

## **ENABLING THE DISABLED RIDER**

**Robert Cook FRCVS, PhD1**

Just as a young horse and a novice rider is not a good mix, neither is a disabled rider and a disabled horse. But let me explain. Disabled horses are far more common than you realize.

Every bitted horse is a disabled horse. The pain of a bit frequently frightens horses. The end result of fear may be flight, fight, freeze, facial neuralgia or just plain surrender, submission, misery and a general loss of interest in life. Bits also cause physiological confusion and over 100 behavioral signs, most of which create problems for riders and drivers and a few of which cause fatal accidents.<sup>2</sup> In short, a bit is an impediment in the mouth of an exercising horse, and a potentially dangerous instrument in the hands of a rider or driver.

The negative side-effects of bits occur with experienced riders and demanding work; with novice riders and moderate work; and with disabled riders and minimal work. But disabled riders, especially those who are uncoordinated and unable to balance are at high risk of hurting their horse and triggering problems. A bit is so unforgiving. It is only rendered at all usable by courtesy of the remarkably forgiving nature of the horse.

The wonder is that any horse accepts the bit. However, the numbers that do are far fewer than claimed. If equestrians learned to recognize and interpret the many signs of pain and fear that bitted horses exhibit, they would realize that, though their horses may be forgiving, they were by no means unharmed.

### **The new equipment**

All these problems can be avoided and the risks reduced if disabled riders are saved from themselves by using a rein-aid with which

they are unable to hurt a horse. The cross-under design of bitless bridle provides such protection. 3 Even if riders should throw their whole weight against the reins, their horse will feel no more than a momentary and painless tug on the head and will not take fright. The cross-under bitless bridle enables riders to give effective but painless signals that are safer for both rider and horse.

### **Benefits for the rider**

Disabled riders are able to establish a bond with the horse and to do more than they are able to do with a bit. They gain confidence more rapidly and build self-esteem because they do not frighten their horses and scare themselves. Their horses no longer toss their heads and threaten to hit them in the face. Riders make more rapid progress with their riding skills and begin to really enjoy and benefit from their experience, which is of course the whole object of the exercise.

### **Benefits for the horse**

Horses become calmer and less likely to spook as they are no longer expecting, at any moment, to be jabbed in the mouth. A bitted bridle makes them nervous and apprehensive, the last thing that a disabled rider needs. With the CBB, horses enjoy their work and become more compliant. They walk out more willingly and no longer fuss and fidget constantly. Many a horse that was thought to have inherent and unacceptable character flaws when worked in a bitted bridle is able to demonstrate that such so-called vices were simply signs of pain. Evasion of the bit becomes a thing of the past when there is no bit to evade.

### **Benefits for the leader**

Leaders also gain confidence, as the horses are calmer and less apprehensive of being hurt. In addition, the leader has better control than when the lead shank is attached to a bitted bridle or

head collar. If a 'Y' attachment is used to connect the lead shank to the two rings at the point the reins attach to the cross-under straps, the leader has the equivalent of a 'Be Nice Halter' which is a very effective halter. As long as the section of lead shank close to the horse's head is kept slack, the rider still has the sense of being fully in charge of the horse. The situation is similar to a driving instructor's car with dual controls. The leader can take over at any moment but otherwise does not interfere with the rider's contact.<sup>4</sup>

### **Benefits for the Riding Instructor**

Instructors, with less cause to be concerned over the safety of rider, horse, leader and sidewalker, can focus better on their other responsibilities. As bit-induced problems are eliminated, riders are not held back by the absence of hand coordination skills that many of them are incapable of developing. Instead, riders can more easily be taught to develop the skills that they do have. They progress faster with these skills and reap the greater rewards of confidence and satisfaction.

### **Benefits for the Riding Center**

Head collars and martingales are no longer needed. Wastage of horses is reduced and precious funds conserved. Horses no longer turn sour and have to be replaced as bit-induced character changes no longer occur. It becomes easier for the center to use borrowed horses, as owners no longer need fear that their horse's mouths will be ruined. Volunteer leaders can more easily be recruited, as they do not have to deal with difficult and resistant horses. The Kent Association of Riding Therapy, Inc, a Premier Accredited Center in Chestertown, MD has been using the CBB on all six of its horses for the last three years<sup>5</sup>

## **Potential Benefits for Para-equestrian FEI events**

The FEI rules for para-equestrian events mandate the use of a bit for dressage, eventing, and driving.

### *Riding Events*

In the light of the welfare advance in riding that the CBB permits and has been abundantly demonstrated over the last eight years, this particular rule should be adjusted to permit a bitless option. It is surely illogical that disabled riders are obliged to use a method of control that adds to their own problems and renders riding more dangerous, when a safer option is available.

I have corresponded with the Secretary General of the FEI for the last two years in the hope of persuading the FEI to permit the CBB for dressage and all the other disciplines in which the presence of a dressage component results in a rule by which only bits are allowed. Sadly, the compelling evidence in favor of a CBB option has been rejected by the Dressage Committee of the FEI, the only body within the FEI that has the power to make such a rule change.

This shifts the burden of achieving a rule change to each one of the national federations. In the USA, for example, the USEF could send such a recommendation to the Dressage Committee of the FEI. So the next step is to convince committee members at the USEF of the need for such a change. The NARHA has an especially strong case to make and I hope that, as an association, they might add their weight to the campaign. In the end of the day, associations are influenced by their individual members. Each individual member of the NARHA could submit a petition to the USEF. Surely, this would eventually have the desired effect.

### *Driving Events*

The situation with para-equestrian driving is a little different. The rationale and fundamental physiological evidence that explains why bits are contraindicated for riding apply also to driving. But whereas able-bodied riders in large numbers all over the world have accepted the logic and have had the courage to make the transition to the CBB, this has not yet happened in driving. So the practical evidence to support the fundamental principles in favor of such a change is not yet available. Able-bodied drivers might lead the way. A few have already done so and are delighted with the results. A driver in the UK, for example, has been driving a horse with an open CBB (unblinkered) for the last two years. With a bit in its mouth, this same horse was classified as dangerous to drive. Now the owner is being invited by major horse shows to take part in official competitions and to give demonstrations of bitless driving (see the two articles by Laura online at [www.bitlessbridle.co.uk/articles/](http://www.bitlessbridle.co.uk/articles/)). A carriage company in Beaufort, SC, USA now drives all four of its Belgium draft horses in the CBB and, for good measure, all four horses are also barefoot.<sup>6</sup> In the passage of time, there will be ample evidence to reassure carriage drivers that the CBB is safer than a bit.

Reasons can be advanced for the argument that it is even more important for drivers to avoid hurting their horses than riders. Bit-induced riding accidents are distressingly common but it is probable that bit-induced driving accidents are even more common. Riders can (and should) rely predominantly on seat and legs to communicate with their horse but the driver does not have this option. As drivers wield long reins they can, inadvertently or intentionally, apply horrendous forces to their horse's mouth because of the tremendous mechanical advantage that the length of the lines provides. In an emergency, for example, when a horse spooks, a driver can - with his feet planted firmly on the dashboard of the carriage - throw his whole weight and momentum against the bit. The pain that a bitted carriage horse suffers as a result of

spooking explains many an instance of bucking, rearing and bolting. A frightened horse in the shafts of a carriage is a driver's nightmare. By contrast, if a carriage horse spooks when in a CBB, all it suffers is a painless tug on the head and it recovers from the spook more rapidly and with a much reduced likelihood of a tragic accident.

## **Summary**

From the Bronze Age right up the end of the 20th Century, there has been no universally acceptable alternative to the bit method of communication. Since the dawn of the new millennium, this has changed. Furthermore, it has been possible to recognize for the first time in history, the extent to which a bit frightens a horse. It can now be said that a steel rod in a horse's mouth inflicts *avoidable* pain. In the light of this new knowledge, bits have to be re-classified as cruel, as cruelty is defined as *the infliction of avoidable pain*. Disabled equestrians have quite enough to contend with, without inflicting avoidable pain on their long-suffering horses and generating anything from 40 to 50 behavioral problems for a given horse. The para-equestrian doesn't need to be riding a para-equus.

## **Further reading**

A great deal of further information about the CBB is available online at [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com). Many articles that provide the scientific foundation for the above claims can be downloaded and, in addition, visitors can read the feedback from users.

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1 Professor of Surgery Emeritus, Tufts University, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, North Grafton, MA. Chairman, The Bitless Bridle Inc.

2 A full description of these problems is available online at [www.bitlessbridle.com/FOTB\\_Q.pdf](http://www.bitlessbridle.com/FOTB_Q.pdf)

3 The Bitless Bridle. The Bitless Bridle Inc. 1200 Nursery Road, Wrightsville, PA 17368. Telephone: 866 235 0938 (toll free) Email: [info@bitlessbridle.com](mailto:info@bitlessbridle.com) Online at [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com)

4 Less experienced leaders can attach the 'Y' piece directly to the 'O' rings on the noseband, where it still works well and guarantees that the lead shank does not interfere with the rider's reins.

5 Marco Belperio, the NARHA Registered Instructor, would be glad to tell readers about his experience with the CBB. Telephone: (410) 810 0774 Email: [mbelperio@verizon.net](mailto:mbelperio@verizon.net)

6 One horse is blind in one eye and another, at 19.3 hands, is a candidate for the tallest living horse in the Guinness Book of Records.