



Hackamore Guide

Shaping and fitting the hackamore

I know we have talked a little in previous newsletters about the fitting of the hackamore but I would like to get little more detailed about it and also about how to shape it properly and place it properly on the horse.

A big problem I see when people are trying to use a hackamore is improper fit. This can result from a hackamore that is the wrong size, often much too large or from one that is not properly shaped.

We see a lot of hackamores that are too big for the horses and as a result we end up with far too much length at the bottom. We then either see the mecate wrapped too many

times around the bottom or we see far too much space between the mecate and the lower jaw of the horse. When we have too many wraps it will cause the hackamore to bounce on the horse, especially at the lope. This creates a false signal and can easily dull the horse's responsiveness.

If we have too much space between the mecate and the jaw because of excessive length we can end up with a couple of problems. We might still be getting that bouncing effect and false signal but we will also get a significant delay in the signal we are trying to send. When we have that extra space the hackamore has to move farther before the mecate engages under the jaw. The rider has to move the reins more to get the signal to the horse and as a result the signal takes longer to get to the horse. I also often see people who have this resulting in rider's moving their arms far too much in order to compensate as they attempt to get the response from the horse.

Another unintended consequence of the overly large hackamore is that they tend to teeter totter on the horse's face.

The nose button will move up and down on the horse's nose when the reins are picked up. Instead of staying in one place on the nose and simply rolling there a little, it moves up and down the bridge of the nose causing both an inconsistent signal on one that can be much harder than intended. This negative effect is compounded when the nose button itself is too long for the horse. For most quarter horse size horse a 6.5 -7 inch nose button is

usually ideal. Many of the lesser quality hackamore will have a nose that is much longer.

Another big problem with

having too big a gap between the mecate and the lower jaw is that when the reins are picked up and the hackamore does move up under the jaw it can end up pinching one of the facial nerves that runs under the jaw bone. If we create pain or aggravation of this nerve it will cause tension in the horse's jaw that will then result in tension through the entire top line of the horse and can seriously

implead our attempts to get the horse to collect.

The last problem with having too much space is that when the hackamore moves excessively because of this kind of improper fit you are far more likely to scrape the horse under the jaw.

The hackamore ends up drugging along the jaw bone and if done repeatedly or with too much force it can take off

the hair, cause scraping of the skin and bleeding. We absolutely

do not want this under any circumstances.

a comfortable pair of shoes it should not be to lose or too tight.

If the hackamore is not shaped correctly we can also cause irritation and a loss of responsiveness. The hackamore should fit comfortably around the horses face making as much contact around the face as possible. Any place the

hackamore does not touch is a place we lose signal. The hackamore should not be so tight that is squeezing the face but like

If the hackamore is squeezing the sides of the horses face then it will be putting excessive pressure on the soft tissue along the sides of the face. This soft tissue is where much of the signal is felt by the horse. Too much pressure will end up dulling this area and result in less responsiveness to the signals.

If we have too much space

we create other problems however. If we have gaps in the contact then when we move the hackamore the horse feels nothing in those places and it lessens the effectiveness of the hackamore. It also allows the hackamore to move on its own when the horse is in

motion. If the hackamore moves at all on its own then it will be

sending false signals and dull the horse to the true signals we intend to send to the horse.

The excessive unintentional

movement of hackamores that fit this way can also create irritation and even scraping of the bridge of the nose.

The solution to these problems

is proper shaping of the hackamore. If we find gaps in contact with the horses face we can tie the hackamore down between uses to pull it in for a closer fit. When doing this I tie it down slightly more than the exact location that I want. The hackamore will want to return to its original shape so by over shaping it a little the hackamore will end up in a close fit to what we want.

If the hackamore is too tight under the jaw or where it rests on the side of the face we add something to spread that area as we keep the nose tied down.

It might take several weeks but over time the hackamore will begin to maintain this shape.

If you avoid these common mistakes it will go a long way to making your training with the hackamore far more effective.

A commonly asked question is, "Can I ride an older horse in a hackamore if it has been trained in something else?"

Yes, you absolutely can and it is actually a very easy transition and very often ends up with excellent results.

This is especially true of horses who have had any kind of bad experience in the bit. If the older horse has ever had its mouth hurt, that pain memory stays with that horse for life. Whenever you see a horse who is mouthy with the bit it is a sign of either current physical discomfort or past discomfort that is still having an impact on that horse mentally. Taking an older horse like this out of the bit and

putting them in the hackamore can often times have some pretty dramatically positive results. The horse no longer has any negative memory associated with the head gear and is now able to relax and focus.

We need to keep in mind that if the horse is worried at all about the bit, that horse is distracted and a certain percentage of his attention is on the bit and not on the rider. When we change to the hackamore we remove that distraction and then all of our other signals become easier for the horse to understand and interoperate.

Over the last few years of doing clinics we have

transitioned several hundred older horses into the hackamore with absolutely no issues. What almost always happens is that the horse relaxes more and the rider becomes more conscious of the signals they are giving and as a result both horse and rider begin to progress at a more rapid rate than what they were doing in the other equipment they had been Using.

When you do ride an older horse in the hackamore for the first time you might have to go out just a little wider with your hands to clarify the signals for right and left. If this is needed with your horse it is usually only needed for a couple of rides at most before the horse begins to understand the subtle differences between the hackamore and your other gear.

Other than going a little wider

with your hands the first ride or two, everything else should be pretty similar. Most people feel that the horse is lighter and more responsive in the hackamore. If however the horse begins to get heavy or dull we need to really think about how we are riding that horse and what we might have done to create that response. When a horse gets heavy we need to really think about how we can change our riding in order to fix it. The fix is not in the bit, it is in the rider's awareness of their signals and improving the communication with the horse.

And no matter how your individual horse responds to the hackamore, you know you will never create any damage. If the hackamore fits properly and is shaped for the horse, you ride it with conscious awareness of your signals and you don't try to force it, you will not ever cause any permanent damage



CHOOSING A HACKAMORE

What to look for in a quality hackamore

Buying the right hackamore can sometimes be very difficult. Knowing what diameter, overall length and length of nose button is only part of the battle. Making sure the hackamore is made from quality materials and has the right balance of flexibility is also very important. So let's take a look at what constitutes good quality materials and what kind of flexibility we want to look for in our hackamores.

Because the core of the hackamore really is the key to how well it will help us signal our horses, we will start there. The core should be made of all rawhide. I have seen hackamores made from a variety of other things such as rope, steel cable and even garden hose but the only ones that will fit and function properly are those made of rawhide. The cores can be made in a variety of ways from twisted to braided and even strips of rawhide sewn together. I find that the twisted cores are generally the most consistent in function and overall performance though.

The body of the hackamore is braided over the rawhide core and the number of strings used in making the body is also important in function as well as longevity. I personally prefer hackamores that have an all rawhide body. I have owned some that had leather of different kinds and they worked well but they don't seem to last as long as the rawhide. I

have used rawhide hackamores that were well over 100 years old and still looked and functioned extremely well. The rawhide does have to be good quality and well prepared though. One of the things we find with the cheaper hackamores is that the hides have been treated with lime in order to remove the hair. Often times when you see the lighter colored rawhide it has been limed.

Using lime compromises the cellular structure of the rawhide and will significantly decrease the usable life span of the hackamore. As a general rule I would avoid the white and very light colored rawhide for this reason.

Also take a look at the individual strings that make up the body and nose button of the hackamore. Look to see if the edges of the strings have been beveled. The better quality hackamores will have the edges beveled to prevent them from curling up when they get wet from the horse sweating. You can also look at the lines in the braiding.

The better the skill of the braider, the straighter the lines will be throughout the hackamore. You can pick a spot where two strings cross and make a V and then follow that line to the next and so on.

Keep those lines straight is not easy to do and takes a lot of skill. If the lines are not perfectly straight it does not mean you have a bad hackamore but chances are, if they are perfectly straight your hackamore was made by a master craftsman.

Another thing to look for is to make sure the nose button is centered. You will find some hackamores that have a nose button that is off to one side. This is caused by one side of the body of the hackamore being slightly longer than the other side. This unevenness will affect the signaling to your horse so we want to make sure the nose is as centered as possible.

Something else we need to check for is the flexibility through the entire hackamore. I see a lot of them that have good flexibility in the body but the nose button is so rigid that it will not move at all. If I grab the heel knot and the nose and move them, I want to have a wave go all the way through that body and nose of that hackamore. I also want to be able to bend it in half to about a 90 degree angle, let go and have it snap back into place. If I have these things then I know the hackamore will move correctly and properly transmit the signals to my horse.

I have seen hackamores in places like EBay for as little as \$50 and I have paid as much as \$650 for a good hackamore. For a decent quality using hackamore though you should expect to pay no less than \$200. Once we go under that \$200 range the quality usually drops off to the point of creating problems in the function of the hackamore and the ability of it to properly transmit the signals to your horse.



The importance of the hackamore nose button

The nose button has a tremendous impact on the ability of the hackamore to function properly. Unfortunately we see a lot of hackamores being sold today that have nose button dimensions that make it impossible for the hackamore to function properly. Many of them have nose buttons that are far too long or not shaped properly for the conformation of the horse's head.

If you are riding a horse with an average size head the nose button should be between 6 to 7 inches long. If it is any longer than that it will cause a teeter totter effect as the hackamore pivots on the axis of the hanger when you pick up the reins. Instead of the nose button just softly rolling on the nose as it should, it will bounce up and down cause inconsistencies in the signal and irritating the horse's nose. It can even end up crating a raw spot on the nose because of excessive movement.

Something else we see a lot are nose buttons with a lot of buildup in the center. Some of them have so much buildup that it is very difficult if not impossible to shape the hackamore properly. I have heard people mistakenly say that the buildup is only there to add color and make the hackamore look fancier. When done properly, the real purpose of the buildup is to fill the space across the bridge of the nose on a horse that has a wide flat nose bone. On those kinds of horses you will get excessive isolated pressure on the outer edges of the bridge of the nose because of a lack of contact in the middle. This excessive pressure results in irritation. The buildup nose button solves this problem by filling that gap and distributing the contact evenly across the entire nose.

Keep in mind however that horses with a "normal" nose do not need the buildup and having it can create the opposite problem. On a horse with a narrower or normal width nose, a hackamore with buildup in the center will put too much isolated pressure in the middle of the nose.

The next thing to think about are "nerve knots". Some people believe that at each end of the nose button you should have a larger built up spot. The theory is that this button at

either end will create pressure on the facial nerves and give the rider better response from the hackamore.

This theory is seriously flawed though. First of all, I don't want anything literally getting on my horse's nerves. That is just asking for problems. I want my horse relaxed and not reacting to direct and isolated nerve pressure. Even if someone does believe this is a good training strategy I would ask them if they know exactly where the facial nerves are on each horse they ride. The nerves are not always in exactly the same place on every horse so they have no way of knowing exactly where those nerves are that they think they want to put pressure on. At first it might sound ok in theory but in practice it fails. Having said all that, the hackamore can have a little build up at the ends of the nose buttons without causing excessive pressure. You certainly want that to be small though just to avoid causing any potential problems.

Last let's look at the underside of the nose button. Today we see a lot of the sport hackamores that are flat under the nose button. I have looked at a lot of old hackamores and I have never seen an example of this.

This style is designed to purposely create an edge that bites into the horse's nose when the reins are used. Unfortunately we often see this kind of hackamore being used in conjunction with training techniques like jerking (bumping) the reins. This style of hackamore and training forces a horse to respond in a short period of time but cannot be sustained. It

comes out of the futurity world and if you plan to ride your horse for any length of time in the hackamore this kind of hackamore should be avoided.



Measuring for hackamore

To measure the hackamore, first, find the top of your horses' nasal cavity with your fingers. You will be able to follow it up and feel where it stops.

Then place a piece of string or measuring tape on one finger with above the spot where the nasal cavity ends. Take the string / measuring tape from the centre of the nose down to the groove under the chin. Go under to the centre. This will give you half the circumference of the face. Double that number to provide you with the full circumference of the place where the hackamore will lay. With that measurement, you can choose the right size for your horse.

We normally recommend two wraps and a rein with a half hitch over the top of the rein. Three wraps under the rein in also ok. Anything over three wraps can cause the hackamore to bounce, especially at the lope.

If you already have a hackamore which fits your horse, please measure it as illustrated in the second picture. Hold the front part 4" apart (horizontal arrow) and then measure from the inside of the nose knot to the inside of the heel knot (vertical arrow) to get the correct length.

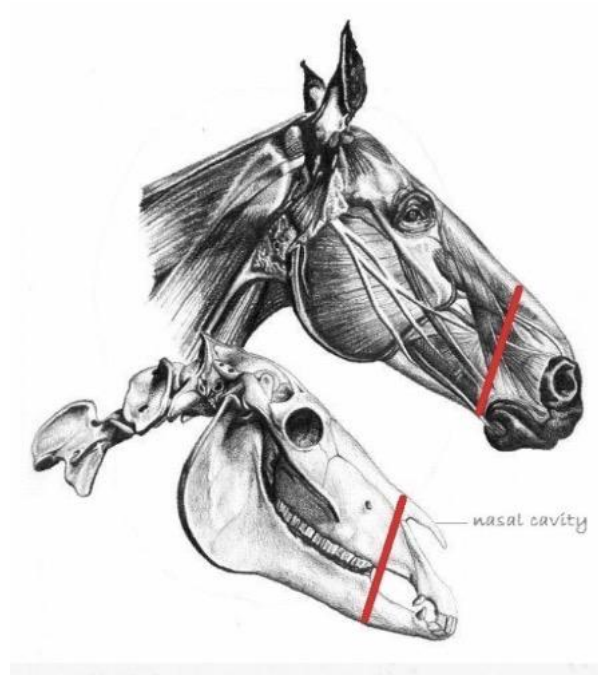
SIZE CONVERSIONS ESTIMATES FOR 5/8" HACKAMORES
All measurements are done with a true 5/8" mecate

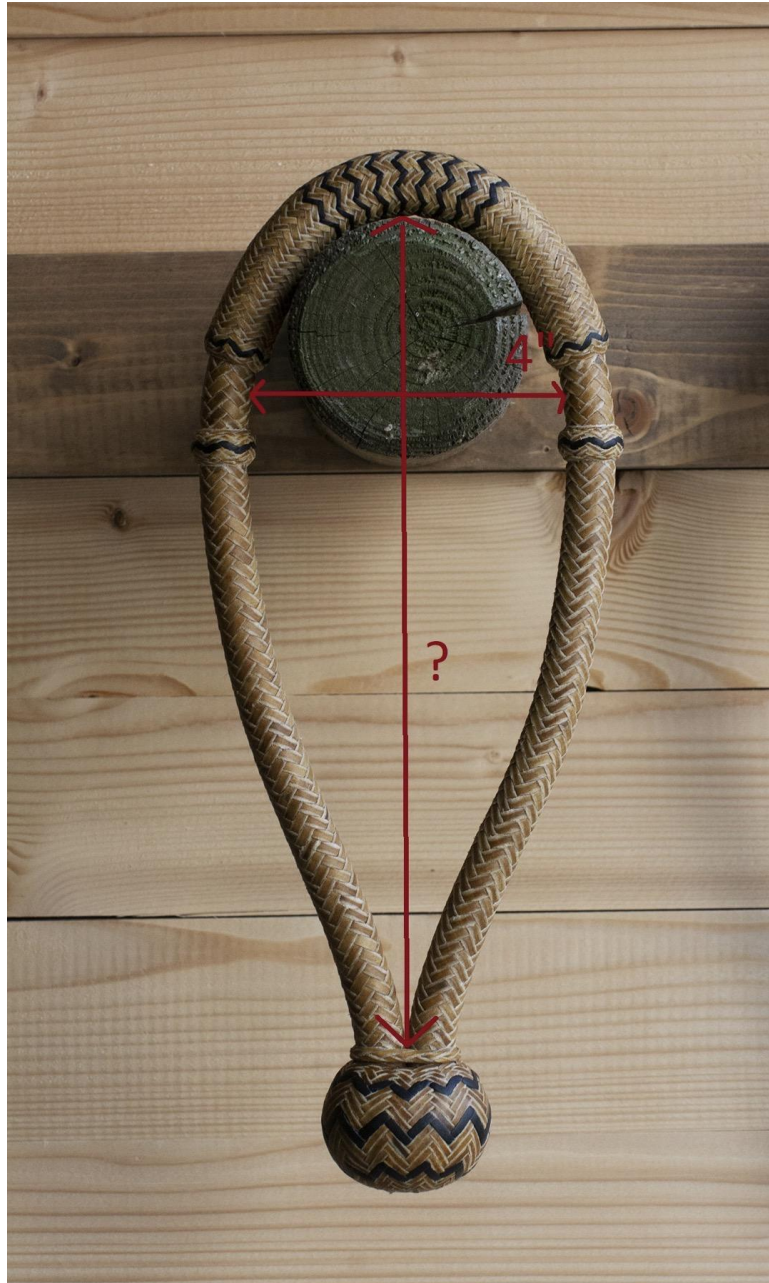
NOSE MEASUREMENT IN CM	NOSE MEASUREMENT IN INCHES	WRAPS ON HACKAMORES	LENGTH OF HACKAMORE
46	18 1/8	2	10"
47	18 1/2	2	10"
48	18 7/8	2	10 1/2"
49	19 1/4	2	10 1/2"
50	19 3/4	2	11"
51	20 1/8	2	11"
52	20 1/2	2	11"
53	20 7/8	2	11 1/2"
54	21 1/4	2	11 1/2"
55	21 5/8	2	12"
56	22	2	12"

The length of the hackamore will be a 1/2" shorter for the 1/2" size hackamore and another a 1/2" shorter for the 3/8 size bosal.

Example: If you have a 5/8" x 11" hackamore, the length of the 1/2" hackamore would be 10 1/2" and the length of the 3/8" bosal would be 10"

EXACT FIT WILL DEPEND ON THE CONFORMATION OF THE HORSES'S FACE, THICKNESS OF THE MECATE ETC.





Hackamore and Mecate Buying Tips from Jeff

If you are looking for some advice on buying hackamores and/or mecates look at this video from Jeff.

[Jeff Sanders Hackamore and mecate buying tips Youtube video](#)

For more information on hackamores, bosals and the training of horses in the classical Californio Vaquero style of traditional horsemanship, check out the Teachable page, where courses (including the California hackamore course are available to purchase, or subscriptions)

[California Bridle Horse courses on Teachable](#)

[Californio Gear webshop](#)

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[California Bridle Horse School](#)