

GOING BITLESS: WITLESS OR WISE?

by Ruth Field

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The author wishes to advise that the following article was never written with the intention of recommending or endorsing any bitless bridle design except Dr Cook's "Bitless Bridle" TM. For more information see www.bitlessbridle.com

Metal was first placed in the horse's mouth about 6000 years ago, and has been an accepted item of tack ever since, despite the fact that humans have been riding horses just as successfully without bits for the same length of time. Now there is compelling research revealing that, at best, the bit causes discomfort and confusion, and, at worst, is downright cruel.

My thoroughbred mare, started late, never accepted the bit, even on a loose rein. She reefered, pulled, violently shook her head and sometimes her whole body. She struck out with her forelegs, went hollow, wouldn't halt, refused to turn right and sometimes left. She didn't like circles, she HATED transitions, and don't even dare suggest a leg yield. Maybe if I'd been more consistent with strong half halts, she would have got over it, but ask me to start putting on that sort of pressure and I turn to jelly. Something inside says, "If this is what you have to do to train this mare successfully - give up. Because you don't have what it takes."



The problems disappeared in June this year. Just like that. Gone. Literally overnight - never to return. They simply disappeared when I switched to the Bitless Bridle.

The Bitless Bridle bears no resemblance to other bitless headwear such as the hackamore, side-pull and bosal and, unlike these or bits, does not rely on concentrated pressure to the nose or mouth. The Bitless Bridle is a simple system of two loops, and applies mild pressure to the whole of the head, to acupressure points and over a large area of relatively painless skin.

The rein aids are the same, but the Bitless Bridle, with straps that cross under the horse's jaw, pushes on the head rather than pulls on the mouth. In the vast majority of cases, the horse adapts almost instantly, although the rider may require a few days to "get the hang" of it.

The Bitless Bridle isn't a new idea, but the concept has been developed and improved on by Dr W. Robert Cook. Now Professor Emeritus at Tufts University, School of Veterinary Medicine, Massachusetts USA, Dr Cook has spent close to five decades researching many equine welfare issues. He has focused on mouth, ear, nose and throat diseases, with a special interest in unsoundness of wind and the cause of bleeding in racehorses. Validating the Bitless Bridle from a scientific point of view is, he believes, his most important contribution to the welfare of the horse. He says that not only does the bit cause pain, it often damages the bone of the lower jaw.

The bit, according to Dr Cook, sets up physiological conflict. Anything placed in the mouth triggers eating responses in the horse relaxation, quiet breathing, salivation, movement of the lips, tongue, soft palate and jaw. But at the same time the horse is asked to exercise, which requires an entirely opposite set of cardiovascular reflexes "set" lips, dry mouth, stationary jaw, closed mouth, immobile tongue, and soft palate lowered. The bit also interferes with breathing and therefore the rhythm and length of stride, since a horse takes one breath for every stride.

Dr Cook's conviction that the bit is bad has been borne out in a survey of over 600 horse owners representative of most riding disciplines. " The unprecedented opportunity to switch a horse, overnight, from painful to painless control revealed many new and serious manifestations of 'aversion to the bit'. The bit method of control caused 58 adverse behavioural effects. All could be classified under four major effects; to instil fear, to trigger flight, to make the horse fight back, and to cause facial neuralgia (the headshaking syndrome). These effects could all be categorised as responses to oral pain."

Problems that disappeared with the removal of the bit included: - resistance to being bridled, rearing, taking off, nervousness, sluggishness, lack of focus, high head carriage, contact evasion, failure to collect, hollowing, no impulsion, "roaring" (thickness of the wind), head tilting, pulling, tail wringing, grinding the teeth The list goes on.

I was a little sceptical. But within minutes of my first ride in the Bitless Bridle, I was facing a few facts as unpalatable as the bit obviously was to my mare. No matter how benign the bit, or how carefully fitted, or how gentle I was with my hands, or if I rode only on a loose rein, the simple act of wearing a bit had obviously been causing enormous discomfort.

Imagine trying to have a very important conversation by mobile phone when the signal is poor. The crackling hurts your ears, you strain to catch every word as the voice fades in and out. Then suddenly the static goes, the signal is strong, and you can hear the voice as clear as a bell. You can, with much relief, focus on what is being said.

My mare knows perfectly well how to halt. But she was unable to "hear" me through the discomfort in her mouth. Now she halts on a sixpence, on voice command only if I choose. She is HAPPY to halt. And the rest of her training is no longer stuck in a holding pattern.

I ride my Senior Citizen gelding in a Bitless Bridle now, too. His arena work is softer, he no longer tilts his head right, he is forward again. When he gets a fright out hacking, he no longer dives onto the forehand. Instead, he lifts his back and passages. Never did get that far with the training. Any time I feel like it, I just ride along the road past the alpacas. I've been riding past those terrifying alpacas for years, and I never got passage before.

Which brings us to the issue of competition. You can actually attach a bit to the Bitless Bridle in such a way that it becomes pretty much a standard bridle. Or you can just hook on the bit without attaching it to the reins. But I don't know if I can ever go back to a bit just to compete. Maybe one day the rules will be changed. Considering Oliveira could achieve close to perfection with only a ribbon in his horse's mouth, I strongly suspect they should be.

All reference material taken from research and articles published on www.bitlessbridle.com

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1) Cook, W. Robert FRCVS, PhD: "Bit-induced pain: a cause of fear, flight, fight and facial neuralgia in the horse." Pferdeheilkunde, In Press, 2002.