

## **BITLESS RIDING: A Presentation at Cornell Horse Expo**

By  
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- I. Opening
  - a. I'm here representing Bitless Bridle, a company that offers horsepeople a way to retain precise communication and control while riding their horses without a bit: the cross over bridle. Which I will tell you about at length a little further on.
  - b. Here at the start I want to emphasize that I'm promoting bitless riding first, and the cross-over bridle second. Bits are inherently harmful tools, which can be made even more harmful through misuse. My first priority is to encourage people to stop using bits on their horses. Since the cross-over bitless is the most effective and humane alternative to a bit I've used, I'm happy to advocate it not as some company employee, but as a personally satisfied customer and user of the bridle.
  - c. Bitless riding isn't just a fun thing to try with an easy-going backyard pony: it's a humane upgrade from a bit...for any discipline, any breed, or any level of horse or rider training. I've been transparently implying that horses are relieved to lose their bits, that their behavior and performance tends to improve when they are ridden with a bit-free mouth...this is because bits are harmful to horses, particularly in imperfect hands.
    - i. Most people concede that without fine, independent hands, a rider can hurt a horse with the bit. But how many of us can honestly claim that we never make mistakes, or never deliberately put more pressure on the horse's mouth than he is plainly comfortable with? Increased pressure for a hard downward transition... A quick jab on the rein for not responding appropriately to a cue, or to attempt to sensitize a hard mouth. Or what if the horse spooks or we misjudge a distance at a fence and get left behind? We punish the horse's mouth—accidentally or deliberately.
    - ii. But beyond the consideration that almost none of us are master riders our *entire* equestrian career, there's another problem: the bit is inherently at odds with the horse's physiology, and therefore inherently harmful. That means that even in the hands of a master, bits cause problems for the horse.
  - d. Let me go over how bits inevitably interfere with a horse's athleticism and comfort first. Then I'll talk about a few of the other health problems bits and their misuse can cause, as well as training problems for horse and rider. Finally, I'll tell you about the cross-over bridle, how it works, and why it's a superior alternative to any kind of bit.

- II. Bits: Inherently Harmful
  - a. A horse exercising at liberty breathes in rhythm; at the gallop he takes a breath for every stride. He has a dry, closed mouth. Even if he has just been grazing, he'll stop chewing. Many of us have seen that: something catches a horse's attention while he's grazing, and he looks up as his jaw goes still, in preparation for flight.
  - b. Put a metal rod in a horse's mouth, and immediately that natural athletic state is disturbed.
    - i. The horse's body is programmed to produce saliva if there is something in his mouth, just like we humans do. The body assumes we intend to digest whatever we've put into our mouths, and so it sends out enzyme rich saliva to begin the breakdown process and lubricate the swallowing process. Personally, I've drooled over my car keys an unfortunate number of times, holding them in my teeth while my hands were preoccupied. You all could probably attest to similar experiences.
  - c. A great deal of that excess saliva just slobbers out of the horse's mouth as he exercises, which is often mistakenly considered an indication of a soft mouth. This might all be no problem, because horses breathe through their noses, not their mouths. But the horse also needs to swallow some of that liquid, like we do when we run. And every time he swallows, he needs to stop breathing. This can cost him at high levels of exercise. He's deprived of that rhythmic flow of air he has at liberty, and the interrupted rhythm can even have an effect on the horse's regularity and length of stride. Lactic acid builds up in his muscles faster than it would if he could breathe steadily; he tires more easily. The pressure on him to breathe and swallow at the same time might cause him to inhale saliva or swallow air...both potentially harmful occurrences.
  - d. Aside from innately interfering with the horse's respiratory system at exercise, the bit has a painful position in the horse's mouth. It rests on the bars of the mouth, conveniently teeth-less ridges of the jaw thinly covered with nerve-filled gum. The mouth is one of the most sensitive parts of the horse's body. If you take a close look at this jaw...this is where the bit sits...the bars of the mouth are extremely narrow. With a two or three pound bit on top of them, the nerve-filled gum is pressed into this edge of bone. It's your judgment on whether that might hurt or not. Bear in mind that added to the bit's own slight weight, there's the pressure of the reins in the rider's hands... say an average three pounds in each hand...only enough to have contact. Most people use significantly more.
- III. Other Health Problems
  - a. We've looked at why the bit is inherently harmful, even in the best of hands. If used improperly, it can cause a multitude of health and

training problems. I've a full list of such problems at my booth if anyone would care to peruse it. There are slightly over a hundred so far: many kinds of resistances and aversions to the bit, respiratory problems, musculoskeletal problems, problems directly affecting the horse's mouth...For now I'd just like to point out a few of them.

- b. The classic text *Veterinary Notes for Horse Owners* has an entry on head-shaking syndrome which is a good example of most medical description of the condition. [TEXT]. My understanding of scientific theory is that if you're trying to figure out what's causing something, you experiment with the variables. So if a horse is ONLY displaying a condition when he is being lunged or ridden, it would seem logical to examine the variables singular to those experiences, like the tack. Why this hasn't occurred to most researchers I couldn't tell you. Maybe they're not horsepeople and don't know the first thing about lunging.
- c. Notice the same is said, in various sources, for 'roaring', or laryngeal hemiplegia: it begins to affect horses between the ages of two and seven, after they have begun training. This would again imply that something specific to the training is creating the problem.
- d. But I must add that unfortunately, simply removing the cause of these problems alone won't cure them once the damage has been done to the horse. Just like taking your hand out of the fire won't make the burn on your skin go away. Corrective treatment is often necessary, and in the case of head-shaking, which is believed to be a symptom of facial neuralgia, treatment is often ineffective. Often, though, time is enough for the horse to heal himself.
  - i. My pony, Mr. Right, had both head-shaking syndrome and a perpetually mis-diagnosed respiratory ailment...Out of ignorance and bad guidance I did nothing more to help him than to adopt a halter as our official riding bridle...and over time the respiratory problem stopped recurring. The head-shaking also stopped. This pony who had never been able to hold a steady canter suddenly could, from one day to the next. That all changed when I sold him to a lady who used a bit on him. His breathing began to worsen again, his head-shaking came back, his canter fell apart and returned to its previous runny shuffle. I asked her to ride him in a halter or a cross-over bridle—which I'd discovered by that time—and he hasn't had a problem since.
- e. What is it that causes these numerous health problems? Various things: Again, the bit simply sitting in the horse's mouth interferes with breathing in more ways than I have discussed. For full descriptions come look through or buy *Metal in the Mouth: the Harmful Effects of Bitted Bridles*, by Dr. Robert Cook. The excessive pressure the rider puts on the bit causes many

behavioral problems and forms of aversion and resistance to the bit. It is also most likely what is responsible for facial neuralgia and the headshaking-syndrome. And the rider's ability to force the horse into a false frame by manipulating the bit and getting the horse to flex at the poll can cause both respiratory difficulties due to an unnaturally bent trachea, as well as muscular and skeletal problems, even to the point of bridle lameness.

#### IV. Training Problems

- a. A horse trains best when he is healthy and comfortable. This is unlikely to be his state of being while working in a bit.
- b. Remember that a horse might be resistant for three reasons: he either doesn't want to do what's being asked of him, he doesn't understand what's being asked of him, or he physically can't do what's being asked of him, because it hurts. Frequently, because the harm the bit causes is overlooked and unacknowledged, a horse is viewed as being willfully resistant, when he's really having a problem with the bit. For example, a rider whose horse has taken to carrying his head above the bit might put draw reins on him, or carry her hands lower and work his mouth in an effort to make him soften his jaw and give at the poll. She doesn't take into account that the horse is only holding his head that way to avoid the painful pressure of the bit, and that without a bit he would most likely adopt a much more natural and balanced frame.
- c. The same goes for horses who exhibit any kind of resistance to the bit: hard-mouthed horses, heavy horses (counter-intuitive but true), horses that duck behind the vertical, shove their noses above it, tilt their heads at exercise, "pig-root" or take the bit in their teeth. Other problems which are mistaken for training or behavioral problems but which are often actually caused by the bit include unwanted hair-trigger responses to both rein and leg aids, sucking back, rearing, napping, running away with riders, jiggling, bucking and bounding at requests for upward transitions, stiffness in the neck and stride, lack of coordination, resistance to backing, tail-wringing, false collection, and an inverted frame. Again, for a full list of problems which bits have been shown to cause, come visit my booth. If your horse exhibits any of these problems, please consider that it is almost certainly the bit which is causing them, and try riding the horse without a bit for a while before resorting to expensive trainers, medical procedures...sale, resignation, name-calling, or euthanasia.

#### V. Bitless Riding

- a. But can a horse be controlled without a bit? It's often argued that a bit is simply necessary in a panic situation. But if you all take a moment to think back on your experiences being run away with or seeing others run away with, I believe you'll find there was a bit in the horse's mouth. A bit is no guarantee that the horse will be

controllable. As bits become more severe, their ability to inflict pain on the horse increases. It's an unpleasant piece of logic not often thought through. I don't think there are many horse people who want to hurt their horses. And I don't think there are many people who, understanding the nature of the horse (which is to run at the first sign of a threat, and rear to fight if running is not an option), would believe that inflicting pain on the horse's mouth and jaw will have the effect of restraining and calming him. Making him less frightened.

- b. In any case, if a horse does take off, the correct thing to do is to employ a one-rein stop, which disengages the horse's hind end, dislodging his source of power and speed. Pulling on his mouth with both hands and the rider's full weight is incorrect, and likely to only put him on his hind end, allowing him generate more speed, as well as giving him something to lean on, like a racehorse's fifth foot. A one-rein stop can be performed in a halter, as many great trainers testify.
- c. If a person believes she requires a great deal of physical leverage in order to restrain her horse, this is a dangerous situation. No matter how much pain she is capable of causing, either with a stud chain, or a sizable bit, she does not really have control of the horse. Respect is missing from the relationship, and the two should return to basic ground work with the assistance of a good trainer or instructor. Many are available in person, or their books or videos are handy and very informative.
- d. I have worked with over a hundred horses since eschewing bits, often deliberately selecting the ones reputed to be hard-mouthed and runaway. I have yet to find one who cannot be ridden safely without a bit.
- e. There have been many people making not only bitless, but bridleless riding very popular and available for average riders over the past decade: Klaus Hempfling, in his book *Dancing With Horses*, describes the art of collecting on a loose rein; Lynn Palm's bridleless dressage performances with *Rugged Lark* earned him a Breyer Model horse mold; the Chiron riding style and Linda Tellington-Jones both emphasize the benefits to the horse and rider of riding with a neck rope and no bridle; there are many bridleless drill teams, most notably *Eh Capa*, which consists of a large group of young people between the ages of 8 and 19 who ride their horses bareback and bridleless. The Parellis and their students probably go without saying at this point. Indeed, in the Parelli system, students use halters rather than bits until they're at the very top levels of training with their horses.
- f. But for those of us who have now determined that bitless riding is the way to go, but don't have the time or confidence to master bridleless riding, there are several bitless bridle options. There's the

classic favorite, the adapted halter; also, the English jumping hackamore; the bosal; the side-pull; the mechanical hackamore; and doubtless a couple others I'm not even aware of. Care must be taken in selecting one, because some, like the mechanical hackamores, work on the same principle of causing pain that bits do, particularly by the use of a chain under the horse's jaw, or even by restricting the horse's ability to breathe. These kinds of bridles give bitless a bad name. English jumping hackamores are great for cues that involve using both reins together, but becomes imprecise when a single rein needs to be used. The opposite is the case for the side-pull. Bosals are very much like adapted halters, which are also great, but have a tendency to slide on the horse's face and disperse pressure in an inconsistent and unclear way, which can detract from the finesse of the rider's communication with her horse.

#### VI. The Cross-Over Bitless Bridle

- a. This is why, though most of those methods are quite good and certainly recommended over bits, it's the cross-over bridle that I'm promoting.
- b. Description and demonstration of how the bridle works and where the pressure is being applied and dispersed. Finesse and precision can be maintained. And it requires no special training for the horse or rider to make the change: the aids remain the same as they were in a bit.
- c. From what I've experience with the bridle, and from what I've seen while working independently on the filming project those pieces of footage are from, horses change when they are ridden without a bit. Sometimes the change is as subtle as a more relaxed body, neck, and stride; a softer eye and more focused expression, as opposed to the permanently anxious look they'd previously worn; a quiet mouth; better balance and cleaner, naturally balanced responses, particularly during transitions. Sometimes the change is dramatic, and a horse who had been rearing and running and fighting furiously with his rider's hands quiets and becomes cooperative and willing.
- d. Giving the cross-over bridle a try is a gamble that's impossible to lose. The company is there to support you through the change, and help you figure things out if you have a problem. If you buy a bridle, try it on your horse, and decide that for some reason it doesn't suit you, you can send it back. The more likely situation is that you try it out, and find that you've got an even better horse than you knew. Now you've also got a bridle that you can use on any of your horses, instead of needing a particular bit for each one. On top of all that, you can delight your neighbors with your modern-art styled wind-chime, made of all the bits you've collected over the years and now have no more use for.

VII. Conclusion

- a. That's all from me. I have sample bridles and order forms at my booth, as well as copies of Metal in the Mouth: the Abusive Effects of Bitted Bridles available for sale. Also some information you can take home about bits, riding bitless, the cross-over bridle, and that full list of problems bits have been known to cause. Ordering and information is also available online at the website 'bitlessbridle.com'. If you have any questions or comments about bits or bitless riding, particularly with the cross-over, please come and visit with me and Ol' Gray. If you think the whole thing is nonsense and you'll never consider getting on your horse without a bit, please come and visit us anyway...I'm always up for a good discussion. Thank you.