

BITLESS BRIDLE CASE HISTORY

#1 The Netherlands

By Mitzi Summers

As a Level IV Centered Riding Instructor, I occasionally travel overseas to teach other CR Instructors. If it is a Centered Riding Update, they are required to ride and teach under my supervision to learn and share information, and also to give me the opportunity to observe them. Then I can either recommend them to Upgrade to a higher level or not.

I was in the Netherlands working with students, many of whom had brought their own horses. An instructor, Bridgit, had come riding a heavier built horse with Tinker breeding named Batavi. These were originally also called "Gypsy" horses, bred to withstand hard work and sometimes severe conditions, and to pull the Gypsy caravans.

Partly because of his breeding, i.e. heavy through his shoulders and neck, Batavi found it difficult to be balanced while under saddle. He had always been ridden with a snaffle, and because of riding and training issues, had learned to come behind the bit and come totally on his forehand. He would curl into and behind the bit and become so unbalanced that he would literally cart his rider wherever the horse wanted to go. Bridgit was unable to get him to just stay out on the rail, let alone ever canter him. They were both frustrated.

The owner had gone to many trainers but had not received the help that she needed. At first I made certain that she understood the mechanics of the half halt, and I took her off her horse to make certain that she was able to mimic this aid when she was dismounted. I then had Bridget ride her horse again. The horse was just a little bit better when his rider used "uphill half halts", but still curled and was really not able to be steered.

I then got on Batavi who was still wearing the simple snaffle, and tried riding him with half halts, asking him to engage his haunches to lift his forehand. I also wanted to ask him to just bring his head up- raising my hands to ask him to lift his head and rebalance. I felt that this maneuver would help him, but I refused to pull on his mouth when asking him to lift his head. No matter how soft my hands were, and how hard I tried to keep him connected first through my seat and legs, it would still be punishing him.

He was so used to pulling into the pressure of the bit....he probably put a '7' in my hands, on a scale from '1' being the lightest to '10' the heaviest. This is another example of a horse learning to go into pain and discomfort; they often do not respond to pressure in their mouth as people think that they should.

This was not acceptable to me. One of the chief tenets of my teaching and training is to be non-abusive...not to hurt the horse. I dismounted and put a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle on Batavi. I had brought it from the States, but two of the instructors also had

them. I walked beside Batavi for a short while, mechanically raising his head by lifting my arms high about midway up his crest. I clucked to him when I lifted, as I did not have the use of my seat or legs. I wanted him to start to understand the relationship between lightening his forehead through a feeling of impulsion.

I then remounted and he was immediately lighter in front without my doing anything with my hands. It was clear that he was happier with the Bitless and did not feel that it was necessary to over bend to escape the pressure from the bit. I just had to lift his head a few times. In just a few minutes he was traveling in a much more normal position-everyone was thrilled, especially his owner.

Bridget then mounted him and she was able to keep him on the track and not come into the center of the ring. She finished the lesson by riding him in a shallow serpentine. One instructor particularly impressed was a high level dressage rider who at first had been negative about the Bitless Bridle. She was used to only using bits, of course, but she was able to see the change we could make in the horse only using gentle, kinder methods.

The next day Bridgit rode her horse in the woods before her lesson. She had been afraid to take him on the trails before. She then rode in her lesson and he was even better than the day before. I had wanted to get "before" pictures of him for Dr. Cook, but Batavi's new posture and way of going seemed to be already ingrained in him. This is understandable, as he was probably truly comfortable for the first time in most of his ridden life.

The advanced dressage rider showed up that day with a Dr. Cook bridle which she had just purchased at a local tack shop! (In the Netherlands there are stables and tack stores everywhere, as dressage is the second most popular national sport.) I still hear from Bridgit from time to time. She is cantering Batavi, and has ridden him in some local shows successfully....shows that allow a Bitless bridle to be used. This is an example of a Bitless Bridle used for a specific training purpose to rehabilitate a horse that had developed "resistances" because of physical discomfort.