

TRADITIONAL (PAIN-BASED) BITLESS BRIDLES



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Bridles without bits are not a new invention, but in recent years have become very popular with those horse owners seeking ways of communicating kindly with their horses, rather than controlling through pressure, pain and fear, as with the bitted bridle. But how effective are the various designs of non-bit bridles - and how humane are they, really? Dr Cook thinks most of them leave a great deal to be desired.

'Hackamore' is a description that is often used for any bridle the action of which depends on nose rather than mouth pressure. But there are actually three distinct categories of such bridles: bosal hackamores, mechanical hackamores, and side-pulls (including rope halters and jumping hackamores).

The bosal is usually made of a rawhide tube (with or without a metal insert) that goes around the muzzle. It has a large knob on the back, called the heel butt, to which the mecate or bosal reins are attached. The mecate is usually made of horsehair and is deliberately rough. This is to make the horse move away from the pressure and irritation. The bosal causes irritation to the jaw and nose, whereas the mecate causes irritation to the neck. The irritation (pain) persuades the horse to move away from its source. Indirect reining (neck reining) is normally used for steering. A good quality bosal will have a balanced heel butt that will rest in a neutral position until the reins are used. For slowing and stopping both reins are lifted. The back of the bosal will rub the chin and the front will press down on the nose. This, in conjunction with a backward shift of the rider's body weight, signals the horse to flex at the poll and to slow or stop. When the bosal is used with intermittent, or give and take pressure, the horse learns to move correctly and to flex and be light in the bridle. Pressure, with the resultant pain, is only used when necessary and the horse learns to correct himself. If ridden with constant pressure, the bosal loses all control, as the horse will be unable to find a comfort zone.

The mechanical hackamore, like the bosal, acts much like a curb bit. It uses leverage on the nose and a curb chain presses behind the chin. Poll pressure is also added. As with a curb, the shorter the shanks the less severe the pressure. Shanks that curve back are less severe than straight shanks. Instead of a mouthpiece, a nosepiece is used but, as with a mouthpiece, 'wider/thicker' is less severe than 'narrower/thinner.' While the hackamore does not provide good lateral control (steering), it does provide vertical control (brakes) and encourages the horse to lower his head and flex, the same as a curb.

The side-pull acts much like a snaffle. It provides greater lateral control, but less flex control and brakes than the two previous bridles. The horse will most likely carry his head higher. One of the most popular forms of the side-pull, and one of the most severe, is the 3/16" rope halter. The reason it is a side-pull is that there is no leverage. The reason it is severe is because, as when talking bits, the narrower the noseband the more severe. Most rope halters are narrow and severe.

In marked contrast to all of the above, The Bitless Bridle is painless and provides effective aids for both vertical and lateral communication.

The Bitless Bridle™ is a crossover whole-head-hug design, researched, developed and improved by Dr Cook so that it is now suitable for most, if not all, equestrian disciplines. It is available in Australia ONLY through Australian Equine Arts. For more information contact AEA Manager, Ysabelle Dean, Bitless Bridle Associate Clinician.

Website www.ausequinearts.com



Five year old Stefi has been started very recently, and trained from the outset in Dr Cook's The Bitless Bridle. She had her first rider on board in mid-December, a 12 year old child. No problems with steering or stopping. Throughout the starting procedure, Stefi has remained forward yet completely responsive to voice and rein aids in a Bitless Bridle.

Further reading:

Cook, Dr WRobert FRCVS, PhD & Strasser, Hiltrud Dr Med Vet, PhD: "Metal in the Mouth: The Abusive Effects of Bitted Bridles" 2003, Sabine Kells, Canada.

Also see The Bitless Bridle website www.bitlessbridle.com