

# Can Everyone Ride Bitless?

**YES! EVEN BEGINNERS!!**

It has been five years since I threw away my bits; all but one, that is. A few of my clients require a bit, due to current rules in dressage and other show rings that do not allow Dr. Cook's cross-under bitless bridle. But fortunately, some English shows and Western events do allow it!

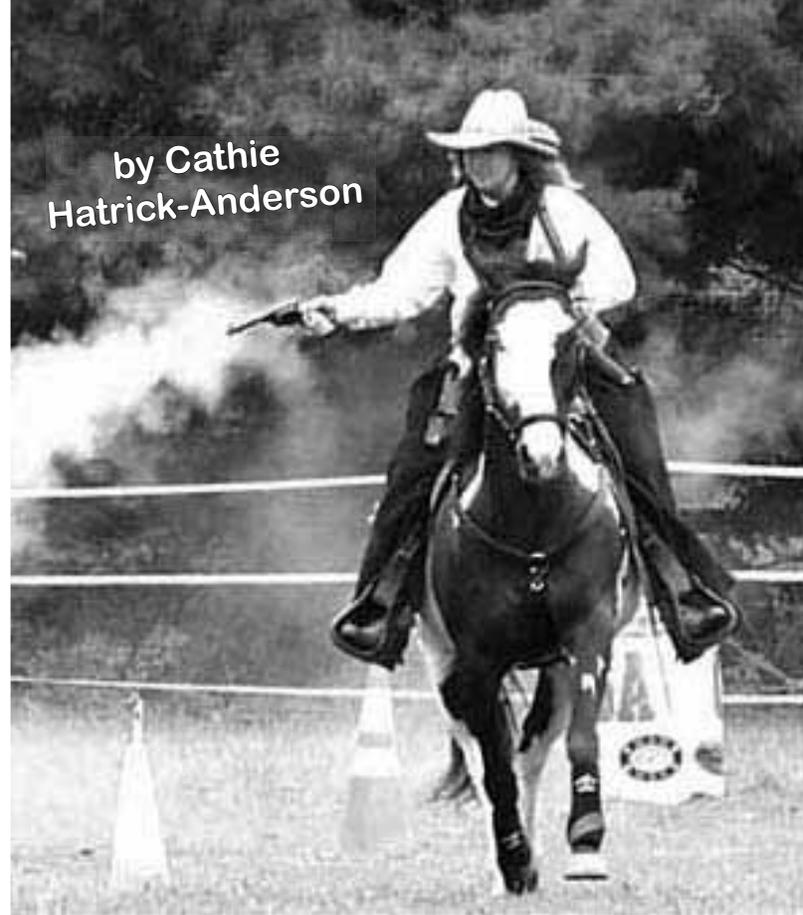
When I demonstrate to a client how they can have MORE control riding in a rope halter with reins or Dr. Cook's Bitless Bridle, they become very excited...after a period of disbelief. It only took me 40 years to re-discover it myself! As a child, I rode with a halter and two lead ropes without thinking twice. At four feet tall it was a lot easier than trying to put a bit in.

Now that I'm 45, I don't bounce well and tend to break. Yet as a professional horse trainer, specializing in starting colts and rehabilitating ones that buck, bolt and rear, I feel safer without a bit. I even train horses to pull a cart using Dr. Cook's bridle with no blinkers. But from the initial comments that I often receive, you would think I was running with scissors!

In reality, the safety of the rider (including myself!) and horse are my top priorities. It may be hard to fathom, but most riders are not throwing caution to the wind by riding bitless. We've all been using bits for so long we've become brainwashed by time and tradition. Many ride in hackamores without raising an eyebrow. Yet choose a rope halter or Dr. Cook's Bitless Bridle and you may be ridiculed for acting recklessly.

Let's think about this. Riders regularly climb aboard horses that can go from 0-30 mph in 1.5 seconds at the sight of a shadow, and throw in a buck, followed by a triple fart and a spin, as if it had been carefully choreographed. Does a bit control that horse?

Many riders refuse to ride out alone, because they know the bit won't stop the horse. So how about trying that highly-recommended 'stronger bit for trail riding'? Here's the deal: A bit does not assure a rider's safety. When a disobedient or fearful horse receives a correction via a metal rod in a highly sensitive area, this usually exacerbates his response. He becomes blind with pain and fear and feels a need to escape his rider.



by Cathie  
Hatrick-Anderson

ABOVE and FACING PAGE: Cathie A. at a Cowboy Mounted Shooting competition, riding her horse, Cachina, in a Dr. Cook's western style bridle. Cachina was started Bitless as a three-year-old.

BELOW LEFT: At demonstrations, Cathie asks attendees to place their finger (horse's tongue) on the bars of the lower jaw, then lays the mildest bit on top of the finger and gently presses.

Participants immediately understand and feel how much pressure is applied to the tongue, via the bit.

Some ride with a false sense of security in the confinement of a ring or small arena. Have you ever wondered why some horses can perform upper level dressage movements or run an incredible barrel pattern in an enclosed ring but can't be ridden out alone?

When observing a rider on a bitted horse that's clearly responsive to the aids, one would never know the reins attached to the bit were capable of administering extreme pain. But these riders have spent years developing their skills and, from past experience, the horse has also learned that if he resists the rider's hands, the metal rod in his mouth will begin to hurt. So... he complies... most of the time. It's unfortunate that many horses have to suffer because of our lack of knowledge.

Why do so many horses demonstrate external signs of pain when being ridden? When we use the reins to get a horse to collect, turn sharply or slow down; we apply enough force that he may have to open his mouth. You might not realize it, but those few pounds of pressure can cause significant pain; discomfort at the very least. Once that pressure travels down to the horse's tongue via the bit, the tongue gets pressed onto the knife edge bars of the horse's lower jaw, then pinched in a vice created by the chin strap below. The force is now extreme.

The bars of the horse's mouth where the bit lies, just before the first cheek teeth, are parallel batons of bone covered by a thin layer of skin. Try this exercise to get a feel of what I am describing. Stick your tongue out so that it now overlaps your front teeth, (similar to a horse's tongue overlapping the bony bars)

- Place an index finger on each side of your tongue
- Pull down as hard as you would pull the reins when you ask your horse to stop.





I had never thought twice about pulling that hard on my horse's mouth. If only I had known! I am truly grateful that horses are so forgiving.

I have observed horses moments after they have sustained a major injury - interestingly enough, they showed no outward signs of acute pain. Yet bitted horses commonly demonstrate multiple signs of pain, such as pinned ears, wrinkled nose, swishing tail, gaping mouth, or grinding teeth. These reactions provide an indication of the severity of pain that a bit can inflict. These are observations I have confirmed, coupled with all I have heard and read from Dr. Robert Cook, FRCVS, PhD; a retired equine ENT surgeon. I believe the bit can be cruel. It is an unnecessary form of punishment, as it relies solely on pain for controlling a horse.

I don't want all riders to throw away their bits--not just yet anyway. If you have a horse that does not listen while being handled on the ground or being lunged, your horse is not going to respect you under saddle when you ride him bitless. You obviously have issues beyond the bit. If your horse is fine when ground-trained in a halter or Dr. Cook's bridle, you will find you have a better horse under saddle. If your horse only exhibits bad behavior when bitted, odds are he will change for the better when bitless! What if your horse appears to accept the bit? You have nothing to lose, and a lot to gain by trying bitless.

To make the leap, I'd prefer you to err on



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**BITLESS BRIDLES (BB):** "A quiet revolution is now taking place that transforms the art and science of horsemanship. The Bitless Bridle™ provides a humane alternative to the Bronze Age technology of the bit. Unlike the bit, no pain is inflicted."

**STEERING:** "The BB bears no resemblance to hackamores, bosals, and sidepulls, all of which are pain-based in their mechanism. With the BB, brief pressure on one rein pushes the horse's head. Horses respond better to being pushed painlessly (nudged) with the Bitless Bridle™ (over a large surface area) than being pulled painfully by a bit (with highly focused pressure on the sensitive tissues of the mouth). Where the head goes the horse follows. Unlike the effect of a bit that tends to twist a horse's head, the head stays upright and the turn is more natural and physiologically correct. The Bitless Bridle™ 'works' with both direct and neck reining."

**STOPPING:** "Brief pressure on both reins or alternate pressure on each rein applies a gentle squeeze to the whole of the head and triggers a 'submit' response. Braking is probably attributable to a combination of the calming effect of a whole-head-hug; to initiation of a balancing reflex at the poll; to the stimulation of areas of special sensitivity behind the ears; and to painless pressure across the bridge of the nose. The "brakes" are more reliable than those provided by the bit. First, bit-induced pain causes many a horse to bolt rather than brake. Secondly, at no time can the horse deprive the rider of all means of communication by gripping the bit between its teeth or under its tongue. Unlike the mechanics of the bit, hackamore, bosal or sidepull, braking is not dependent on pain across the bridge of the nose, poll flexion and obstruction of the airway." [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com)

PHOTO CREDITS for this article:

Conrad Berthold - horse skull photo  
Team penning-Tom Cloutier  
Cowboy Mounted Shooting-Aida Schreiber

the side of caution. Ride first in a small-enclosed ring. **You** are going to have more trouble believing that the bit doesn't stop your horse than your horse will have.

If you are still not confident, you can even try placing a bitted bridle on top of Dr. Cook's bridle. Now you'll have two sets of reins. Use your bitless rein just as you would on a snaffle bit. If you ever feel you need the bit, the reins are right there in front of you, draped on your horse's neck.

We take great care in the management of our horses. We know that pain from improperly fitting saddles or poor hoof care results in behavior issues, so we carefully fit their saddles and keep their feet balanced. Some take extra care, adding special diets, prepared treats, and even chiropractic care. We do this because we care about our horse's health and comfort. We know he needs to feel well to perform well. Now...what are we doing about the bit?

## Cathie Hatrick-Anderson

Cathie lives on Bobcat Farm in Upton, Massachusetts, with her son, Wes, and husband, Bob.

As a freelance trainer, she travels to all six New England States, training and presenting clinics.

Dr. Robert Cook FRCVS, PhD, appointed Cathie as the first Bitless Bridle Instructor in the United States. She is a Member of the CMSA and The Massachusetts Six Shooters.

She can be reached at (508) 479-5266.

Copies of her new DVD "Bitless Bridle Clinic" are available at [www.bobcatfarm.com](http://www.bobcatfarm.com)

