



Scared Bitless

Written by Epona.tv staff on 02.12.2013 in Welfare

Is it possible to ride a dressage horse without a bit? Is it safe and helpful to even give it a try? Those are the questions currently waiting to be answered by leading officials of the British Equestrian Federation, British Dressage, British Eventing, British Horse Society and the US Equestrian Federation. These governing bodies have been asked to consider allowing competitors to choose whether to ride with or without a bit when competing at dressage.

To any outside observer – whether you prefer to ride with a bit or without - it's clear that allowing bitless bridles would be a straightforward affair for the federations. There are no practical reasons why it can't be done, and new types of gear are allowed all the time. For instance, it is now possible to ride a dressage test with ear covers on the horse without first seeking dispensation, and nose nets have become accepted for horses who headshake. The only thing standing in the way of making bits optional for dressage riders everywhere is the minor detail of certain vocabulary in the various rule books.

When petitioned to allow bitless competitors in dressage, Federations frantically point to each other and murmur the words "acceptance of the bit" or "on the bit". These terms, it seems, are non-negotiable, set in stone. But why? Why can't the Federations just change the words? As any rider knows, the horse does not actually accept or obey the equipment we strap on him. He accepts or obeys the person operating the equipment. So why not just change the word "bit" to the word "bridle" or "hand"?

In the UK, the first bitless riding club under British Horse Society, Norfolk Horse Training and Equitation Club, has been putting pressure on the governing bodies to do just that: Change the wording to allow for bitless participants in dressage competitions. There's even [a petition](#), but for the bitless campaigners, it's an uphill struggle. According to British Dressage, it is obliged to abide by the rules of the British Equestrian Federation. But the British Equestrian Federation denies having anything to do with whether British Dressage allows bitless dressage – both federations point to the FEI Dressage Rules as

their guiding light. Here at Epona.tv, we thought it would be a good idea to ask the FEI: Why don't you just change the word "bit" to the word "bridle" or "hand" in your rules?

So we did. As expected, our initial request for an explanation as to why the FEI has not long ago changed the wording of rules to allow for bitless dressage, yielded a typical non-answer - identical to that which had been sent to and printed by other media:

"Revising the tack requirements to include what some would term "softer" options would substantially alter the fundamentals of the sport. Permitting bitless bridles or snaffle bridles at the top level would not permit the same assessment of one of the cornerstone criteria - throughness and acceptance of the bit - on which performance is judged. At the lower levels, where it is possible to assess this with a snaffle bit, for example in ponies, a snaffle bridle is mandatory. We are aware that some countries allow the use of a snaffle bit for national competitions at all levels, but no National Federation has proposed that the use of a snaffle or a bitless bridle should also be introduced for international events."

-Said Mr. Asmyr, according to the initial email reply we received from the FEI Press Office.

So British Dressage can't do anything without British Equestrian Federation doing it first. And British Equestrian Federation can't do anything without the FEI doing it first. And FEI can't do anything unless British Equestrian Federation or another National Federation asks them to. In case you're wondering, it seems to be the same in several other countries, including Denmark. The Dutch Equestrian Federation is the exception – they have decided to allow bitless competitors in dressage from 2014.

We didn't feel as if our question had been addressed, so we tried again, phrasing it in different ways, hoping to increase the chances of an actual answer.

"What is the exact reason that submission and throughness cannot be judged when the horse is in a bitless bridle?"

"Should the horse be submissive and obedient to the rider or the equipment?"

"If the latter is the case, why should the rider not be able to show the horse in what some would term "softer" options?"

"What exactly is it about the connection between the horse's mouth and the rider's hand which Mr. Asmyr does not feel can be achieved by a connection between the rider's hands and the bridge of the horse's nose?"

"Is it the opinion of Mr. Asmyr that a horse cannot be "through" without a bit in its mouth?"

"If so, is "throughness" an artificial quality imposed on the horse by its rider or does the FEI still believe that the purpose of dressage is to return the ridden horse to the natural balance it had before a rider was put on its back?"

"Can the FEI not provide a single argument against permitting bitless bridles other than that bits are part of the dressage tradition? If so, what happened to the principle that the horse's welfare should be paramount?"

"Historically, a dressage horse had to be able to go in a double bridle before it was deemed fit to ride to war. Given that this practical relevance of the bits has disappeared in the course of the last century, what is the reason for holding on to the requirement for the bits?"

In short, we really, really tried to make it clear that we were not in any doubt as to what it currently says in the FEI Dressage Rules. We wanted to know what stands in the way of changing this wording to allow for bitless competitors in dressage in the future. The FEI Press Office let us know that all these many questions would be forwarded to Mr Asmyr and that it might take a few days for him to reply.

We waited – breathless with anticipation. Then, right on time, the answer finally arrived and we're proud to be able to exclusively reveal why "acceptance of the bit" cannot be altered to "acceptance of the hand" or "acceptance of the bridle" in the FEI Dressage Rules. Here it is, straight from Mr. Asmyr via the FEI Press Office. The answer:

"A change of the word "bit" to "bridle" or "hand" would be a change in FEI policy. We have no plans to change this policy at present, and we have also had no requests from any of our National Federations to make any changes to this."

So there you have it. The FEI itself doesn't even know why bits are mandatory in dressage. And as Mr. Asmyr cryptically adds at the end of his concise statement:

"The frame of the FEI's work is mapped out in our rules and does not include riding theory."

In other words, if there are reasons why bits should be mandatory in dressage – and there may well be – it is not up to the FEI to know these reasons, since... well, because! Just because! You get the picture.

We have to say, that's a pretty useless reply, even by the FEI's standards. It's as if we're like....

"Hello Sir. We wonder why you don't change the wording from "acceptance of the bit" to "acceptance of the hand" or "acceptance of the bridle" in the FEI Dressage Rules?"

And then Mr. Asmyr's all like...

"The reason why we won't be changing the wording from "acceptance of the bit" to "acceptance of the hand" or "acceptance of the bridle" in the FEI Dressage Rules is that according to the FEI Dressage Rules, "acceptance of the bit" is what it says."

And we're all like ...

"Huh?"

And he's all like...

"Uhuh!"

What is really fun about all this, however, is the declared reason why horses must show *"acceptance of the bit"* in the first place. As part of our recent correspondence, the FEI Press Office helpfully sent us an excerpt from the rules along with this entry level introduction to the sport of dressage:

"Dressage at international level for seniors is a test of a horse's acceptance of specific aids (leg, hand and weight) and the rider's skill in using these aids to perform specific movements in a specified posture. There are other movements which horses can perform (e.g. Spanish walk, bowing etc) and other aids to which the horses will respond (e.g. voice, visual signals etc). However the Dressage test is steeped in a time honoured tradition which limits precisely which aids and movements are required. This is done to create a test which requires the highest level of skill by the rider and talent from the horse resulting in an elite competition. International competitions are not within the reach of every athlete."

Feeling enlightened by this up-beat and accessible explanation, we set about reading [the rules](#) (again) to see what it was we had missed about them that would explain how the bit is totally necessary for any dressage to take place – ever.

As you will probably already know, Dressage is all about proving to the judges that the horse is enjoying itself. It says so right in Article 401 – Object and General Principles of Dressage:

"The object of Dressage is the development of the Horse into a happy Athlete through harmonious education. As a result, it makes the Horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with the Athlete."

So far, so good. The object of Dressage is to develop the horse into a happy horse (or athlete, if you want to pretend as if the horse actually has any stake in the competition). That sounds great – a sport which is all about pleasing the horse. Yay! But how do the judges know which horse is the most happy? Well, just wait until you find out. It will all make sense in a moment.

”These qualities (the happiness, confidence etc., ed) are demonstrated by: The freedom and regularity of the paces. The harmony, lightness and ease of the movements. The lightness of the forehand and the engagement of the hindquarters, originating from a lively impulsion.”

And last but apparantly not least:

”The acceptance of the bit, with submissiveness/throughness (Durchlässigkeit) without any tension or resistance.”

So you see, the bit really is necessary in the sport of dressage. Without the bit, the judges might not be able to tell which horse is the happiest. Dressage judges are a highly specialised species. They can't tell if a horse is happy or through unless it has at least one bit in its mouth. The more highly qualified the judge, the more bits the horse must have in its mouth in order for the judge to assess the intensity of its elation and the purity of its gaits. Given the record breaking nature of recent freestyle scores, we shan't be surprised if a new breed of judge emerges shortly – one which can only assess the happiness of horses with three bits in their mouths.

Of course, we're being silly now. But at least we're spouting this silliness in jest. The FEI, on the other hand, appears to be dead serious when it claims that judges cannot assess throughness or submission unless the horse has a bit in its mouth. It goes without saying that if you're going to ride with a bit and your horse is not through.. then he will evade or resist the contact. Claiming that the bit is necessary for throughness to be present in the first place is to turn things on their head. A horse who is through is going to be accepting of and submissive to whatever type of bridle he wears as long as it doesn't hurt him. We may all have different opinions about what consitutes dressage and how a horse should be schooled - Epona.tv is not anti bits. If anything, we're skeptics when it comes to the whole bitless movement. But on what grounds should we resist the right of others to have a go at rocking a bitless all the way to the Olympics? On what grounds should you? Regardless of your dressage theory leanings or equestrian cultural background.

What, then, about the FEI riders? How do they feel about the whole thing? In 2011, bitless dressage was discussed at the Global Dressage Forum and according to the [report by Eurodressage](#), International Dressage Riders Club Secretary General Wayne Channon said:

“We've not been asked that question but it's not a point of principle to us. We'd gladly discuss it.”

No surprises there. Why should the riders mind having a greater choice of permitted bridles in which to show their horses? It's not as if anyone is proposing to ban the bits – what is being pushed is the possibility of free choice. Show your Grand Prix horse in whatever he likes best: A double bridle, a snaffle, a sidepull, his stable halter. What's the problem? Why is the FEI not racing to make this change and score some absolutely free brownie points in the animal welfare department? Why is Trond Asmyr running for cover instead of going: *"Hey, nobody's actually brought that up with us before, but if any National Federations care to step up and make the formal suggestion, we'll be willing to take a long, serious look at ways of making this happen ASAP"*?

Possibly because the brownie points would not be free at all. You see, there is a cost to opening the door to *"softer options"* and that cost is the way that *"softer options"* by their very soft appearance tend to shine an unflattering spotlight on the *"harsher options"*. Take – for instance - these riders who are getting their horses ready to demonstrate how happy they are before the judges at the European Championships. How would they look next to someone riding in a *"softer option"* bridle? Would they come off well? Of course they wouldn't. And the Federations know it.

- See more at: <http://epona.tv/blog/2013/december/scared-bitless#sthash.nsCe9IWU.dpuf>