

**PAIN-FREE COMMUNICATION:
A key to horse and rider harmony**

Kathleen M Hulle, LVT, Avelene, New York

Living with horses is a gift. Horses accept their existence on our terms, but they decide whether or not to carry out the tasks we assign them. We should not take for granted that special moment when a horse surrenders itself willingly to our touch.

Horsemanship has evolved over many millennia. Every decade brings new tools and skills but horsemanship is also steeped in tradition and sometimes stifled by it. If a new tool fails to follow tradition, horsemen tend to resist its acceptance even though the new tool offers important benefits for horse and rider. Some of our present-day traditions were established long before man recognized the concept of kindness as the key to communication. Use of the bit, for example, dates back at least 4000 years to the early days of the horse's domestication. Its introduction was driven by primitive man's fear of the horse and the assumption that he needed to master the beast by brute force. We should be constantly on the look out for the arrival of new ideas that stimulate us to reappraise our attitude to traditional practices 'inherited' from distant ancestors.

I have witnessed at first hand the use of a new tool, the rationale of which is founded on an understanding of equine physiology rather than on primitive man's fear of a wild beast. This tool is a design so far removed from tradition that I have seen riders flinch with alarm at its very description. Yet these same riders have later agreed, after plucking up courage to test it, that the tool represents a landmark advance in welfare and equitation.

The tool is a bitless bridle based on a crossover design (Fig 1). Yes, it is bitless. No, it is not a hackamore, bosal or sidepull. Yes, it is very effective. It can be found on a research veterinarian's website: bitlessbridle.com. Along with the design, Dr. Robert Cook provides information from decades of his own research, feedback from users, a critique of the bit's adverse effect on a horse's behavior, and 120 reasons why the new design is compatible with the exercise physiology of the horse.

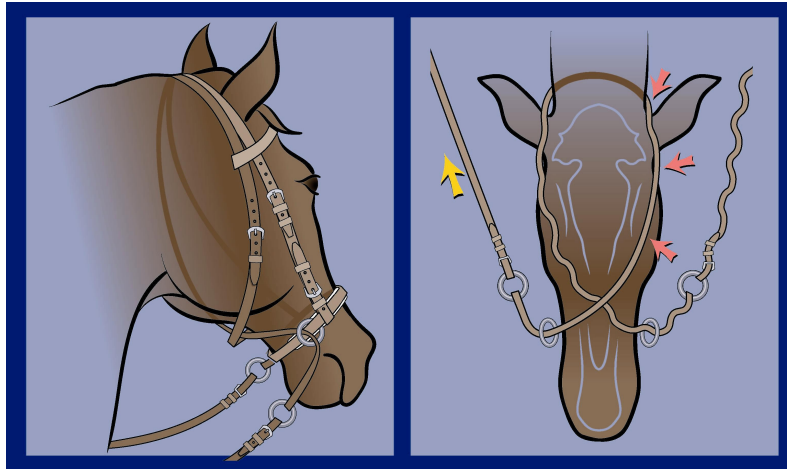


Figure 1

For steering, the crossover bitless bridle nudges half the head and for stopping it hugs the whole of the head.

Steering: Gentle pressure on one rein (yellow arrow) pushes painlessly but persuasively on the opposite half of the head (red arrows). Horses steer better when pushed painlessly (over a large and relatively insensitive surface area) than when pulled painfully by a bit (with highly-focused pressure on the sensitive tissues of the mouth). Unlike the bit, that tends to twist a horse's head, the head stays upright, which is physiologically correct. More effective steering is one of the first benefits that riders notice. The design 'works' for both direct and neck reining.

Slowing & stopping: Brief pressure on both reins applies a gentle squeeze to the whole of the head and triggers a 'submit' response. Braking is probably attributable to a combination of the calming effect of a whole-head-hug; to initiation of a balancing reflex at the poll; to the stimulation of pressure points behind the ears; and to painless pressure across the bridge of the nose. The "brakes" are more reliable than those provided by the bit.

Ideally, the rein aids should be back-up, as required, to the more important aids provided by body-weight, balance and breathing.

A crossover bitless design is the only design that ensures rein-aids are pain-free. It is applicable to all breeds, all ages of horse and rider, all grades of rider skill, and all disciplines, including driving. As a biochemist, I greatly appreciate and respect Dr. Cook's extensive research into the horse's anatomy and physiology. His solution for the recalcitrant headshaking problem (facial neuralgia) will motivate all readers to look at their horses with a more educated eye. As a nurse and licensed veterinary technician (LVT) I have used the bridle to give owners new hope for disabled horses. As a horse trainer and rehabilitator, I have used it to start, retrain, and rehabilitate many horses. In the process, I have further educated myself.

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My own Arab/Welsh pony initiated me into the benefits of the crossover design. This pony exemplified the damaging effects of a bitted bridle, even when ridden with what I have always thought of as 'educated hands.' With a bit, the pony stumbled and consistently tracked his hindquarters to the right, eighteen or more inches. He had done this for twenty years. He bobbed his head and violently rubbed his face on his front legs. Like most Arabs, he spooked regularly. All these problems disappeared on switching to a crossover bitless bridle. But the most marked improvement was in his overall way of going. At 26, he is surefooted and straight while being ridden on the buckle!

Today is a very exciting time for horsemanship. More is being learned about this highly sensitive prey animal, the horse. Dr. Robert Cook is at the forefront of what I believe will be seen, in time, as the single most effective change in how we communicate with them. The removal of bit-induced pain is crucial to the successful rehabilitation of so many horses. Such a change constitutes a revolution in horsemanship and a revelation for horsemen.

Now is the time to promote harmony in horsemanship, not tradition. Harmony cannot be achieved in the presence of pain. There are so many good reasons for adopting a pain-free bridle and relinquishing a painful, outdated tradition. Make riding simpler, safer and more satisfying. Discover that you have a better horse than you thought and that you are a better horseman than you ever imagined.