

The items below were excerpted by a reviewer from “Metal in the Mouth; The Abusive Effects of Bitted Bridles” by Dr. W. Robert Cook & Dr. Hiltrud Strasser, 2003

WHY USE A BITLESS BRIDLE?

Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.

Thomas Paine, Introduction to
Common Sense, Feb. 14, 1776

Well then, you see it is not a piece of iron can make a horse knowing, for if it were, the bitt-makers would be the best horsemen.

William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle (1743)

The bit method of communication is inhumane, dangerous, and counterproductive.

The horse's mouth is one of the most sensitive parts of its anatomy. Even the slightest pressure on the bars (a part of the jawbone) causes intense pain. As the bit applies pressure to the top edge of the lower jaw (the bars of the mouth) and the curb chain applies pressure to the bottom edge, the bone and soft tissues of the lower jaw are clamped between two pieces of steel. The bars of the mouth are two knife-edges covered with only a thin layer of gum and the lining membrane of the mouth.

Cook's survey of 74 jawbones in 4 museum collections, from horses 5 years old or older, has shown that bone spurs on the bars (generally both bars) were present on 55 of the specimens, or 74% (Cook 1999c). As some of the 74 horses were feral and had been bit-free all their lives (the feral horses had no bone spurs), the real incidence of the problem in the bitted horses was actually greater than 74%. No bone spurs were found in a survey of 35 zebra skulls.

For thousand of years, man has taken advantage of the too convenient accessibility of the horse's mouth by placing a rod of metal in this highly sensitive body cavity.

People who wear dentures are acutely aware that any pressure on the gums is unbearable painful. The horse's mouth is no less sensitive, though it is easy for some riders to forget this fundamental fact.

There are the immediate effects on the musculoskeletal system, of bit-induced pain, as evidenced by the fight-or-flight responses of bolting, bucking, rearing, balking, headshaking and many other behavioral problems. Breathing and striding are synchronized, so anything that interferes with breathing interferes also with striding.

Snaffles can cause unsoundness and curbs can cripple.

Bucking and rearing are two of the more dangerous responses to bit-induced pain. When pressure of a bit on its lower jaw is applied, a horse tries to rid itself of this foreign object.

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One of the problems with the bit method of “control” is that, without any warning, the method itself can be rendered entirely null and void. All the horse has to do is to grasp the offending bit “between its teeth”. This puts the horse in charge and renders the rider powerless.

The iron bit he crushes ‘tween his teeth, Controlling what he was controlled with ... What cares he now for curb or pricking spur? Shakespeare

The wisdom of using a method of control that can be so easily negated has to be questioned.

But above all, this rule is chiefly to be observed, to put as little iron in your horse’s mouth as possibly you can.

William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle (1743)

A bit is not necessary. Not only is a bit not *necessary* for communication, it is in fact an *impediment* to communication.

The books, videos, and lectures of Pat Parelli, Fred Rai and many other international known horse trainers and riding instructors testify to the excellent communication that can be achieved without even using a headstall, let alone a bit.

The bridle, I confess, is of some use, though but little; for I have managed a horse with a halter only, and he went as well as with the bridle, of which I have many witnesses in this city of Antwerp, who have seen the thing; I have also managed the English one with a scarf, and made him curvet and vault very justly; so that it is not the bridle, but the art of the rider, than renders the horse tractable.

William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle (1743)

In the thousands of years of shared history between horse and man, the customary way for communication has been to use force and pain, and train the horse to react to signals which for the horse, are unnatural. However, in the last few decades, there has been more and more proof that, with a relationship based on kindness and trust, it is possible to obtain every performance without force, pain, or damage to the horse.

One of the main problems today is not so much a case of the horse being unable to understand the human, but the human being unwilling to learn the language of the horse. Man need to understand the expressions and reactions of the horse, so that the horse can understand man. This is something that requires far more time with the animal than simply developing a good seat. Many people want to sit on a horse, but do not have enough time to get to know their equine companions sufficiently to develop good communication with them. In such cases, the horse never learns to fully concentrate on the rider ... and the rider never learns to give the horse truly understandable signals.

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Although bitless alternatives (such as the hackamore, bosal and sidepull) have been available, none of these are entirely satisfactory for every horse, discipline, and rider. However, all this changed with the development of the new crossover bitless bridle. With this new concept of bitlessness, it is possible to switch overnight – and successfully – from bit to bitless.

The crossover bitless bridle is based on an entirely different principle from the traditional bitless bridles. Unlike these, it is an entirely painless method of communication and provides for both stopping and steering. Hackamores and bosals provide for stopping but are weak on steering, whereas sidepulls provide for steering but are weak on stopping. The crossover bridle provides for stopping by hugging the whole of the head, and steers by nudging one half of the head.

The design is such that any rein force that is transmitted to the headstall is actually reduced rather than increased.

Not only does a horse steer better in the crossover bridle, it also stops better. By removing the bit and eliminating pain, the “brakes” are more reliable (since horses run from pain).

This bridle also work by enabling the horse to breathe without the obstructions caused by the bit.

The crossover bridle works by improving the welfare of the horse and contributing to the safety and satisfaction of the rider. The likelihood of accidents is reduced and performance is enhanced.

Novice riders are saved from themselves, as their pain-free horses are calmer, more compliant, and less complicated to ride. As rider confidence increases, many riders find themselves relying less on their hands and more on their seat and legs. In other words, they become better riders by the best possible route, one that is more humane, simpler, safer, and more satisfying.

By continuing to require the use of a bit, equine associations are no longer in compliance with their own codes of conduct.

The crossover bitless bridle is humane in any hands.

In many ways, expecting a bitted horse to perform well is like expecting the same of a car after you have thrown a wrench into the gearbox.

Quite apart from the mechanical reasons for the benefits of the head bob, all athletes need the freedom of their neck. No human athlete could perform well with his neck in a plaster cast. Yet pain from the use of a bit often results in a rigidity of the horse’s neck. If considerable rein tension is added to bit pain (as in flat racing when the jockey takes a “double handful”), this further limits the freedom of the neck and handicaps performance.

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Oxygen is important for most chemical processes in the whole body. With a lack of oxygen, neither the skeletal muscle nor the heart muscle can function optimally. Many famous high performance and sport horses thus suffer from “sudden heart failure”. A bit in the horse’s mouth restricts the ability to breathe properly, especially during heavy work or exercise.

For the rider, the effects of the bit collectively make riding more complicated, costly and dangerous than it need be, not to mention less rewarding, attractive, and pleasurable. The laws of most states in the USA acknowledge that horse sports are inherently dangerous. This reality is supported by the American Medical Association, who report that equestrian-related injuries are the most common sports injuries seen in US hospital emergency rooms. A rider is seen for trauma injuries every 8 minutes.

Nevertheless, there are precautions that a rider can take, and one of the most worthwhile precautions is to use a method of communication that does not frighten or torment this powerful flight animal.

In conclusion, Dr. Cook’s research of more than 25 years has found:

A bit (any bit) causes a horse pain, whether or not the rider is aware of the fact.

Pain and other pathophysiological contradictions generate equine behavioral problems that are more common and more serious than have previously been supposed.

Manifestations of pain caused by the bit can be classified under the five F’s of fright, flight, fight, freeze, and facial neuralgia.

All of the above are subsets of fear, and all increase the likelihood of accidents to both horse and rider.

The bit is a common cause of asphyxia (“thickness of wind”, “roaring”, and “choking-up”) and should routinely be considered as a differential diagnosis for recurrent laryngeal neuropathy (laryngeal hemiplegia).

The bit is a common cause of several diseases for which the cause has previously been listed as unknown (for example, the headshaking syndrome, dorsal displacement of the soft palate, epiglottal entrapment, collapse of the windpipe, and pulmonary bleeding).

The bit is a common cause of poor action, stumbling, shortened stride and (because it reduces the supply of oxygen) results in premature fatigue, breakdowns, falls, and limb bone fractures.

Removal of the bit benefits not only those horses that riders recognize as “hating the bit”, but also those in which the rider has never recognized any such aversion.

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Removal of the bit makes riding safer, simpler and more satisfying for the rider.

Removal of the bit enhances performance, reduces accidents and advances the welfare of the horse.

For more information on the bitless bridle or to order a copy of “Metal in the Mouth”, you can go to www.bitlessbridle.com.