-saw," you're not being light enough.

Even when working with one side of the mouth, it's important to remember to give and take as well.

"That's the best way to use a gag bit—give and take, give and take," Loomis Kernek



Kirkpatrick achieves the softness and suppleness she desires using the Loomis as one tool to help achieve fluid motion through a turn.

says. "Give a cue. Reward when they do it. Repetition, reward and correction is a simple way to train horse."

The principle of give and take is the reason you see horses running with Loomis gags, and they rarely ever open their mouth to escape the bit when used properly.

While Loomis gags have been used with all manner of tiedowns, cavasons and such, Loomis Kernek prefers to use a German martingale she designed to go with the it if absolutely necessary.

"If I've got one that's flipping his head up, I get their teeth done, and if I can't get what I want done with long hours in the saddle, sometimes I'll use one," she says. "It's a German martingale. It goes to the side, so you can tip the nose without pulling the head down."

Soft and Supple

Loomis Kernek believes the most important thing a Loomis gag does is give a horse confidence. A confident horse is a relaxed horse. A confident, relaxed horse can become a very supple horse—and it all starts in the horse's mouth.

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"You can put it on a horse that's been frightened and scared," she says, "pick up one side of the reins more than the other (ask the horse to give slightly to one side) to where you can barely see the horse's eye, get in a posting trot, and in 15 minutes, you've got a relaxed horse."

You must first get the No. 1 point, the mouth, secure, she says, in order to have the opportunity to soften the other four laterals—neck, shoulders, ribs and hips.

She also believes a horse that is supple in their neck, shoulders, ribs and hips will automatically get soft in the poll.

"If you soften the laterals, the poll will come in line," she says. "I don't believe in tying a horse's head around. I believe in softening your laterals, and the poll will come down."

Lift and Shoulder Control

The uses of the Loomis gag are varied, and preferences differ from trainer to trainer. If Loomis Kernek had to name one person that truly made the bit a favorite among barrel racers, it was the late Celie Ray.

"She bought one from me back in the early '70s, when I started going to the futurities," she said. "She'd have a clinic, and I'd have 30 to 40 orders afterward. She didn't want to sell them; she just told people to call me."

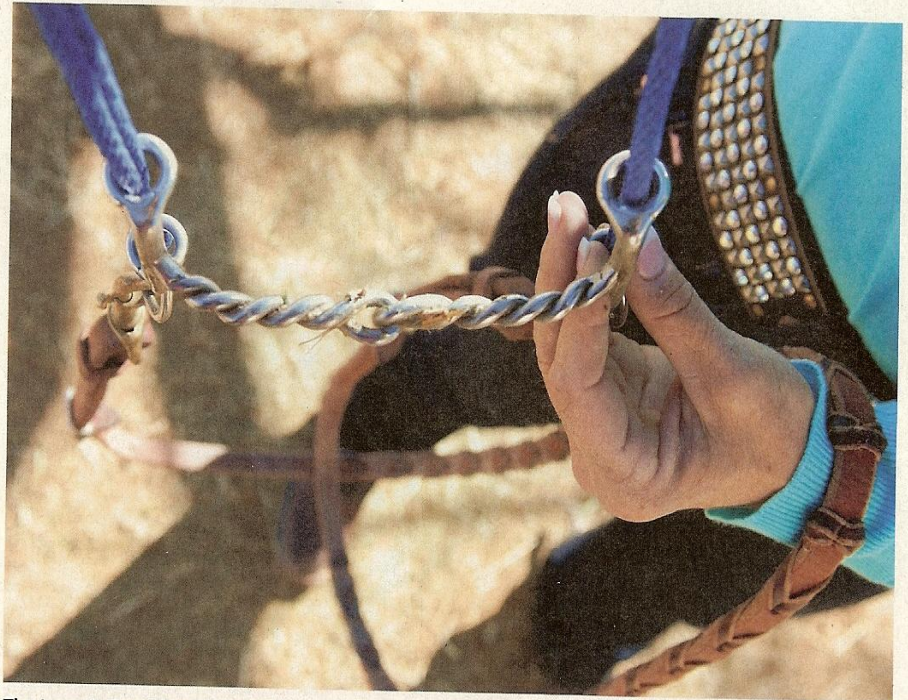
It was multiple futurity and derby champion and National Finals Rodeo qualifier Celie Ray that introduced Dena Kirkpatrick to the Loomis Gag.

Kirkpatrick has trained many great horses in the Loomis, and many of those horses competed in the bit as well; including DJ Nick Bar, Imanonstop Princess, Frosty Feelins, 2008 WPRA World Champion Sugar Moon Express, Levin Lucille, Fols Classy Snazzy, Lady Perks and, perhaps most memorably, Willy Nick Bar, the only horse to sweep both rounds and the finals of the World Barrel Futurity.

"I rode with Celie for years, and I learned to use it while riding with her," Kirkpatrick says. "What I see today is a lot of people using it for a lot of different reasons. I use it past a ring bit or snaffle to get more lift. That Loomis gives me more lift and shoulder control."

Although she's used all types of Loomis gags in the past, today she mostly uses the twisted mouthpiece with leather headstalls.

"I use the leather headstalls because I only want to work with the corners of a horse's mouth," she says. "If I have a horse that's a little sensitive to the twist (mouthpiece), I try



The Loomis Gag Bit with twisted mouthpiece from Classic Equine.



Joyce Loomis Kernek.

to ride that particular horse with lighter hands rather than go to a smooth mouthpiece. If they get overly sensitive or flinchy, I will put a smooth mouthpiece on them."

At her clinics, Kirkpatrick advises her students to ride with a lot of "feel" in their hands. The key to the Loomis is riding with your fingers, mainly your pinky finger, and a little

wrist movement.

This "play" in your hand when riding with one hand is what Loomis Kernek refers to as "give and take." Taking a solid hold during your training with a Loomis will "dull" a horse rather than make them lighter.

"You don't ever 'dead pull' on them with it," Kirkpatrick says. "If used incorrectly, it will actually encourage a horse to pull on you, and that's counterproductive.

"If I do need to lighten one up, I'll bump them on one side and then the other—a little see-saw for lack of a better description. Even when I ride them with something else, I'll use the Loomis to lighten one up, to get more feel in the mouth and backed off the bit."

After starting her 2-year-olds on the pattern in a snaffle, Kirkpatrick will switch to a Loomis when she starts trotting the pattern.

"When I first put the Loomis on a 2-year-old after they're ridden with a snaffle, it will take them a couple of times to realize the different feel in their mouth, so I'll wait until I've reintroduced the buttons they had with the snaffle. Usually, the better broke they are to a snaffle, the easier it is to go to a Loomis. I almost always start my horses on the barrels with a snaffle, and then when they get to trotting and I want to lift their shoulders a little bit more and get more flex, I will put the Loomis on them."

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The Loomis also allows lift and flex without stalling a horse in a turn, which is vital for Kirkpatrick's one-motion-turn training style. It also lets her help her horse on the backside of a barrel without hanging on them in the turn.

"I get more flex and more shoulder lift, but can still get the forward momentum with it," she says. "It has a lot of play because it gags indefinitely, and it's not as direct into the corners of their mouth, so you get more play in there. If you're using a snaffle, it's a direct pull in the corners of their mouth. When you bump the corner of their mouth in a snaffle, their face is going to come directly to that."

It also allows for the use of an indirect rein. If you're turning to the right and pulling to the right with the inside rein that's direct rein. If you need to shape horse for a turn, and you push the inside rein against the neck to get the horse to hold their position or move away, that's indirect rein.

"The Loomis enhances what indirect rein means," Kirkpatrick says. In other words, stay up and around in a turn instead of leaning on the inside rein and dropping in on the barrel.

If they get to where they're not listening to the Loomis on the pattern, she will go back to her dry work to lighten them up.

Most of the horses she trains in a Loomis will make their first competition runs in one.

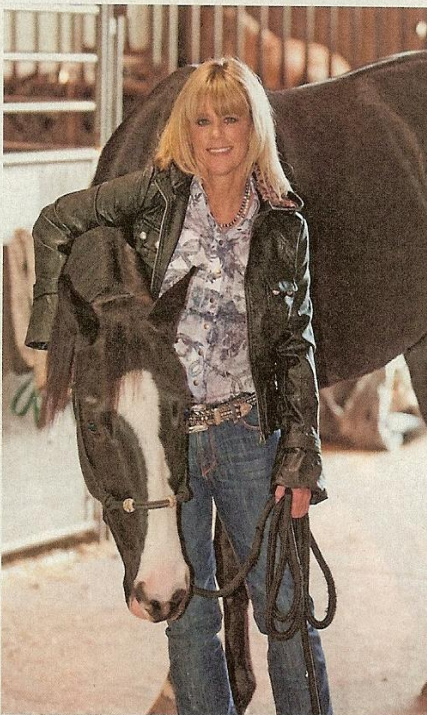
"I won't switch to something else until I need to stand them up a little more," she says.

JB One Famous Dude, the current World Barrel Futurity Reserve Champion, was switched to a Carol Goostree Simplicity due to his extreme speed and drop, even though he gets tuned in a Loomis.

"He wants to start dropping on me a little bit going into the turn, and I can stand him up a little bit better [with the Loomis]. Even though in my slow work I use that Loomis to get a lot of flex and move their shoulders and keep their rear ends up under them, when they get to running, they start to get in on you. You don't have much because the Loomis has so much play. So if they have a tendency to start their turns too soon, I'll use that Simplicity because it's not so different that they're going to freak out and hang up, but I can stand them up going into a turn a little bit more with it. You can get them on their butt a little bit quicker."

Kirkpatrick has also used the Loomis to desensitize super light horses.

"Say you've got a horse that's really sensitive," she says, "and every move you make is



Dena Kirkpatrick.

doing something, you can put that Loomis and hang it a little looser in their mouth. You can desensitize them a little with it because it has so much play. You can smooth them out a little bit. When you move your hand, nothing drastic happens. You can smooth out a horse that over-reacts."

She says the Loomis keeps her honest in her training.

"It helps me keep a horse where he needs to be instead of getting a bigger bit," she says. "When I ride with a Loomis, I know exactly where they are."

Fluidity

World Futurity Champion Jolene Stewart uses a Loomis gag on a number of Jud Little's horses. She won the 2007 World Futurity on Sooner Superstar using a Loomis with twisted-wire mouthpiece and wire headstall. Her 2009 standout with more than \$100,000 in earnings, Return Of The Bully, runs in a custom designed version of the Loomis with a smooth copper mouthpiece with three links of chain in the middle on a rope headstall.

Stewart likes the fluidity of the Loomis gag.

"When I start teaching a horse to break at the poll, it's not that harsh or sharp," says Stewart, who learned to use the Loomis gag when she was working for Troy Crumrine, who

used them for tuning and warm-ups. "It allows them some relief and steadies them up. It helps teach them to give to the bridle without a sharp give and release. It's more fluid.

"If you have a horse that's a little funny about their head, an O-ring can be really sharp for them, and they'll throw their head. With a Loomis, they can lean into it a little bit, so it's not that sharp give and release."

She also likes that the Loomis can be forgiving of a rider's mistakes.

"When you're making a run, it's really hard to think that fast," she says, "so you put something like that on them, so you can stay out of their way. You can pull on them a whole lot with a Loomis and not really do anything. It totally works for me because I bump them going into a turn and then give it all back to them in the turn by moving my hand forward, and then on the backside, I give a pretty sharp pull. With some of the O-rings or shanked bits, that would be too sharp of a pull, more like a snatch on them. With a Loomis, I can give that quick sharp pull, but it doesn't go through my hands that way. It gives them some relief."

The Loomis also allows a horse to get straighter, quicker leaving the turn because they can go on and get running again even if Stewart hasn't totally released them yet.

Stewart does caution that you can't "hang" on a horse too much with a Loomis because they will get dull to it.

"They figure out they can push through it, and you may need to go back and ride with an O-ring or shanked bit at home to back them off," she says.

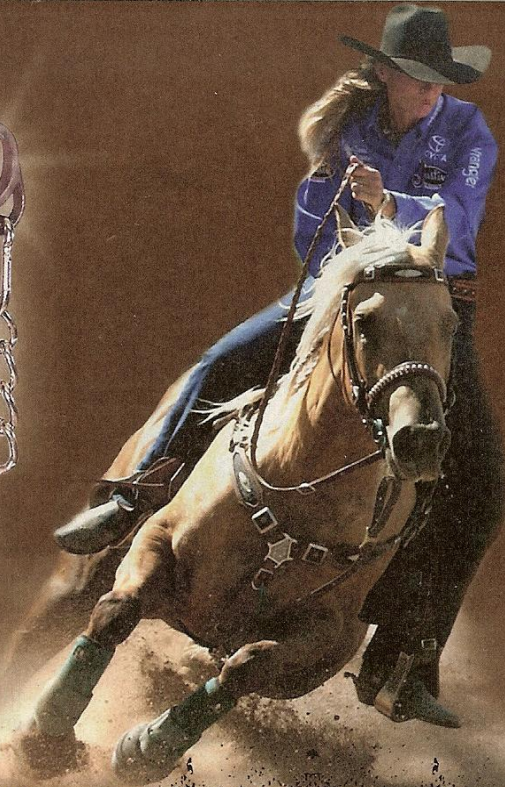
Learning the Loomis

"A bit is only as good as the hands that are using it," Loomis Kernek warns. "The best way to learn how to ride with a Loomis is to ride with someone who uses the bit correctly."

Her advice is mirrored by Thomas, Cunningham and Kirkpatrick.

Although many trainers use it for many different reasons, when used correctly, a horse will ride with a soft face and supple body. They won't root on the bit or gap their mouths to evade its pressure, making the Loomis an effective and widely used piece of equipment in the right hands.

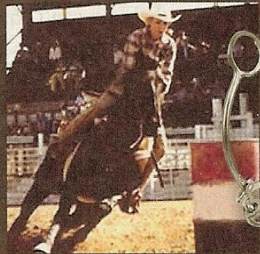
Tanya Randall is a regular contributor to BHN. E-mail comments on this article to bhneditorial@cowboypublishing.com.



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'Feel' is everything to a 12-Time National Finals Qualifier and 2-Time World Champion. Sherry designed her collection of bits with exactly that in mind. Her bits are balanced with just the right amount of weight for the perfect 'feel'.

BEATING THE COMPETITION BIT BY BIT



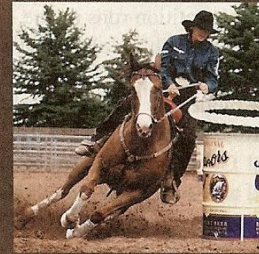
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As a barrel racing legend and former World Champion, Carol Goostree has been a trusted name in bits for over 25 years. Carol's bits are original in design and ridden by some of the best barrel racers in the world.



JOYCE LOOMIS

WPRA & AQHA World Champion Barrel Racer Joyce Loomis designed the original Loomis Gag Bit. Its unique design has been trusted by many prominent trainers and competitors for over three decades.



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