

ON THE BIT & THE F.E.I

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More and more riders are asking questions about using *The Bitless Bridle*² in competition work (Fig 1).



Fig 1. The Bitless Bridle

This is most gratifying, even though short questions often require long answers. Here is a sample 'question-and-answer' to clarify the current position on this delicate issue.

Q: My trainer tells me that one of the fundamentals of dressage is 'acceptance of the bit.' If this is the case, how is it possible to use the Bitless Bridle for this discipline?

A: Your trainer is not alone in misunderstanding the intent behind this maxim. If a bit is to be used, then 'acceptance of the bit' is a prerequisite to achieving collection. However, the goal is not acceptance of the bit but collection and this can be achieved without a bit. A horse does not have to be 'on' a bit to be collected. In fact, quite the opposite, a bit often prevents collection.

The concept of 'collection' or 'self carriage' might be less misunderstood if we spoke of 'balance' rather than 'collection.' For balance is the real goal. As a horse cannot be balanced unless the rider is also balanced, both partners in the 'dance' share this responsibility. The FEI 'Values' page emphasizes this when it states that "*equestrian sport is the only one, which brings together two athletes, the horse and rider.*"

A horse's balance is not something that is achieved instantly by means of the bit (i.e., through rein pressure and 'false collection') but is something that comes

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eventually through physical fitness. In order that a horse can readjust his own natural balance when at liberty to accommodate the need to carry the weight of a rider, he has to develop abdominal and back muscles up to the task. For a young horse, this is something that takes time and training over a period of years, not months. Until he is strong enough, he will not be able to lift his back, bring his hocks under him, and become rebalanced.

However, physical fitness of the horse is only part of the equation. So too must the rider be physically fit. An unfit rider cannot balance. If she (or he) is unbalanced, this prevents her horse from maintaining its balance, even though the horse may be fit enough to do this with a balanced rider. The essence of 'good hands' is the least amount of hand, and the prerequisite for light hands is rider balance. An unfit and, therefore, unbalanced rider uses the reins to keep herself in the saddle. Such a rider is 'heavy-handed' and this, in turn, prevents an otherwise fit horse from achieving balance. If a rider's arms and back are tense, this upsets her seat and upsets her horse. Instead of a rider being able to move her pelvic bones in synchrony with the underlying movement of her horse's back, her pelvic bones will be pounding her horse's back. This causes a horse further pain, over and above the bit-induced pain in its mouth from a metal rod under tension.³ The horse responds by stiffening its neck and spine, and either becomes heavy on the forehand or hollows its back and raises its head. Either way, the gait loses its rhythm and 'poetry of motion,' and the horse becomes short-strided and unbalanced.

Harmony of horse and rider is only achieved when both partners are in balance. Riders in all disciplines work towards such harmony and so this question of balance ('collection') is not something that only applies to the discipline of dressage. Nevertheless, a balanced partnership is certainly critical to a good dressage performance. It follows that an unbalanced rider cannot expect to achieve the same reward with the Bitless Bridle as a balanced rider. Conversely, even a fit and balanced rider will not achieve a good dressage performance on a bitless horse that is unfit and, therefore, unbalanced.

I am copying below a letter that I have sent recently (September 2005) to Michael Stone, Sports Director of the FEI, in Lausanne, Switzerland. The letter was written at the time he kindly agreed to give the Bitless Bridle a trial, by loaning out the sample I sent him to a number of dressage competitors. I am hoping to persuade the FEI to permit the crossover bitless bridle for competition work. The FEI mission statement and code of conduct make clear that the criterion for sanctioning equipment is the welfare of the horse. Interestingly, though the quality of performance is not a criterion mentioned in the code of conduct, there is a caveat with regard to the rider's skill ... *"In the interests of the horse ... the competence of the rider shall be regarded as essential"* (Table 1, item #7). This

³ The FEI acknowledges the painful mouth problem when it states, "The checking of the bridle (by the steward) must be done with greatest caution, as some horses are very touchy and sensitive about their mouths (Dressage Rules. Article 428, section 5)

being so, it need not be a matter for the FEI to be concerned about if unbalanced riders are initially disappointed with the degree of collection they can achieve with the Bitless Bridle. On the other hand, it matters a great deal to the FEI that permitted equipment should not harm the horse.

However, anticipating that Michael Stone and his committee members could be influenced by some negative feedback of this sort, even if it was irrelevant, I thought it worth mentioning this matter. Here is the letter: -

"I had intended to let the bridle speak for itself, as it is its own best ambassador. However, I share your interest in hearing what your more traditional members say about the bridle and cannot resist adding a comment. First, some background.

Dressage riders have been drilled for generations on the importance of a horse being, as the phrase goes, 'on the bit.' The result is that this very phrase could now become a barrier to approval of a bridle that apparently has nothing to be 'on'! A better phrase would be 'on the bridle.' An even better phrase would be 'on the aids.' Even better still, would be acceptance of the reality that true collection depends on some aids more than others. 'Seat and legs' are the key to collection. The correct use of the hands requires their least possible use, with no use at all of forearms, biceps and shoulder.

Those patient riders who have invested careful years in training a horse to become fit and strong, with the emphasis on 'seat and legs,' so that he can carry and balance both himself and his rider, will like the crossover bitless bridle. Those who have been taking a short cut by hauling on the bit to produce poll flexion (and, therefore, false collection) may be disappointed that they can no longer "get their horse in a frame." With perseverance, of course, they will achieve true collection. Though this may not always come overnight, many riders discover that, when they remove the pain of the bit, the horse immediately lifts its back and becomes collected.

Because of the above, the crossover bitless bridle becomes a test of the rider. A balanced rider with a balanced horse can move from a bitted bridle to the crossover bitless bridle without her horse becoming unbalanced and losing collection. Such a rider has good hands. By contrast, a horse that was exhibiting 'false collection' prior to becoming bitless will appear to 'fall apart' on becoming bitless, because it no longer has its head hauled in by the bit. Sadly, the mechanical advantage and coercion of a curb and chain makes it all too easy for a rider to produce a false semblance of 'collection' but poll flexion is not balance. The all too common extreme of poll flexion, a head behind the vertical, is imbalance. I hope that this does not sound as though I am being unnecessarily defensive. I just wish to alert you to some of the feedback I predict you may encounter.

I also accept the possibility that a few riders with impeccable 'hands' may feel that, at least in the first instance, they do not have the delicacy of communication with the crossover design that they have with a bit. Nevertheless, the communication can be expected to improve with time as the horse becomes more accustomed to the new sensations. In any case, impeccable hands with "the delicacy of a neurosurgeon" are a rarity and this reaction will be equally rare.

The difference in performance between the bit method of communication and the crossover bitless method is rather analogous to the difference, for a man, between shaving with an old-fashioned cut-throat razor (i.e., a 'straight' razor) and a modern electric razor. A cut-throat razor in the hands of a master will give you a closer shave than an electric razor. But a cut-throat razor in less competent hands is likely to lead to accidents. On the other hand, even a novice can use an electric razor and give himself a perfectly acceptable shave, without incurring the risks he would be taking if he wielded a cut-throat. Though its technology is much simpler, the crossover bitless bridle is equivalent to the electric razor. Being painless, it saves the rider from bruising the jaw, cutting the mouth, and hurting the horse. A pain-free horse learns faster and performs better. Horse and rider develop a partnership and harmony ensues. The cost of what might temporarily be lost by the master horseman in 'closeness of shave' (the fine-tuning of control) is more than compensated for by permanent benefits for all other horsemen (a more compliant and focused horse and greatly enhanced equine welfare).

An appraisal of the crossover bitless bridle may be viewed as a cost/benefit equation. I suggest that the (questionable) cost of any loss of finesse for an elite few is more than balanced by the huge benefit for the great majority of riders and the undeniable welfare benefit for all horses. That which may be lost on the swing is more than gained on the roundabout. My research tells me that a bit causes over 120 problems for horse and rider (Cook & Strasser 2003). Some of these problems (such as bucking, rearing and bolting) produce accidents that jeopardize the very life of both horse and rider. Other problems may be less life threatening but are still serious and are the result, as are bucking, rearing and bolting, of a rider unintentionally causing a horse pain. I conclude that the bit method of communication represents a hazard to welfare and safety.

I am not suggesting that the bit should be banned but I urge the FEI to consider permitting, alongside the currently named bits, a painless and more effective method of communication that reduces the risk of accidents, enhances the welfare of the horse, and increases the pleasure and satisfaction of riders.

I hope these thoughts will provide you with a useful background to the trials that you have volunteered to conduct. I am so delighted that you have this open mind and have agreed to look at the bridle. Please understand that my prime objective here is to promote the welfare of the horse rather than the sales for my company. I have been a research veterinarian with a focus of interest in the ear, nose,

throat and mouth of the horse for 53 years. The crossover bitless bridle that I have developed in the last six years is a by-product of this research. I hope that my academic record will counterbalance this conflict of interest (CV available online at www.bitlessbridle.com).

The crossover design has been so successful that it is being copied all over the world. I own a US patent on the Bitless Bridle but do not claim, or wish to claim, a worldwide monopoly. When the idea is copied abroad, I am happy that the horse will benefit. In order to avoid anyone at the FEI thinking that this is an effort on my part to push a particular product, I have been at pains to refer to the design by a generic name, the crossover bitless bridle, rather than a proprietary one.

What I am urging is the adoption of a method not a product. I see it as an opportunity for the FEI to make an historic contribution to the welfare of the horse. This trial is the first small step towards the possibility (in due course) of a rule change to permit the crossover design of bitless bridle for competitive dressage and other disciplines for which it is currently not listed as permitted equipment. It also represents an opportunity to materially benefit the horse. If the FEI were to give a lead to the national federations on this crucial matter, it would save the horse many years of unnecessary pain and prevent many an accident."

Until very recently (i.e., the last six years), there has not been an acceptable alternative to the bit method of communication. The FEI and national federations must be given time to consider this option after having become accustomed to a method of communication that was first adopted in the Bronze Age. As the bit method of communication is based on pain and as all the traditional bitless bridles (the hackamores, bosals and sidepulls) are also pain-based, the crossover design of bitless bridle represents the first pain-free method of communication with the horse's head to have been developed since the horse was domesticated.

The crossover bitless bridle is in compliance with all 10 of the requirements listed in the FEI Code of Conduct (Table I). Paradoxically, because of the advance in equine welfare that the availability of the new bridle now offers, it could be said that, until rule changes are introduced and the crossover bitless bridle is permitted, the FEI is no longer in compliance with nine of its own 'ten commandments.' The only one with which they currently remain in compliance is #5.

#	Fédération Equestre Internationale Requirements
1	In all equestrian sports the horse must be considered paramount
2	The well-being of the horse shall be above the demands of breeders, trainers, riders, owners, dealers, organisers, sponsors or officials
3	All handling and veterinary treatment must ensure the health and welfare of the horse
4	The highest standards of nutrition, health, sanitation and safety shall be encouraged and

	maintained at all times
5	Adequate provision must be made for ventilation, watering and maintaining a healthy environment during transportation.
6	Emphasis should be placed on increasing education in training and equestrian practices and on promoting studies in equine health.
7	In the interests of the horse, the fitness and competence of the rider shall be regarded as essential
8	All riding and training methods must take account of the horse as a living entity and must not include any techniques considered by the FEI to be abusive
9	National Federations should establish adequate controls in order that all persons and bodies under their jurisdiction respect the welfare of the horse
10	The national and international Rules and Regulations in equestrian sport regarding the health and welfare of the horse must be adhered to not only during national and international events, but also in training. Competition Rules and Regulations shall be continually reviewed to ensure such welfare.

Table 1: FEI CODE OF CONDUCT

If any further arguments were needed for a rule change, another paradox might be mentioned. The current FEI rules, which were drawn up before the crossover bitless bridle became available, permit the new bridle to be used for the cross-country and show jumping phases of combined training events. Both of these phases are rightly regarded as high-risk activities. However, for irrefutable reasons, both anatomical and physiological, the risk of an accident is reduced if the bit is removed and replaced with the new bridle. (Cook & Strasser, 2003).⁴ It remains an anomaly that the crossover bitless bridle cannot presently be used for such relatively low-risk activities as dressage and show hunter classes. Yet, once again, it is repeatedly demonstrated that horses wearing the permitted double bridle during dressage tests, exhibit multiple signs now recognised as indicating fear and pain (Cook & Strasser, 2003). Such horses are often unfairly condemned for being ‘hot’ and tempt their riders into having them illegally sedated.⁵

The 10 requirements in the *“FEI Code of conduct towards the environment”* is only relevant to this discussion with regard to item two. This states, *“Young riders must be taught to consider the sport in the context of a deeper and sympathetic understanding of the animal world and to place the achievement of horsemanship above that of mastering the technicalities of the various equestrian disciplines.”* This philosophy, with which I agree, supports what I have written above about the welfare of the horse being more important than the quality of the performance. As it transpires, however, if a physiologically compatible method of communication is used (i.e., the crossover bitless bridle) rather than a method that is physiologically incompatible with the horse (i.e., the bitted method), horses become calmer and quality of performance improves. A rule change to permit

⁴ As I complete this article, a long e-mail arrives with the subject line “The Bitless Bridle may have saved my life.”

⁵ “Entering dangerous Fields: Is equestrian sport clean or not? – a veterinary perspective.” November 2004. Available online at the FEI website (www.horsesports.org) select ‘Veterinary’ and click on ‘Update on equestrian sport by Dr. Frits Sluyter, Prof. Leo Jeffcott and Dr. Andrew Higgins.’ The following URL is offered but may not be active ... www.horsesports.org/PDFS/FEI/04_01/Equestrian%2011-04.pdf

the crossover bitless bridle would have the happy effect of making equestrian sports not only more acceptable to the horse and, therefore, better for performance, but also safer and more satisfying for the rider. Both horse and rider win.

It is my hope that I can persuade the FEI to accept a rule change to permit the use of the crossover bitless bridle, as all the national organizations around the world take their lead from them. If the FEI change, so eventually will the rest of the world. However, the FEI is a 'large ship' and such vessels take time to change direction. Although the FEI path may be the most promising path to take, this may still be a rather long path. In the meantime, two other paths are also open and exploration of either of these by individuals would be helpful.

Firstly, users of the crossover bitless bridle could submit a proposal for a rule change to their national federation. The protocol for these submissions will be different for each country and individuals should consult their national federation's websites for the details. By way of example, the protocol for the USEF is appended to this article. If even one national federation could be persuaded to accept a rule change, this might move the present log-jam and influence others.

Secondly, individuals can demonstrate the suitability of the crossover bitless bridle for dressage by taking part *Hors Concours (HC)*. HC participants are not eligible for ribbons and cannot compete but they do get scored. HC riders may well, as has already been demonstrated, have the satisfaction of being awarded higher marks than the ribbon winners. The more often that riders choose the HC option, the quicker it will become evident to judges and administrators that a rule change is required.

By way of summarizing the foregoing, let us anticipate the objections that some members of the FEI committees may raise to the approval of the crossover bitless bridle.

1. *"The bit method is sanctioned by thousands of years of usage; it's a fundamental tradition of horsemanship."*
 - A. Tradition alone is not a good reason for clinging exclusively to a method that was invented by early man in the Bronze Age. The FEI Code of Conduct makes abundant allowance for amending the rules in the light of advances in equine management. It is not being proposed that the bit method should be banned but simply that an option should be available.
2. *"The bit method provides finer control than the crossover bitless bridle."*
 - A. This can only be true for a tiny percentage of horsemen, i.e., the master horsemen. Such a claim is certainly untrue in general, as it takes no account of the frequency with which most horsemen encounter, with any one horse, 30 or 40 of the 120 problems

caused by the bit. 'Fine control' is out of the question when a horse is frightened by or fighting with the bit. However, as quality of performance is not a criterion that features in the FEI Code of Conduct, even these considerations are not needed to refute the statement. Rules are determined by what is right for the welfare of the horse.

3. *"It is unsafe to ride a horse without a bit."*
 - A. If the metal is removed from a horse's mouth and the horse is no longer in pain, the horse becomes calmer and more compliant. A pain-free horse will not be frightened ('hot') and will be less likely to precipitate an accident. Undoubtedly, the welfare and safety of the horse, which *"must be considered paramount"* (Item #1 of the Code) is greatly improved by removing a rod of metal from its mouth. Curiously, the FEI Code of Conduct does not anywhere mention the welfare of that other athlete in the partnership, the rider. But the rider's welfare is also improved by the same change and this must surely be a consideration.

Item #6 of the FEI Code of Conduct states that *"Emphasis should be placed on increasing education in training and equestrian practices and on promoting studies in equine health."* With this as a policy, there can be no doubt that rule changes will follow. The last sentence of the FEI Code of Conduct provides further encouragement ... *"Competition Rules and regulations shall be continually reviewed to ensure (the) welfare (of the horse)."*

Finally, to answer the question, acceptance of the bit by the horse is not a requirement for dressage but use of a bit by the rider is a requirement for competition dressage under current FEI rules.

Reference:

Cook, W.R. and Strasser, H *"Metal in the Mouth: The Abusive Effects of Bitted Bridles."* Sabine Kells, Qualicum Beach, BC Canada, 2003

APPENDIX

Rule Change Proposals for United States Equestrian Federation (USEF)

Rule changes can be submitted by USEF members only. Even members are advised that their chances of getting a rule change accepted are enhanced if they can obtain the support of a committee member.

The step-by-step procedure is as follows:

1. Go to www.usef.org and click on "FORMS AND PUBS". Select "Rules & Regulations" and click on "Rule Change Brochure" for information. You can reach the same topics by using the following URL ... <http://www.usef.org/documents/rules/ruleChanges/PRC/PRCbrochure.pdf>.
2. Consult the Rule Book at www.usef.org/content/rules/ruleBook/2004 in order to discover the Chapter, article and section that you want to delete, alter or change.

For Dressage, the Rule Book Chapter you need is XIX on p.352. The article is "1921. Saddlery & Equipment" and the relevant sections are sections 2-5. You will also need to look at Fig 1 on pages 354-357.

For Eventing, the Chapter you need is XVII , Article 1714, section 2. on p.296. Appendix 4, p.328 has some more drawings. While browsing, look at 'Article 1710 Abuse of Horses', section 5 which states, "*The bit must never be used to reprimand a horse. Any such use is always excessive.*"

3. Locate the "Rule Change Form" to submit a proposal using <http://www.usef.org/documents/rules/ruleChanges/PRC/2004Rulechangeform.pdf>.

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