

## **Muzzles: Freedom or Torture?**

**By Lynn Acton**

My husband has a hard time putting muzzles on our horses because he feels like he's being mean. The horses don't resist. They practically muzzle themselves, eager to reach the treat that's waiting in the bottom. For them muzzles mean pasture time. Yahoo, the gate's about to open!

Jerry understands why the muzzles are necessary. Bronzz is insulin resistant; Shiloh gains weight on grass fumes. Carbohydrate overload and overweight are both risks to a horse's health and soundness. We are responsible for their long term welfare even when it means making them unhappy in the moment. That's all rational. Jerry still feels like he's burdening them with torture devices.

My perspective is different. I remember the torture of laminitis: Seeing the pain in my horse's eyes as he looked trustingly to me to make it better. Standing with him as his hooves soaked in ice water. Applying frog supports to his feet. Walking slowly with him as he hobbled from stall to sandy round pen, his only turnout for many weeks. Drawing stars on my calendar the first time he walked down the barn aisle with his normal long-striding swagger!

I see muzzles as my horses' passport to happy, healthy pasture time. Grazing, socializing, and moseying around are mental health activities for horses, and studies show that muzzles are a healthier option than curtailing grazing hours. When grazing time is limited, horses can gobble so frantically they pack away up to 8 hours worth of grass in 2 or 3 hours, raising their glucose and stress levels in the process. Horses turned out for longer periods *with* grazing muzzles did not register stress. They got a reduced amount of grass over a longer period of time, much healthier for their metabolism and digestion.

It's sometimes hard to decide whether a horse is at risk or overweight enough to need a muzzle. We easily overlook extra pounds when we see a horse daily. Glamorous photographs of impeccably groomed but overweight horses tacitly equate extra pounds with good health. Vets and farriers agree, however, that with easy keepers it's safer to err on the side of lower weight. If you're not sure if your horse needs a muzzle, peruse the photographs and explanations in "What High Risk Horses Look Like".

<http://www.safergrass.org/pdf/EMSGallery.pdf>

Horses generally adjust to muzzles without resentment, though some object at first. The first time I put a muzzle on Shiloh, she dove right into the grass. Bronzz tried to make me take the thing off. First he smacked me

on the arm with it as if I might not have noticed the contraption strapped to his head. Then he played the guilt card. Leaving the pasture, he trudged back to the barn with his head dragging from the weight of the torture device. I steeled myself, and went in the house. When I looked out later, he was in the pasture munching away. Once horses get the hang of going up and down to get maximum grass in the hole, they get amazingly efficient.

I make the muzzles as safe and comfortable as possible. Each muzzle's *breakaway* halter is wrapped with fleeces, washed as needed. Any muzzle parts that rub are covered in duct tape. (You can also buy a variety of muzzle accessories to prevent rubs.) I rinse the dirt and dead grass out of the basket every day. Shiloh has the light weight Breathe Easy muzzle, but that style doesn't fit Bronzz's Arab face. It also has an extra large eating hole through which some horses can get too much grass, especially if their pasture is lush. Bronzz, like my sister's mare, is stuck with the heavier Best Friends muzzle, customized with our own modification: we cut off the 2 pieces of webbing in front of the horse's nostrils to allow more air flow. A few Houdinis, like my sister-in-law's little dun, become adept at removing their own muzzles, requiring creative adjustments to thwart them.

As the hole in the muzzle gets larger with use, some horses will get more grass than they should. You can adjust the size of the hole by buying a "muzzle plug" or dropping in a homemade disk of hard rubber with a hole drilled in it. These inserts can be interchanged to adjust grass intake.

Recommended precautions with muzzles include: make sure it fits properly without rubbing, always use a breakaway halter or attachment, introduce the horse gradually, watch for any change in dynamics with herd mates, and do not leave it on full time.

Sure, I'd love to let my horses graze without muzzles but, since that's not safe, I'm happy to give them the freedom that muzzles allow. When Bronzz gallops up from the pasture breathing loudly through his muzzle, I kid him about sounding like Darth Vader. I scratch the itchy spots when the muzzle comes off. And I trust that he knows I'm taking care of him.

Resources: Useful information even if your horse doesn't need a muzzle:

"Tips for Transitioning to Spring Pastures" by Dr. Eleanor Kellon.

<http://equine.uckele.com/Resources-Articles/cat/drkellon/post/SpringPasture/>