

Tongue Sticking Out

Q My young dressage prospect hangs his tongue out to the side when I ride him. I'm told this will cost me points in the dressage arena, even though he does everything I ask. Why is it a fault? How, exactly, will it affect my scores, and what can I do about it?

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A According to the US Equestrian Federation rule book, a Training Level horse should "move freely forward in a clean and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit." A horse sticking his tongue out is clearly *not* "accepting contact with the bit." Contact is one of the basic building blocks in the training pyramid; without satisfactory basics, a horse cannot progress in his development as an athlete. That is why, even at Training Level, a

good judge will penalize "tongue out" by deducting at least a point in every movement in which the tongue problem is seen. The judge will also lower the collective mark for submission, even if the horse is otherwise obedient, as submission requires "acceptance of the bit."

Obviously, this can be a very expensive deduction for anyone who wants to show. And even if you were riding just for the personal challenge of schooling your horse, you'd have to address this problem to advance his training.

Horses generally stick out their tongues because they are uncomfortable. I would first have a veterinarian who is skilled in dentistry check your horse's teeth. Check out the May 2005 issue of *USDF Connections* for an excellent article by Dr. Barb Crabbe on what to look for in your horse's mouth. And remember that not all vets are equally adept at dental problems; if your horse is having mouth difficulties, having a specialist check his teeth will be worth the money you spend.

If examination rules out your horse's teeth as causing pain, check his bit—or, for the best way to get an objective opinion of whether his bit suits his anatomy, while your vet is still there have her check his mouth—*with the bit in*. To avoid pinching, the bit should be wide enough that about a quarter-inch of it is visible to the outside of his mouth on either side. The type of bit matters, too: Some horses accept single-jointed bits, but others apparently object to the amount of pressure such a bit puts on the bars and lips and the squeeze it can cause on the tongue. A double-jointed bit with a small "peanut" middle link



A horse's protruding tongue signals possible mouth discomfort and, to a dressage judge, lack of submission.

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(such as the KK series) drapes more evenly over the tongue and causes no pressure on a low palate. However, not all double-jointed bits are created equal. The Dr. Bristol, with its large flat middle link, may actually cause *more* tongue pressure. And a fat snaffle is not necessarily the “nicest” bit you can choose; a horse with a small mouth, such as an Arab or a German *reitpony*, may find all that metal just too heavy or too bulky for comfort.

Assuming your horse’s teeth are fine and his bit is suitable, the next thing to check is your hands. Many a horse resorts to sticking out his tongue to protect his sensitive bars and lips from a rider’s stiff or unsteady hands. He’ll have no incentive to seek contact with the bit if it’s moving around randomly or jabbing him intermittently because his rider is still balancing on the reins. Only if you can truthfully say that you can maintain your own position at any gait without any reins at all (on a longe line) can you blame your horse for tongue resistance.

OK, so you sit like Olympian Guenter Seidel, your horse’s bit fits fine, his teeth would make the cover of *Dentistry Today*, and he STILL sticks out his tongue. What then? Frankly, I haven’t seen this problem much with young horses. I *have* seen it with older horses, especially those coming back from a layoff. In some case they’re sore elsewhere in their bodies—hocks or backs, for example—and they manifest this soreness with tongue problems. In others, it just seems to be a bad habit they’ve picked up somewhere along the way.

If you have exhausted all other possibilities and you’re sure that “tongue out” is not a response to pain, then you have to make “tongue out” more uncomfortable than “tongue in.” Every time your horse’s tongue comes

out, halt—maybe even a little abruptly—lean over, stick the tongue back in, pat him, and go on. If it comes out again three strides later, stop and repeat. If you are persistent and firm (not angry or abusive!), he will learn to associate the halt with the correction. There's reason to hope that after a while you'll be able to correct his protruding tongue with just a unilateral rein aid on that side.

Truthfully, however, this is a correction best left to those riders with excellent seats, good judgment, and steady tempers. Never take out your frustrations on your horse. The results will not be worth your ruining your relationship with him.

You also can try using a flash, crank, or drop noseband, which may help a little in keeping your horse's mouth shut. But no horse should be in a noseband so tight that it's painful. Not only is such an adjustment inhumane, but the FEI is getting very strict about tight nosebands; you could be eliminated if yours is too tight. (Besides, if a horse really wants to stick out his tongue, he will—no matter how tight his noseband is!) **PH**

*US Equestrian Federation "S" judge **Donna Richardson, MD**, won a team gold medal and finished sixth individually at the 1999 Pan Am Games on Jazzman. The Dutch Warmblood gelding has recovered from a lengthy injury, and Donna hopes to be riding him in Grand Prix by the end of the year. She currently is campaigning two other geldings at FEI level: eleven-year-old Dutch Warmblood Mondeo and nine-year-old Bavarian Domino. She hopes to move them up to Grand Prix next year. Out of the saddle, she juggles teaching, training, and judging with her responsibilities as an emergency-room physician in San Marcos, California.*