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HORSEMANSHIP: ART AND SCIENCE

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Reviewing man's 6000-year domestication of the horse in a 24-hour time scale, the art of horsemanship commenced at midnight and metal bits could have first appeared at 3.0 am. Jointed snaffles were introduced about 12 noon and curb bits around 3.45 pm. Xenophon wrote his book on horse management at 4.0 pm but science, as a method of acquiring knowledge, did not exist before 10.0 pm. If equine veterinary science commenced with the establishment of the first veterinary schools, it was born at 11.15 pm but did not mature until 11.48 pm. Equine behavioral science was not a recognized discipline until three minutes before midnight. Regarding the methods by which riders communicate with their horse's head, there has been much art and little science.

In the hands of a master horseman the bit method is possibly acceptable. An artist-horseman has 'good hands' and communicates with his horse predominantly by means of 'seat and legs,' balance and breathing. Such a horseman can perform miracles of horsemanship without either a bit or even a bridle. However, when reins connect the rider's hands with a rod of metal in the horse's exquisitely sensitive mouth, the hands have to be equally sensitive to avoid inflicting pain.

Master horsemen are rare. The majority of riders are not sufficiently skilled to use a method of communication that requires such artistry. We hurt our horses unintentionally and, until recently, unavoidably. The traditional bitless bridles (hackamores, bosals, and sidepulls) are also pain-based, so there has been no pain-free alternative.

Five years ago, this changed with the introduction of the crossover design of bitless bridle.[2] The new method is painless; compatible with the physiology of the horse; and provides for clear and comprehensive communication, without the inevitable misunderstandings, complications and crossed-signals of the bit method.

As the switch from bit to crossover bitless can take place overnight, the noticeable improvement in behavior is often dramatic. Research has exposed

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over 120 problems caused by the bit.[3] Most of the problems had not previously been recognized as bit-induced. Many of the problems, such as bolting, bucking and rearing, imperil the safety of horse and rider. To summarize, the bit tortures a horse, making it nervous and apprehensive. Fear of the bit triggers flight, fight and freeze responses; initiates facial neuralgia (the headshaking syndrome); obstructs breathing; and interferes with stride and balance. The full list is available online at http://www.bitlessbridle.com/about/FOTB_Q.xls

The new bridle allows the rider to communicate painlessly by means of two head loops. To signal for slowing or stopping, riders hug the whole of the head. For steering, they nudge half the head (Figs 1 & 2).

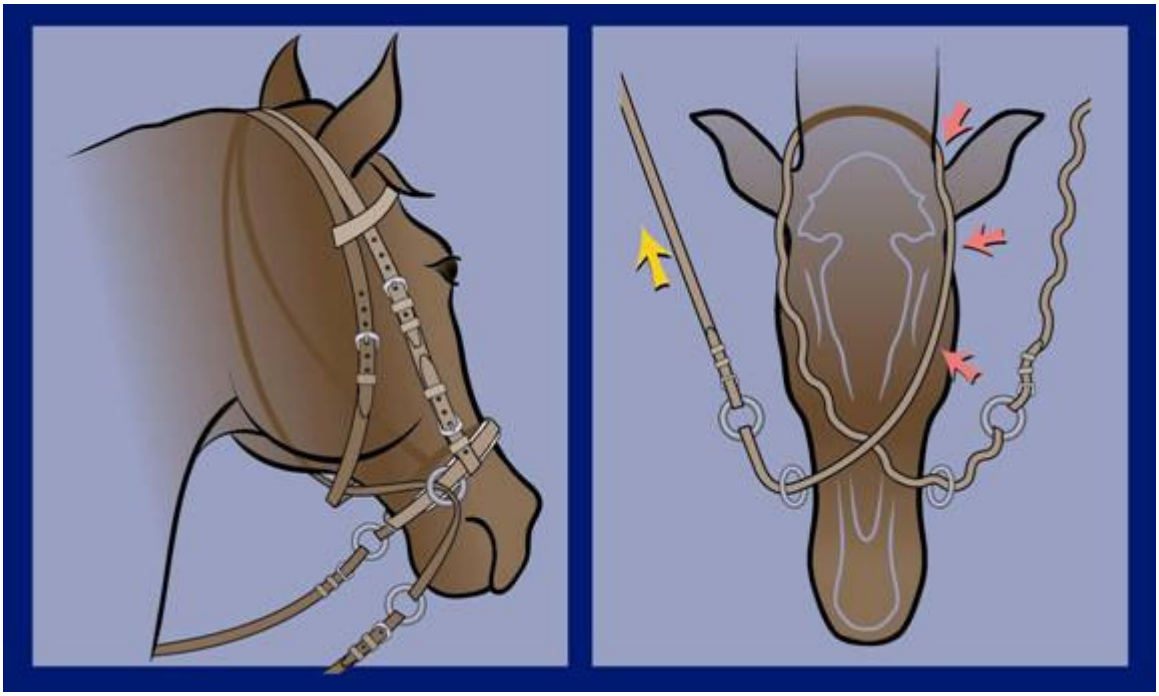

Fig 1. Showing how crossover straps, which are direct extensions of the reins, cross under the chin to provide one loop over the poll and, by pressure on the 'O ' ring at the noseband, influence a second loop over the bridge of the nose.	*Fig 2. A worm's eye view showing how pressure on one rein (yellow arrow) pushes on the opposite side of the head, from the poll, down the side of the face, under the chin and across the nose (red arrows).*

A horse can feel a fly landing on its face, so communication needs only the lightest touch. Nevertheless, as it is virtually impossible for a heavy-handed rider to hurt a horse with this bridle, it prevents even these from triggering pain-induced problems. Apart from the welfare benefits for the horse, riding becomes less expensive. A bitted horse often exhibits 30-40 problems. Any attempt to solve these problems, other than by removing the bit, wastes time and money. However, by removing the bit, riding becomes simpler, safer, more satisfying, and ... scientific.

[3] Cook, W.R. & Strasser, H. (2003): *Metal in the Mouth: The abusive effects of bitted bridles."* Sabine Kells, Qualicum Beach, BC, Canada V9K 1S7

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Riding instructors who are committed to the crossover bitless bridle reverse the order of events in the familiar phrase ‘art and science.’ Quite logically, their pupils learn the science of riding before they progress to consider the art.