

What is this new Bitless Bridle?

By Jessica Jahiel, PhD.

This bridle made its first major public appearance in 2000 at Equitana USA, where it won the award for Best New Product. As most riders know, finding the right bit for a horse can be a long and complicated process - and an expensive one. Most riders have collections of bits that turned out to be wrong for their horses, and most riders would love to be able to save money by getting their bit choice right every time.

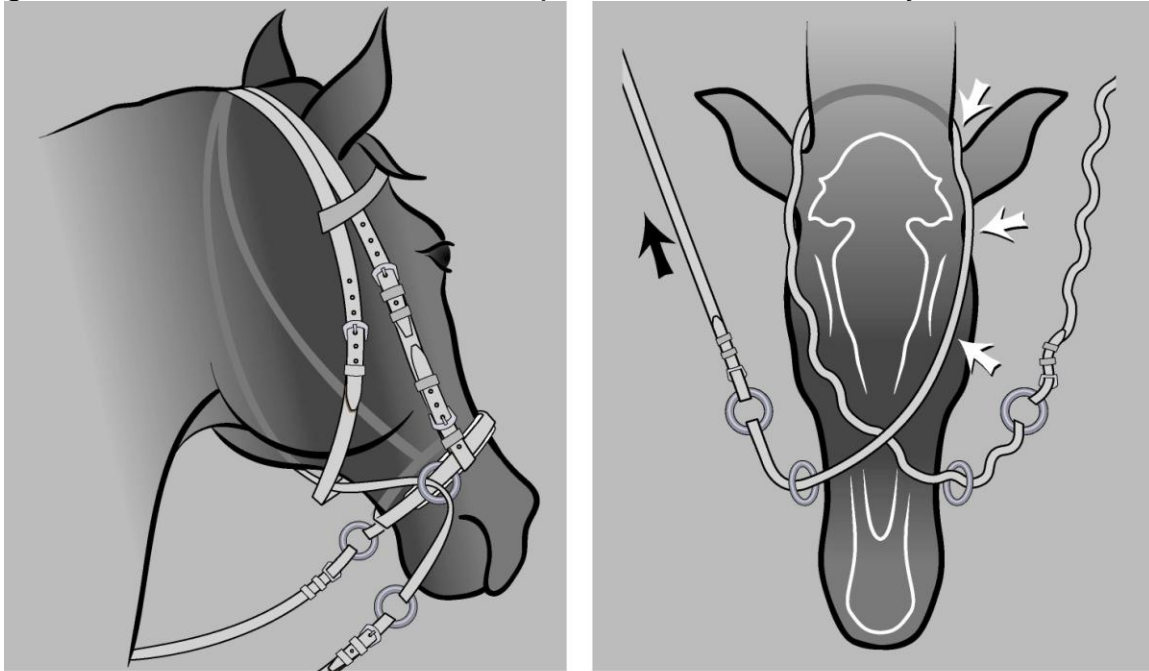
Some riders try to avoid the whole issue of biting by using bridles without bits. This isn't as easy as it sounds. The correct adjustment use of the traditional bosal involves a good deal of education for both horse and rider. There are many forms of mechanical hackamores



available, all with potentially painful leverage, and some that can break a horse's nose and/or jaw with very little effort on the rider's part. Riders looking for less painful and dangerous forms of bridles without bits often turn to various versions of western sidepulls and English "jumping hackamores. With these, the rider avoids the infliction of pain and damage on the horse, but also sacrifices fine communication and lateral control. Some riders don't care about lateral control or communication through the reins, and are happy to ride in a halter with one or two leadropes attached. And some riders are trying something entirely new: the Bitless Bridle.

The Bitless Bridle has an interesting design. More subtle than a halter, sidepull, or jumping hackamore, and infinitely less forceful than a mechanical hackamore, it works by placing pressure on the side of

the horse's jaw and on the horse's nose. A strong pull from the rider will also create pressure behind the horse's ears and under the horse's chin. What makes the bridle less forceful is that the pressure is from flat straps only - not from metal bars or chains, and not from knots in the strap material. The pressure is applied to areas of the horse's head that are much less sensitive than the bars and tongue. From the rider's side of the reins, the feeling is very much like riding with a well-adjusted bridle and well-chosen bit; from the horse's side of the reins, the pressure from the Bitless Bridle is lighter and more gentle than the same amount of pressure used with any bit. The



direction of the pressure is interesting too - and this is what makes the Bitless Bridle unique and effective for lateral control. When the rider applies pressure on the left rein, for example, instead of a bit pulling against the left side of the horse's mouth, the left rein acts on a strap that puts pressure against the right side of the horse's cheek and jaw. This allows the horse to bend and turn quickly and quietly in response to the rider's use of the rein, without any of the head-tossing associated with mechanical hackamores, and without the need for the rider to use a strong leading rein, as is necessary with a sidepull, jumping hackamore, or halter. The Bitless Bridle increases the horse's comfort and increases the rider's ability to communicate quietly and gently and clearly. Without strong restriction and forced flexion, the horses ridden in the Bitless Bridle do not "lock" their polls,

and because there is no mouth pain from the bit, the horses have no reason to brace their jaws or necks against the reins.

Is the Bitless Bridle for everyone? Maybe not - but everyone ought to try one, at least once. Horses understand it instantly; riders take a few minutes longer to make the adjustment, especially if they have always believed that BIT = CONTROL and that without a bit, they will have no control. If nothing else, the Bitless Bridle can make it clear to any rider that the purpose of a bridle (and bit) should be to tip the horse's nose softly in a particular direction, and that the rest of the rider's wishes (stop, go forward, backward, or sideways, change gaits, etc.) should be communicated by the rider's seat and legs. The Bitless Bridle is a useful addition to any tackroom. It is popular with many racehorse trainers who are interested in any piece of tack that provides them with an edge, and who are convinced that horses ridden in the Bitless Bridle can move and breathe more easily than horses ridden in conventional bridles. It is also popular with owners of riding schools, since horses ridden in beginner lessons typically experience a lot of pulling and jerking from unbalanced riders of all ages and sizes. With the Bitless Bridle, the riders have full control, but the horses are much more comfortable, as they are protected while the riders learn to balance themselves and achieve the body control that will keep them from using too-strong pressure or making inadvertent jerks or tugs at the reins.. If you've been having trouble finding the right bit for your horse, or if you're interested in riding without a bit, or if you already ride without a bit and would like to use a bridle that will maximize your horse's comfort and your own ability to communicate with the horse through the reins, give the Bitless Bridle a try!¹

¹ Photograph by courtesy of Gretchen Fathauer at <http://members.screenz.com/gretchenfathauer> and TYLER'S owner, Teresa Jessee