



TRADITIONAL (PAIN-BASED) BITLESS BRIDLES¹

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Question: *How does The Bitless Bridle differ from pre-existing bitless bridles?*

The short answer is that pre-existing (traditional) bitless bridles depend on their ability to cause pain or the threat of pain, whereas The Bitless Bridle is virtually incapable of causing pain. The Bitless Bridle also provides a more comprehensive method of signaling. Being painless and more effective, it is also safer and more humane.

‘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 sidepulls (including rope halters and jumping hackamores).

1. Bosal Hackamore:

Strictly speaking, the word ‘bosal’ is the name for the nosepiece of this hackamore. Its correct fitting requires expertise. The nosepiece is generally made of a rawhide tube which may or may not contain a metal insert. The bosal surrounds the muzzle and has a large knob on the chin side called the heel butt, to which the mecate or bosal reins are attached. The mecate is usually made of horsehair and is deliberately rough, to encourage the horse to move away from the pressure and irritation. The bosal causes irritation (pain) to the jaw and nose, whereas the mecate causes irritation to the neck. Indirect reining (neck reining) is normally used to provide the signal for steering. A good quality bosal will have a balanced heel butt that rests 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

¹ For an independent review of bitless options, visit Dr. Jessica Jahiel's invaluable Newsletter at www.HORSE-SENSE.org, click on ‘Archives’ and carry out a search for her article published on 3/5/05 with the title, “So many hackamores, so little information.”

the poll and to slow or stop. When the bosal is used with intermittent (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 used sparingly. If ridden with constant pressure, control is lost as the horse is unable to find a comfort zone by moving away from the pressure.

2. Mechanical Hackamore (also known as a German Hackamore):

As with the bosal, the mechanical hackamore acts like a curb bit. It uses leverage on the nose and, in addition, a curb chain presses behind the chin. Poll pressure is also added. The shorter the shanks the less severe is the pressure. Shanks that curve back are less severe than straight shanks. As with the bosal, the 'wider/thicker' nosepiece is less severe than the 'narrower/thinner' nosepiece. While the hackamore fails to provide a good lateral signal for steering, it does provide a vertical signal for slowing or stopping. It does this by encouraging the horse to lower his head and flex, the same as a curb. If used incorrectly, it is capable of choking a horse or even fracturing its nasal bone or jaw. Some authorities recommend, ill advisedly in my opinion, that it be fitted in such a way that the nosepiece, when under rein pressure, obstructs the nasal passages.

3. Sidepull:

The sidepull acts much like a snaffle, as it applies no leverage. It provides a better lateral signal for steering than a bosal or a mechanical hackamore, but a less effective flexing signal for stopping. Also, in a sidepull a horse will most likely carry its head higher. The bridle forms of sidepull may or may not have a metal insert in the nosepiece. Apart from this, the nosepiece varies considerably in material, shape and texture, with according variation in its ability to cause pain.

The Jumping hackamore (also known as the English Hackamore) acts more like a sidepull than a leverage hackamore, though it does have short shanks. Nevertheless, the noseband is padded and the curb is leather. It is generally classified among the sidepulls and is considered to be less severe than most sidepulls (see Jessica Jahiel's Newsletter))

Another form of sidepull is made out of rope, not strap work, and is known as a rope halter, though it is used as a bridle. The rope may be thick and soft or thin and hard, with the ability to cause, or potentially to cause, varying degrees of pain – depending also, of course, on the way it is used. In addition, rope halters may be plain or knotted. Those with knots at one or more points have a greater capacity for causing pain than the plain halters. One of the most popular forms of rope halter is made out of 3/16" hard rope, which is a thin rope and, therefore, a material with considerable 'tooth' or bite. The reason it is severe is because, as when talking bits and

nosepieces, the narrower the circumference the more severe the effect. Such a rope halter is considered more severe than most sidepulls. A Natural Horsemanship trainer (Cathie Hatrick-Andersen) who had routinely used a rope halter for starting young horses before she became familiar with the Bitless Bridle, continues to use the rope halter for the very first stages of schooling and then transitions to the Bitless Bridle. Another well-respected trainer (Pat Parelli) uses a rope halter until schooling is complete, and then transitions to a curb bit.

SUMMARY

All three of the above traditional bitless bridles depend for their effectiveness on their capacity for causing pain, which is why I have classified them in the title of this article as pain-based bitless bridles. This is not to say that pain is necessarily caused every time they are used, any more than the same applies to bits, all of which are also pain-based. For example, in the hands of a master horseman who has learned to ride with seat and legs and who does not actually use the reins *when riding a fully-trained horse*, the most severe of bits may be completely pain-free. Conversely, a supposedly simple snaffle in the untutored hands of a novice can become an instrument of torture. The same applies to the bosal, mechanical hackamore and all the sidepulls. Depending on how they are used they may or may not cause pain. The point is, however, that the design of each of these bridles provides for the possibility of causing pain. This feature constitutes a fundamental weakness of design. Any method of communication that, in certain hands or under certain conditions, might - albeit unintentionally - cause unnecessary pain and trigger serious or even fatal accidents for both horse and rider has to be considered a less than ideal method.

By contrast, the design of The Bitless Bridle² is such that it is virtually impossible for it to cause pain. It could justifiably be claimed that, by comparison with those described above, it is the only bitless bridle without a bite (the biteless bitless bridle). Yet at the same time it provides fully comprehensive rein-signaling for steering, slowing and stopping, at all stages of a horse's training, for all disciplines, for all types and temperaments of horse, and for all ages and experience of rider. A horse can feel a fly landing on a hair of its head and will respond accordingly. It doesn't need a painful signal to persuade it to comply with a rider's request. As painful signals can result in quite unintended responses from a horse, a method of communication that automatically rules-out the possibility of such signals ever being accidentally transmitted represents

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an invaluable safety factor. Using the Bitless Bridle, even the greenest novices are, as it were, saved from themselves. They are unable to get into trouble as a result of inadvertently hurting their horse and thereby triggering the hundred and one potentially alarming responses that evolution has endowed the horse with by way of avoiding pain. From the horse's point of view, all these responses are no more than natural defenses. But from the rider's point of view, such responses reduce the pleasure of riding, making riding more complicated and much more dangerous.