

Teaching with the Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle®

by Mitzi Summers

As an instructor, I focus on positive reinforcement for both the rider and the horse, accompanied by the use of non-abusive riding techniques. The Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle® has proven to be an invaluable tool in preventing pain for the horse and eliminating bit-associated behavioral challenges.

It takes years for a rider to develop an independent seat, using legs, seat, and hands in harmony to give the horse clear, easily understood body signals. Novice riders find it impossible to truly have an independent seat, and the process of developing one can initially be extremely daunting.

As humans, we are very hand dependent because of our anatomy and how we use tools. Think of how hand-intensive even preparing a horse for riding is: leading, grooming, and tacking up all require the use of our hands every step of the way. Then we mount and everything changes, because we are hoping to guide the horse through the use of our seat, legs, and finally our hands... in that order.

Many times when visiting a new barn, I find that horse/rider communication lacks clarity because of the interference caused by pain or discomfort in the horse's mouth. Behaviors such as an open mouth, a head held at an angle, unwillingness to go forward or head shaking are often an indication that the bit and the rider's hands are causing problems for the horse. The signs can be even more subtle. A horse may be tense in his neck, or display an unwillingness to telescope forward toward contact. He may also travel with his nose behind the vertical, or bend from the third cervical vertebra instead of his poll. A simple unwillingness to go forward from the rider's leg

is often an indication that something needs to change.

My use of the Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle is invaluable in guiding my students in developing an independent seat without their horse suffering in the process. The bridle provides soft, clear total head guidance instead of pulling on his mouth and expecting a connection throughout his body.

I particularly love the instant soft eyes and relaxation that occur the first time a bitless bridle is put on a horse. It's fair to say that the



Robin rides her horse, China extensively in a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle at Blossom Valley Farm. You can see the true partnership between the horse and her rider.

horse often immediately relaxes, breathes more calmly, and starts to "listen" to the rider more intently.

School horses have the role of putting up with unclear aids, signals, and lack of balance in their riders. As an instructor, I have the responsibility for helping these valuable partners to be as comfortable as possible. Good stable management, properly fitting tack, and developing empathy for the horse in my students is all part of this, and so is a deliberate plan for protecting the horse's mouth while a student learns to ride.

We all can probably recall what our riding was like when we were just starting out and our hands couldn't be independent. We couldn't help but balance from the reins at times, no matter how prepared our instructor was for preventing our doing so. If an inexperienced rider's reins are attached to a bitless bridle, at least the horse's sensitive mouth isn't being hurt, and he's not being punished for stoically moving forward into a bit's painful pressure.

To ensure that a rider's hands are only a part of the turning process, I teach my students to turn their horse from the center (swiveling from the seat). I also teach them how to slow the horse and rebalance through half halts. A correctly performed half halt originates from the rider's center and involves the rider rebalancing through a pelvic tilt, draping the leg, and finally, impulsion into the hand.

With a bit, it's very easy to simply pull on the horse's mouth, which does not successfully signal the entire horse, and causes him unnecessary discomfort. When my student is using a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle, though, it's much easier for us to work on identifying the correct use of the rider's body and the muscles involved in performing effective half halts, which require the rider to rebalance herself while rebalancing the horse.



Teren rides Turbo Tacksi in a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle. With a bit, the horse was more tense, often traveling behind the bit with a fast tempo. Using the bitless bridle, Tacksi relaxed, began to telescope her neck and head forward to accept her rider's contact, visibly improving her movement and trust.

Frame capture © Norman MacLeod

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Once, when attending an instructor's clinic and workshop where we took turns teaching in front of one another, one of the participants brought in a sweet little Palomino named Goldie, who was constantly shaking her head. Linda was on the verge of tears as this was a continuing problem. She had Goldie in an Eggbutt snaffle, which is considered a mild bit, so nobody considered it as the source of the problem. The instructor worked on Linda's hands, leg position, and general balance, which are all valid considerations, but Linda was clearly not the problem.

Because I always carry various sizes of Dr. Cook Bitless Bridles in my van, I spoke up and suggested we try one, because I really had difficulty in seeing Goldie in so much discomfort and Linda so distressed. The instructor, however, was convinced that it had to be Linda causing the problem. The lesson ended with Linda in tears, declaring that she had to sell her horse.

Since I was listed to teach Linda the following day, I calmly suggested that she not give up, and that I would try something different with her and Goldie tomorrow.

When my turn came, we put on a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle, and the instant Goldie walked forward, she was a completely different horse. She never shook her head. Linda was able to turn, trot, and ride circles with her, all things she had not been able to do. The lesson again ended in tears, but this time they were tears of happiness.

Linda and Goldie are still riding bitless, and participating in First Level Dressage and schooling shows that allow the use of bitless bridles.

Another example of changing a horse to a bitless bridle happened at a jumping clinic I was giving in Vermont. Molly, the barn's owner, was

using a Waterford Gag bit on her open jumper, Sanford. The horse was very strong and literally running away from her until, by the last fence, he was totally out of control. Molly believed, as many do, that a bit is the primary means of safety and control in riding a horse. She didn't realize that Sanford was running from the intense pain in his mouth, which triggered his fight or flight response.

I suggested trying a bitless bridle and was not surprised by her initial resistance to the idea. I told Molly that I would ride him in the bridle first, and he responded very nicely, responding to half halts and using his haunches to balance.

After we did a calm canter to walk transition, Molly mounted Sanford and within fifteen minutes rode him first over a low fence and then over a full course. She affirmed that she needed to remember not to use her hands as much as she had been, and to remember to ride more from her seat. He was controllable, soft, and safe.

Sanford is now always shown in a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle, as open jumping is one of the few disciplines in the United States where a bit does not have to be used.

In my experience, Dr. Cook's Bitless Bridle is a vitally important tool in our journey to begin to attain what we really wish for when we ride — a deep partnership with a wonderful creature. 🐾

About the author: Mitzi Summers is a Certified Horsemanship (CHA) Clinician, was the CHA's 2010 Instructor of the Year, and one of a select group of Level IV Centered Riding instructors in the world, having studied with Sally Swift, Chuck Grant, Frank Chapot, and Vi Hopkins. She started her career at the Northern School of Equitation in Ormskirk, England, where she studied for her British Horse Society Instructor certification.

She focuses on treating each horse and rider with respect as individuals, and then works to unite them as a team using positive reinforcement and non-abusive techniques.

Through Centered Riding and the CHA, Mitzi has certified more than 350 instructors, and has competed, coached, and judged successfully in dressage, huntseat, jumping, western, and breed association shows. She also performed in the Royal Lipizzan Stallion Show. Mitzi has provided workshops, clinics, and individual lessons throughout the United States, Europe, New Zealand, and South Africa over the course of her extensive career, and has authored numerous articles for regional and national equestrian journals in several countries.

Mitzi Summers is available for clinics, judging, and individual lessons. You can contact her at Summersdressage@aol.com, cell phone 315-790-9593. Mitzi's website is Mitzisummers.net



The author explaining the advantages of using a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle at a clinic in South Africa.



Diana is riding Clark in a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle. Clark was formerly ridden with a mild snaffle, which he often evaded by inverting his back and raising his head. Here he's using his haunches more correctly, pushing through his back, and happily accepting the contact of his rider's hand.