

ADDRESSING THE BITLESS BRIDLE QUESTION...

Following the recent debate relating to bitless bridles I am delighted to see that Graham Cory 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 irritable, 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 a ride became a real issue, often taking nearly an hour to bridle her.

Riding out 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 pony with a very hard mouth in a hackamore, but 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.

Having changed to the BB I can honestly say that the transformation in my mare is significant. I now 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 into the distance. I do not believe I could have pulled the mare up so quickly in a bit. 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.

I think the BHS stance in relation to the insurance question is a positive move for the BB rider; however, there still remains significant prejudice in the horse world to their use. The FEI does not permit the use of the BB and consequently many shows and dressage competitions will not allow riders to compete unless bitted.

As a long standing Gold member of the

BHS I would ask the Society to support the campaign to legalise the use of BBs in competition, as I can no longer show my mare due to current rules. This seems to me to be unfair. I feel I am being penalised for putting the comfort and welfare of my horse first by choosing to ride her in a bridle that suits her because of outdated and inflexible opinion.

The equestrian world seems to me to be a funny old place, the use of Rollkur by top dressage riders is widely accepted, despite being proven to be painful and uncomfortable for the horse, yet a BB which encourages the horse to be free and develop natural head carriage is outlawed!

There seems to be strong opinion that BB's are new fangled, faddy and used by 'pony patters' and cranks. Nothing is further from the truth. Horses have been ridden without bits far longer than with them. I believe that many riders over rely (falsely) 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.

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