Following the recent debate relating to bitless bridles I am delighted to see that Graham Cato has taken the opportunity to clarify the BHS’s stance regarding insurance cover for those of us who ride in them and would congratulate him upon adopting a sensible stance.

For some people, the choice of a BB is a personal and ethical one, for others it is a necessity. In my case, my six-year-old Irish Draught mare suffered an injury as a yearling when a lead rope clip became caught in her cheek, tearing right through and requiring 16 stitches. As a result, she has some scar tissue inside her mouth.

When she was broken, a conventional bitted bridle was used but she never really settled to it and became difficult to bridle up, presumably due to the discomfort in her mouth. I persisted with the conventional method for several months following breaking, during which time she became restless, anxious and aggressive whenever she saw me walking into her box with her bridle.

In the end, she would turn her backside to me and threaten to ‘back barrel’ me, ears laid back and stamping her feet. Tacking up for an hour to bridle her was not a pleasant experience for either of us as she constantly fought the bit, tossing her head and generally being spooky and uncontrollable. I had previously ridden a young pony with a very hard mouth in a hackamore, and decided that this would probably be too severe for a newly broken youngster. After some research, I decided to try the Dr Cook’s Bitless bridle in an attempt to alleviate both the mare’s anxiety and my frustration.

I have a happy, responsive mare that ‘listens’ to what I am asking her to do. In a bit, she was difficult to stop, raising her head up to evade the bit action and using her strength and solid neck to do whatever she wanted to.

The first ‘test’ of the BB was when I was riding with a friend in our local country park about a week after I had converted her to the BB. Another rider came down the cross-country course behind us rather quickly, causing our two young horses to spook and bolt. I pulled my mare up in her BB in four strides; meanwhile, my companion, riding in a bit, was disappearing up to evade the bit action and using her strength and solid neck to do whatever she wanted to.

Her response to the BB is far quicker and I have much greater control than I ever had using a bit. I would never change this mare back to a bit; it would do neither of us any favours.

There seems to be strong opinion that BBs are new-fangled, faddy and used by ‘pony patterns’ and cranks. Nothing is further from the truth. Horses have been ridden without bits for much longer than with them. I believe that many riders over rely (falsey) on the use of the bit. Riding bit free encourages riding from the seat, using your aids more effectively and generally improves the harmonious relationship between horse and rider, as there is no pain involved when communicating via the bridle.

I would like to see the BHS continue their support for riders to choose whatever combination suits them, without compromising the welfare or safety of either horse or rider.

JANET ASTLEY,
YORK

Devastating disease

I lost my horse to 'poisoning recently. It was a very distressing experience to find him dead in the field with blood streaming from his eyes and nostrils. He had been checked and was fine the day before, trotting up the field to me and eating his dinner, alert and his usual self. I had never heard of this disease until I found my beautiful, homely big strong horse dead in the field. I was told after the post mortem by my own vet, and by our neighbour (also a vet), that he would have died within four hours of the bacteria entering his body by either breathing it in, digesting it, or it entering via a puncture wound. There was nothing I could have done.

There were three other horses in the field who were unaffected. My horse was apparently unlucky. It is commonly known in sheep (Blacks disease, Blackwater disease, Blackleg), and a vaccine is available in this country for sheep but not, as yet, for horses. I have since researched this, looking for answers and it appears that it is quite common in Kentucky where a vaccination is available and recommended to all foals. Work is also ongoing to link the bacteria to grass sickness and the possibility of vaccinating horses where it is likely to occur.

I’d like to know why a vaccine isn’t available in this country, yet we all vaccinate against tetanus as a matter of course. I’d also like to see it be more widely known in the horse world as, after more than 40 years of being involved, I had no idea and no-one else I have spoken to has even heard of it. I seriously believe that it may be more common than we think, but unless a post mortem is performed we put it down to other things.

How do we raise the profile of this terrible bacteria and campaign for the vaccination to be available in this country? If people know about it and want to take the risk, so be it, but if you don’t know it exists how can you take any measures to prevent it?

JULIE KNOX,
CO. DURHAM

VACCINE QUERY

 ADDRESSING THE BITLESS BRIDLE QUESTION...