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Saturday, May 22, 2004

### Bill Freeman Bits....

*By Kathy Peth*

According to Bill Freeman of Rainier, Wash., folks used to confuse him with the cutting-horse legend named Bill Freeman.

"People used to think we were making bits for him," he chuckles, "but most everybody knows now that it's not that way."

Although he shares a highly recognizable name with the Texan who has won more money riding cutting horses than anyone else - \$4.5 million - Bill Freeman of tiny Rainier makes bits, beautiful bits, for cutting horses as well as for reiners and other using horses.

Freeman and his son Dan run Rainier Blacksmith and Bill Freeman Bits. Although they make everything from wrought-iron butterfly benches to customized doors for Army Hum-Vees, they concentrate on finely crafted and highly polished bits, making everything from snaffles for the fledgling colt to correction bits intended to get the attention of seasoned campaigners.

A metalworker, welder and fabricator, Freeman got his start



Bronco Bill



in California over 35 years ago. While working with his longtime friend Bobby Ingersoll, a California reined cow-horse trainer, Freeman studied bits used by cutting horse pioneers like Don Dodge, and tried to replicate them, making changes and testing the results.

"I'd make something and Bobby'd try it, and we kept doing that till we got what we wanted," Freeman remembers.

As folks started bringing Freeman broken bits to repair, he analyzed the bits, took measurements, made patterns, adapted what he liked, discarded what didn't work and put his own stamp on them. He learned which ones were popular and which ones kept breaking and why. He adapted them as well, testing them with Ingersoll.

Freeman says that about the same time he started making mechanical hackamores, "Ronnie Richards (another of California's successful reined cow-horse trainers) and I modified a hackamore to where reining horse people were putting it on their horses and using it to warm up before they went into the ring. Then they'd put the bridle on, go in and slide 40 feet. That's how I got my start - with the hackamores and the snaffle bits for Bobby and Ronnie."

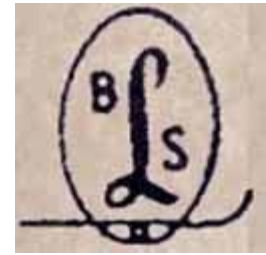
In history's timetable, the wheel gets the most publicity as the world's greatest invention, but certain pieces of horse tack, the bit and the stirrup, were also huge improvements to the human way of life. As an example of the importance of the stirrup, in 522 B.C., before it was invented, a King of Persia apparently stabbed himself to death with his own spear, while trying to get on a horse without the aid of one. Today, the invention of the stirrup is recognized as an important step in the development of warfare.

First, however, came the invention of the bit for the horse's mouth. The use of something to connect the rider's or the driver's hands to the horse's head probably originated with a leather strap, but ancient horse teeth show signs of bit-wear as long ago as 4000 B.C., and metal bits have been traced back over 3,500 years.

It's an old habit...horsemen have always looked for ways to adorn their horses. Some early bits were creatively and highly decorated and some were extremely severe. But while bits offer a surface for ornamentation, they must first serve a purpose. Freeman strives for a balanced and beautiful bit, one that is pleasing both to the eye and to the horse. He decries the fads in bits and bit-making.

"Some folks do things that are so crazy," he says in his soft voice, "and they get an awful-looking thing and it doesn't even work."

Freeman bits are elegant. They may appear almost plain, but as with fine jewelry, that simplicity is hard to pull off since it has to be done so well. The shapes must be accurate and balanced as well as eye-pleasing, and the bits



must be made from the finest material and finished to near perfection. Any mistake will show.

Bill Freeman will tell you he takes the greatest pride in the finish of his bits. He uses a combination of methods that involve tumbling and polishing. Each bit is buffed and finished by hand. To protect the polish, this horseman recommends "dipping" the bits; just taking the bridle off at the end of the ride and rinsing the crud and slobbers off the bit in a bucket of water. To keep the nearly silver shine on his aluminum cheeked bits, he suggests using products developed to polish aluminum wheels on motorcycles and cars.

In the rough-and-ready era of the cutting horse industry over 50 years ago, riders wanted a horse that was free of distraction by its headgear. They demanded the lightest possible bits, causing aluminum bits to become popular - all aluminum, even the mouthpiece. But aluminum is a drying metal, it sucks moisture right out of the mouth.

So, while today's cutters still want a fairly lightweight bit, they have developed horses with more mouth-feel than the early horses in the sport. Cutting bits have evolved along with the training methods and now feature "neutral" stainless steel mouthpieces that are copper or copper-inlaid, or as in Freeman Bits, mouthpieces made with an alloy that includes a horse's mouth to stay wet and slobbery.

The stable of Freeman bits includes fixed and hinged shank bits with a selection of mouthpieces made from a variety of metals. Freeman has developed an alloy of nonrusting iron with up to seven percent copper for his Eversweet mouthpieces. He also uses mouth-watering copper to make his mushroom, sweet water, high-and-low port, and correction mouthpieces; some have rollers, some don't. There is also his latest incarnation of that mechanical hackamore he made with Richards, and he has also started making snaffle bits again.

Handmade snaffle mouthpieces are extremely labor intensive. Quality is crucial. The aluminum cheeks for Freeman bits are machined out of aluminum bullets, not cast like most. All the bits pass the feel-test before they leave the shop. Every component is fabricated with care and concern for longevity.

"One thing we stress," says Freeman proudly, "is that our bits are 100-percent American made, nothing imported."

Freeman is a non-pro cutter, so he's using his own product. He calls his palomino partner his "test bed" for Freeman bits. While he takes pride in the look of his finished product, he is fierce about it being usable.

"I don't want them hanging on the wall," he says tartly. In his mind, that balance of the bit is the foundation for its usefulness.

"Hold your hand out flat," he advises. "Lay the mouth-piece of your bit on your hand, and that bit should hang the way you want your horse's head to be when he's wearing it. That's what makes the horse go along better; if that bit is hanging right, then his head should be right."

This hand test doesn't work on bits with aluminum shanks, because of the weight difference between the lighter cheeks and a steel mouthpiece.

Freeman is currently introducing an S-shanked bit.

"We're trying to do new things all the time," he says, although he isn't fond of innovation for the sake of merely trying something different. "I like doing things that work and look good."

Some Freeman bits feature his "No-Twist" rein ring, a half-moon insert in the front of the rein ring that keeps the reins from flipping and twisting in the bit. Freeman has also added a decorative feature to his hinged cheek bits, a "C" insert that not only covers the ends of the stainless pins that hold the mouthpiece, but also adds to the sleek profile of the bit.

Freeman supplies trophy bits for working horse associations. He has an engraver nearby who does deep, sharp-edged engraving on the silver overlaid bits Freeman makes, and on some aluminum shanks. When polished as highly as Freeman demands, aluminum can resemble fine silver. Most of his business is wholesale, although he can be contacted for special orders by visiting his Web site: [www.billfremanbits.com](http://www.billfremanbits.com)

Making bits by hand is not necessarily the way to get rich, and Freeman has periodically gone in and out of the business.

"The bits haven't always fed us," Freeman says, "so when we started, we had to do a lot of different things. Now, we want to control our destiny so we want to do bits full time."

With some Dan partnering in the shop, Freeman has committed to marketing their creations aggressively. Today, Freeman bits are in the inventories of various vendors at cutting and reining horse shows, at working cow-horse events, and at tack stores all over the country. There's even an outlet in Italy.

Like most folks involved in equine support industries, Bill Freeman likes to watch horses work. Sometimes he takes along an armload of bits and visits with the vendors handling his work. Always, he looks for his bits in the arena. His "No Twist" reing ring is a dead giveaway, of course, but so is the finish and the shape of the Freeman bits.

Bill Freeman has stamped his name on the cheeks of every

bit that left his shop, but he doesn't need to look for that to spot them.

"I can pick mine out all day long," he grins, with 100 percent All-American pride.

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