



FEATURE ARTICLE

MAN BITES HORSE: BIT RULE EXAMINED

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Bit rule examined

Robert Cook¹

INTRODUCTION

The word 'bit' comes from the Anglo-Saxon '*bite*.' Because the 'e' was dropped we easily forget the aversive nature of a device that is routinely strapped into a horse's body cavity. Horses are prey animals – hence their sensitivity and default flight response to fear. But if they are not hurt or frightened, they are endearingly willing to partner with man. They feel a fly landing on their face. They don't need to be hurt to feel a rein-aid. Pain is a barrier to understanding and prevents partnership.

When horses were first domesticated, a simple halter was probably used. In time, the bitless approach led to the bosal, hackamore and sidepull; all less painful than the bit. In 1999, the pain-free crossunder was introduced, raising the question, 'Why use a bitted rein-aid when a more effective pain-free one is available?' Answer: there is no practical or scientific reason. Bits were customary in Europe when competition rules for racing and dressage were first drawn-up and they were just 'grandfathered-in.'

Though used since 3600 BC, bits were not objectively questioned until 1999. Since then, they have been shown to be harmful to the horse, a handicap to performance, and a hazard to the safety of horse and rider. It follows that the bit is a welfare, behavioral, ethical, legal and economic impediment.

The purpose of this article is to remind administrators of horse sports and stewards of racing jurisdictions of the need to reconsider their rules mandating bit usage, i.e., positive punishment. Fifteen years of crossunder bridle field-testing on countless thousands of horses worldwide has not falsified the science. Though it would be unrealistic to expect the bit to be outlawed, it is clearly unacceptable for a harmful and dangerous device to be mandated. For all disciplines, an alternative to the bit should be allowed. It is especially urgent that children, who love to compete, should not be compelled to use a high-risk device. Once choice is permitted, there will be no need to ban the bit. Its use will decline because freedom from pain enhances performance; something that will be quickly noticed by competitors, as it has been by non-competitors. The day will come when the bit will be seen only in museums.

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The Royal Dutch Equestrian Federation has given us a lead. In 2014, they approved bitless bridles for the first two levels of dressage. In due course, the approval will probably be extended to all levels. North American Western Dressage and Western Dressage Association of America both permit bitless bridles, as do a number of solely online dressage competitions.

EVIDENCE FOR CHOICE

The evidence has been published and is freely available online at <http://www.bitlessbridle.com/FURTHER%20READING.pdf>. Though there has been ample time for the evidence to be challenged, no rebuttals have appeared.

Some reasons for **not** using a bit are summarized below:

1. Its use runs counter to all three of the relevant sciences; equine physiology, equine ethology (behavior), and learning theory.
2. A bit does not control a horse. On the contrary, it's the most common cause of complete loss of control.
3. Bit pain triggers over 200 perfectly natural (yet rider-unwanted) behavioral responses, many serious and some fatal (e.g., bolting, rearing, bucking and balking).
4. A horse in pain is slow to learn anything - apart from avoidance of pain.
5. Pain leads to poor performance
6. A bit triggers digestive system responses (salivation, swallowing, and movement of lips, tongue and jaw) rather than the required respiratory, cardiovascular and musculoskeletal responses.
7. A bit breaks what should be an airtight lip-seal in a running horse. The seal - plus one swallow prior to running - creates a vacuum in the mouth. This sucks the soft palate down onto the immobile root of tongue and clamps it there during running, ensuring that the throat airway is fully open for deep and rapid breathing. An unclamped and elevated soft palate ('dorsally displaced') can strangle a bitted horse at each inspiration. In the racehorse it is this that commonly causes waterlogging of the lung ('bleeding') and, sometimes, sudden death.
8. Constant bit contact (e.g., 'rating' a racehorse or 'framing' a dressage horse) prevents natural poll extension and partially suffocates. It also unbalances a horse and interferes with its head/neck pendulum - an energy-saving mechanism.
9. Breathing and striding are interlocked when running. A horse takes one breath for every stride. Bit pain interferes with the rhythm of breathing, straightness of

direction, and the poetry of motion. Of all bit problems, gait problems are the most numerous.

10. A bit causes bone spurs to erupt on the bars of the mouth, erosion of cheek teeth and paradontal disease. These local effects are regrettable enough but a bit also has profoundly negative effects on the horse's brain, spine, lungs and legs and the rider's brain (Figure 1).
11. Bit-induced pain and fear are frequent causes of injury and accidents. Risk is increased for both horse and rider. Unable to breathe properly, a horse becomes exhausted and is more likely to stumble or fall.
12. Availability of a pain-free rein-aid requires the status of the bit to be reclassified. Prior to 1999, it was possible to argue that though a bit may inflict pain this was unavoidable, there being no acceptable alternative – at least for 'English' riding. All this has changed - pain is now avoidable. Infliction of avoidable pain is unethical.
13. Chronic bit pain can change a horse's character for the worse. Aggression and other behaviors judged 'dangerous' can, most unjustly, lead to euthanasia.
14. A bit downgrades a horse's quality of life and opposes development of the harmony and partnership for which all riders strive.
15. The effect of a bit on the horse can have an emotional and financial effect on riders. They may no longer enjoy riding, find it too expensive, and stop riding altogether. It might be said that a bit can get inside a rider's head.
16. The public image of equestrian sport is damaged by bit usage.

Conversely, there is only one reason for using a bit – it is mandated for competition. This false 'necessity' occurs at the horse's expense and makes nonsense of the horse sport objective "*the welfare of the horse is paramount.*" Administrations that mandate bit usage in the 21st century can no longer claim to be safeguarding the welfare of the horse. Consequently, they disqualify themselves from eligibility for charitable status. In the United Kingdom it is a criminal offence under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to "*cause unnecessary suffering.*" (Figure 2)

CALL FOR ACTION

To date, none of the world's racing jurisdictions and only one of the national equestrian federations has updated its equipment rules in the face of evidence incriminating the bit. Yet both sets of administrations have serious problems that could be solved by such a step. The committee structure of organizations can be a barrier to advancement. The search for truth in science is based on evidence, not on majority vote in committee. It is

essential that volunteers who serve on rule committees for equine sports should study the evidence and act accordingly.

The KNHS showed how committee fallibility can be overcome. First, an enlightened committee tested the evidence by establishing a three-year trial of bitless dressage. Judges observed and scored bitless dressage. Recognizing that there was nothing to fear and much to be gained, KNHS approved its introduction. Other national equestrian federations could repeat this logical process or simply learn from the KNHS and avoid years of delay in introducing reform.

Stewards of racing jurisdictions could first monitor a period of bitless training. The second stage would be to write a series of races designed exclusively for bitless horses. The third stage would be to allow bitless horses to race alongside bitted horses.

CONCLUSIONS

As the essence of science is 'advance' and that of tradition 'immobility,' any group's policy tethered to tradition is doomed to anachronism. Tradition has charms but not if it harms. After five millennia it is time to quit the bit. The sciences of learning theory, equine behavior and equine physiology are universal and not influenced by geography, type of horse, the 'English'/'Western'- racing/dressage divide, or the age/experience of the rider. As scientific evidence shows the bit to be a hazard to welfare, health and safety its mandatory use in the 21st century is incongruous. The best interest of horses, riders and administrations will be served by offering choice.

ILLUSTRATIONS & CAPTIONS

[see following page]



Fig.1. Bit Effects (partial listing)

On the horse: Positive punishment, e.g., pain, fear, high-alert, apprehension, spookiness, depression. Cascade of broken lip seal, mouth vacuum dissipated, soft palate elevated, airway strangled, lungs waterlogged and 'bleeding', breathing-and-striding uncoupled, spine stiffened, exhaustion, stumbling, falls, breakdowns, catastrophic injuries, sudden death.

On the rider: Pleasure spoiled by unwanted behavior, loss of control, gait abnormalities, frustration, disappointment, poor performance, injury, fear of riding, expense

On the discipline: Reduced participation, lower income, charity status jeopardized, bad publicity

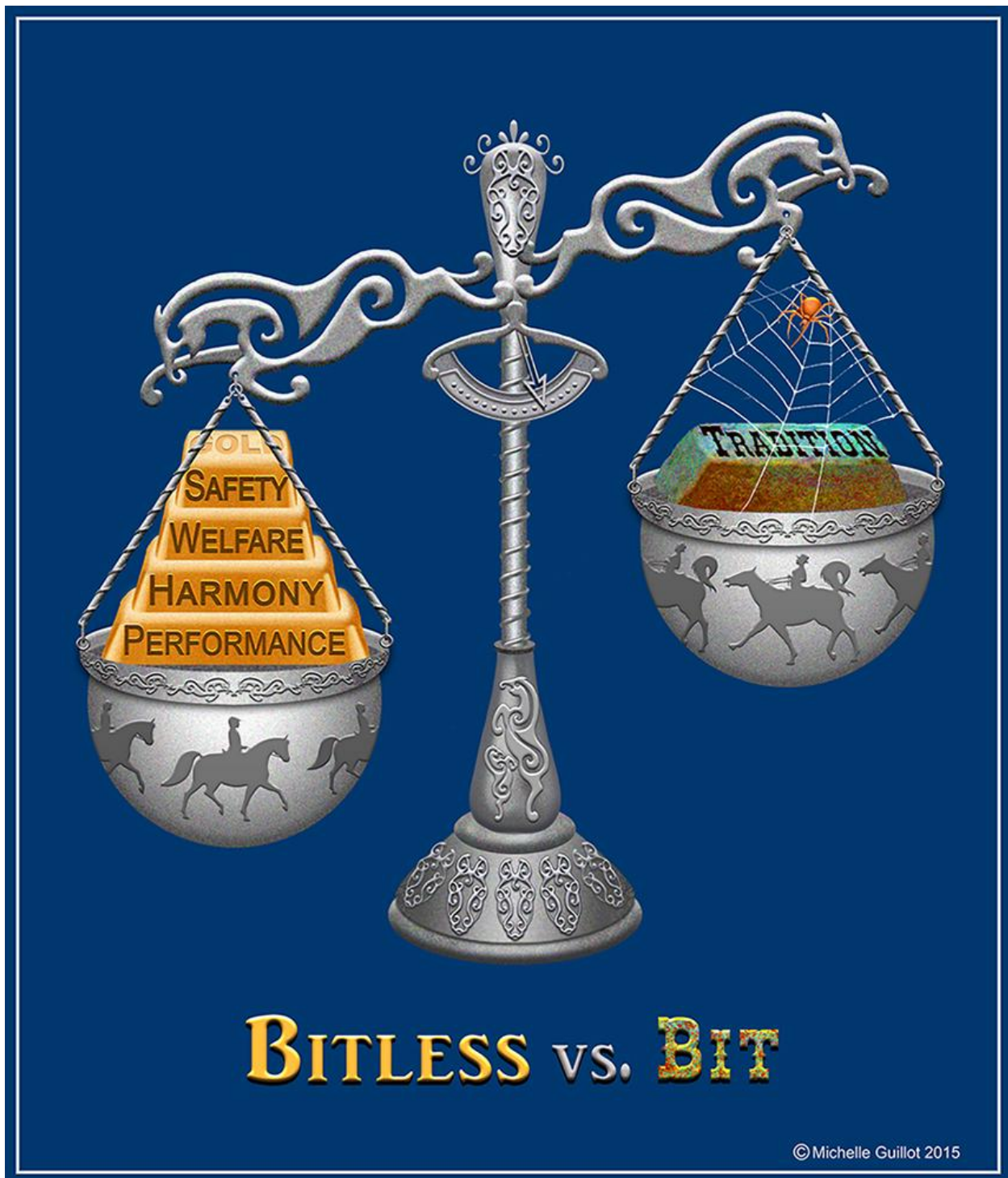


Fig.2. Motion for debate: “This House believes that bits should be mandatory for dressage and racing.”

[see next page for further reading]

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