

ARTIFICIAL  
AIDS:

# SUPPORTS



The rider shows timely negative reinforcement or release of the draw reins when her horse finds the "sweet spot".

## OR SHORTCUTS?

The use of training aids – such as spurs, whips, draw reins and martingales – is a polarizing subject among decision makers of major equine associations and riders alike. Some say they are useful tools in the hands of an educated rider, while others assert they are abusive gadgets, designed to force a horse into submission or to compensate for a lack of skill.

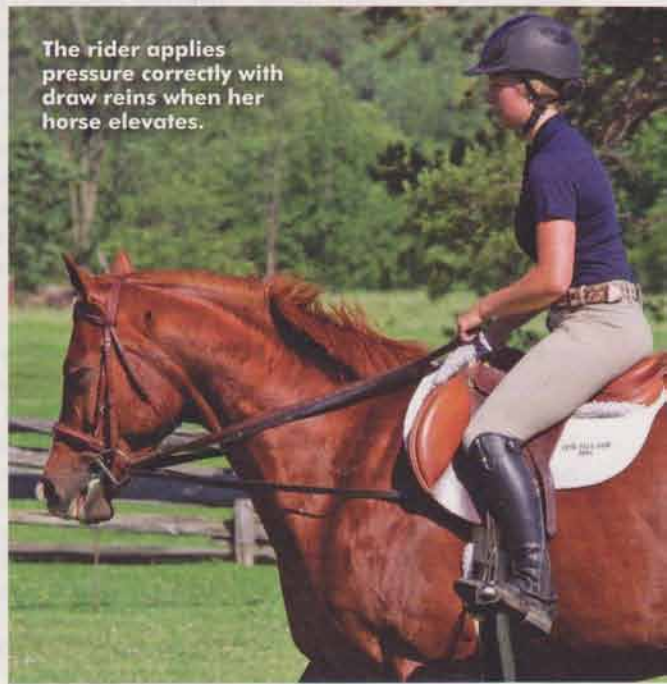
BY LINDSAY GRICE, EQUINE CANADA COACH AND JUDGE



# WHY AND HOW TO CHOOSE THEM



By holding the horses in place with draw reins, a horse will never find the outline his rider does want.



The rider applies pressure correctly with draw reins when her horse elevates.

**NATURAL AID:** a cue or stimulus a rider uses to encourage a response in a horse, sent using parts of the body (hands, legs, seat).

**ARTIFICIAL AID:** equipment used to back up or fortify a rider's light, natural cue. Examples include spurs, whips, martingales, draw reins, and numerous variations, used in the quest to lift, lower or supple the neck, round the back, slow down the legs or speed them up.



## THE CONTROVERSY

Why do some riders use them, and others shun them?

**PRO:** Artificial aids "aid" riders in training effectively and safely. They are useful tools to influence and contain a 1,000lb animal or motivate one who's unresponsive.

**CON:** These tools are bad for the industry. Spectators see them as abusive. They are a source of physical and emotional stress for the animal, and they stifle normal equine behaviour.

As a coach and trainer, in a sport where truth, tradition and emotions frequently collide, I've learned to sift through divisive issues by watching, reading the research, experimenting and asking lots of questions. By doing so, my

opinion on artificial aids has changed somewhat over the years. So, based on my experience and equitation science, here's how to use them, choose them and avoid the ways we might abuse them!

PETER BRUCE PHOTOS



# WHY AND HOW TO CHOOSE THEM

The first step, as the decision maker in the horse-human relationship, is to clearly define your performance expectations, outlining the boundaries in which you want your horse to move. For example, do you want your horse to produce a six- or 12-foot canter stride? How much bend do you want in his body on a curve? Do you want a short or long frame/outline? A long and low, or a raised neck?

You must consider what kind of “box” you are drawing around your horse. When your horse stays inside the box, without you having to hold him there, he has achieved self-carriage. This can only be accomplished when he has discovered, by trial and error, the perimeters of your expectations (“box”), having encountered your aids when he makes an unauthorized change. For example, if he speeds up, he’ll find rein contact. If he drifts to the inside, he’ll find your inside leg. If he loses rhythm, he’ll feel your leg pressure, sending him forward again. It’s crucial that your horse always finds release, or negative reinforcement, within the box. Negative reinforcement is the

main way we train horses. We take away (negative) the irritating pressure to reward (reinforce) the behaviour we want.

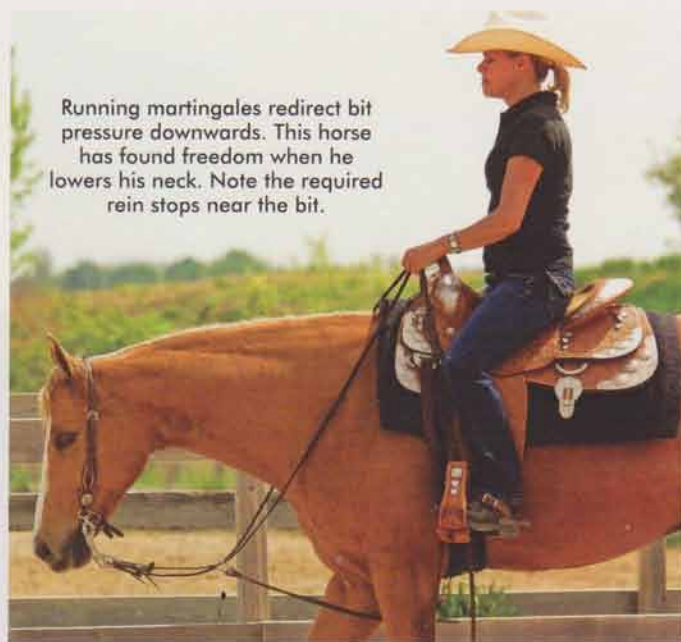
Our goal is ultimately to use the lightest of natural aid pressures to signal the boundaries of the box. If and when a horse begins to ignore these light pressures, a rider may choose an artificial aid as a reminder.

### The artificial aid you choose may depend on:

- Which boundary of the box do you wish to fortify.
- How much pressure it takes to motivate your horse.
- What’s permitted in the schooling areas and show rings of your association.

**Spurs** fortify the back or sides of the box, supplying motivation via increased pressure if your “go forward” or “move over” signal is ignored.

Spurs can serve as a reaching assist for a rider or horse whose conformation makes it challenging to reach the right spot. Choose spurs permitted by your association (see chart). Note that variations in length affect reach – choose the right shank length to pinpoint your



Running martingales redirect bit pressure downwards. This horse has found freedom when he lowers his neck. Note the required rein stops near the bit.

desired target (i.e. at the girth or behind the girth). The sharper the edge of the spur, the more your horse will feel it. Test the end on your hand first. Square heads or rowels will be sharper than blunt or ball tips. If your spur is resting on your horse instead of releasing and rewarding when your leg is in neutral, lower it on your boot or choose a shorter arm.

**Whips/crops** fortify the back of the box. A whip is used directly behind your leg to follow its cue. Technique is important. Instead of individual wallops, it’s more logical to your horse to tap continuously until he responds, then cease. By trial and error, horses figure out that only acceleration turns off the tapping. Using the whip without affecting the rein in

your whip hand takes practice.

Choose a whip for schooling that is long enough to reach and lightweight enough for you to tap. Length and weight of whips in competition is determined by your association.

**Martingales** represent the top of the box. The horse elevates his head and encounters pressure. He lowers it into freedom (release from pressure). Running and standing martingales are the most common types.

**Draw reins** correspond to the front of the box. Riders choose draw reins to influence head carriage and frame/outline. They function differently according to the height at which they’re attached.

**Low attachment:** The goal of connecting draw reins to the girth, down by the horse’s elbows or between his front legs, is to give the horse an idea of how to work in a lower frame. This can be effective for a horse needing to lengthen and stretch the back, developing muscles for a stronger topline.

**High attachment:** Connected closer to the top of the saddle (upper billets or D rings), the draw reins serve to directly support, and run parallel to, the action of the rider’s hand. Used for the horse that tends to brace against the rider’s hand.



LEFT: This standing martingale is too long to apply pressure when the horse finds the “roof” of the box.

BELOW: This horse is unable to find the right answer – her martingale is too snug to provide freedom when her neck is at the desired level.

