

THE BITLESS BRIDLE AND ADVANCED DRESSAGE

Q: My trainer is of the opinion that I need to use a bit in order to selectively communicate with different parts of my horse's mouth and to achieve the more advanced levels of dressage. Does The Bitless Bridle provide as much sensitivity in communication as the bit?

A: First, let me say that I fully understand the feelings of your trainer. Such reservations are often made about the ability of The Bitless Bridle to communicate subtle messages. But with all due respect, such doubts are unfounded. Please ask your trainer, if she has any doubts, to spend a while browsing through the Users' Comments on our website. Also, be sure to ask her if she has ever used The Bitless bridle herself. Many of these criticisms come from people who have never tried the bridle.

Your trainer can best refute her own argument by using the bridle herself. She will then discover, for herself, that by focusing on seat and leg (a principle that I feel sure she upholds) and using minimal 'hands' that her horses will respond very happily to the cues. She will be able to communicate the most subtle of signals, yet without the risk of triggering resistance. Metal aids are unnecessary and can, indeed, be an impediment to advance unless the 'hands' are perfect.

The skin at the corner of the lips is more sensitive than the skin in other parts of the head. Nevertheless, when gentle pressure is applied to the skin over one half of the whole head (steering) or to the skin over the whole head (stopping) there is no shortage of signal. Recall that any part of the skin is sensitive enough to feel a fly landing. So a whole-head-hug or a half-head-hug gives more than an ample signal.

Furthermore, with a bit in a horse's mouth, I would have to disagree that it is possible to be selective about which part of the mouth anatomy even the most skilful rider is stimulating. The bit is too crude an instrument to permit such finesse. Furthermore, the assumption makes no allowance for the many different reactions and responses of your horse. The gentlest squeeze of the finger can put pressure on bone, tongue and skin. It is not possible to signal one without the others. The hope that a gentle squeeze of the fingers is transmitted only to the corners of the lips and not to the rest of the mouth is a myth and not based on reality. Similarly, if the horse chooses to retract its tongue, relatively more pressure will be placed on the bars of the mouth.

The only contraindication for using the Bitless Bridle is nothing to do with whether or not it is a sufficiently sensitive method (it undoubtedly is) but the purely administrative reason that it is not possible to use it for competition work under the current FEI regulations. But you could choose to use the Bitless Bridle and ride Hors Concours. This would give you the satisfaction and feedback of being

scored, though you would be unable to claim the ribbon that with a bit you may not have been eligible for anyway.

Dr. Jessica Jahiel has is of the opinion that one reason for using a bit is as a means of testing the rider's hands. If a rider who has been using The Bitless Bridle can make the shift from this to a bitted bridle bit without upsetting her horse, under any circumstances, in any one of a hundred different ways, she can claim to have 'quiet hands.' The FEI regulations for riders are akin to requiring every barber to use a cut-throat razor when an electric razor gives a perfectly good shave and is so much safer for both barber and customer.

The Bitless Bridle is a pain-free method of communication. The same cannot be said of the bit, no matter how skilfully employed. I am sure that your trainer would not choose to use a method of communication that inflicts pain or the threat of pain when a more humane alternative is available that is actually a more effective method of communication.

So please ask your trainer ... has she actually tried the bridle? And has she used it long enough, on a range of horses, to become familiar with what it has to offer both rider and horse? Even one ride may be a revelation and could change her life.

Robert Cook FRCVS, PhD