

A version of the article submitted by Tessa Van Daalen was published in joint authorship with another person. The reference is as follows:  
Tulp, Marjan and van Daalen, Tess, Een beter bit – versus – beter geen bit. *Bit* #.131, April 2006 pp 16-19

## USE OF A BIT = ABUSE OF A HORSE

Tessa Van Daalen

June 2005

Submitted to the Dutch journal 'BIT'

**Dr. Robert ('Bob') Cook is on a mission. After 53 years of scientific research, the equine ear, nose and throat clinician now promotes a new bitless bridle. „Six thousand years of bit usage has blinded us into thinking we need a bit for control. It isn't true. A bit causes pain, fear and neurological confusion, all of which result in loss of control. There are 118 reasons why a bit is always superfluous and often dangerous.”**

The British emeritus professor has been a member of faculty of many British and American veterinary schools. His age (74) hasn't mellowed him. He makes bold statements. „*Anyone who uses a bit is potentially abusive ... albeit unknowingly and unintentionally. I plead guilty to having 'inflicted unnecessary pain' (the definition of cruelty) by my own riding in past years.*”

*“The horse's lips, gums, tongue and oral cavity are highly sensitive. The bars of the mouth, where there are no teeth, are like a railroad track, except that they are made of bone and have knife-edges. The bone has a 'skin' of gum. As gum is the sheath of the bone itself, steel bits press directly on bone. There is no 'cushion' because the delicate tongue is often withdrawn.”*

Dr. Cook has surveyed the collections of horse skulls in four Natural History Museums in the USA. *“In 74 % of the skulls, I found evidence of bit-induced bone spurs on the bars. Imagine how excruciatingly painful it must be for the horse to have a steel rod pressing daily on a knife-edge of bone that is already inflamed and, therefore, super-sensitive. Have you ever experienced mouth ulcers, toothache or badly-fitting dentures?”*

A horse tells us in many ways that bits hurt. *“The tongue may be pulled back to avoid the bit or placed on top to immobilize it. Alternatively, the bit may be gripped between the teeth, which disarms the device. In the short-term, this renders the reins useless to the rider. In the long-term, it can wear down the first cheek teeth to their roots. To defend himself, a horse may refuse 'contact' and go 'behind' or 'above' the bit, or move the bit around constantly, away from the painful spots.”*

In Dr. Cook's opinion, the headshaking syndrome is most commonly caused by the bit triggering insufferable nerve pain (neuralgia) in the whole of the head.

*“Horses have survived a million years without the help of horse dentists. Use of the bit is one reason why they are now needed.”*

A version of the article submitted by Tessa Van Daalen was published in joint authorship with another person. The reference is as follows:  
Tulp, Marjan and van Daalen, Tess, Een beter bit – versus – beter geen bit. *Bit* #.131, April 2006 pp 16-19

*“A steel rod in the mouth hurts and frightens a horse. He becomes both nervous and unable to breathe properly. Put something in your own mouth and your body switches instantly to the eating mode. A human athlete could not run with a bunch of keys in his mouth? A bit in a horse’s mouth switches on the wrong system. It signals ‘chew-&-swallow’ rather than ‘breathe-&-run’. Bitted horses salivate and foam at their open mouths. Wild horses run with their mouths closed. Horses are nose-breathers”*

*“The breathing and eating channels cross over at the throat. In order to breathe freely at exercise the throat has to be in the breathing mode, not the eating mode. The mouth has to be closed, the lips sealed, the tongue inactive, the jaw stationary, and the huge soft palate in the lowered position so that it does not obstruct the airway. With a foreign body in the mouth none of these criteria are met. Obstruction of the airway leads to premature fatigue, noisy breathing and, because breathing and striding should be synchronized, interference with the rhythm and elegance of the gait.”*

*Horses are individuals and they react to pain and fear in different ways. Some panic and others are phlegmatic or resigned. Some bolt and others balk. Some buck and others rear. Some fight and others accept defeat. Many of these responses are unfairly labeled as vices or ‘bad habits’ to be corrected by ‘strong’ riders. Yet they are all normal responses, programmed by millions of years of evolution. A horse may interpret a bitted rein-aid quite differently from a rider’s intention. A rider’s ‘stop’ may signal a horse’s ‘go.’ A pain signal doesn’t stop a horse. A rider can more safely signal ‘stop’ without a bit, using painless signals by means of seat and balance, supplemented perhaps with painless rein aids.”*

*“Painless communication,”* says Dr. Cook, *“is the key to harmony between horse and rider.”* For this reason, he cannot recommend the traditional bitless bridles, such as bosals, hackamores or sidepulls, all of which depend for their action on their ability to cause pain or the threat of pain.

How is it, I asked, that an animal as strong as a horse lets us inflict so much pain?  
*“Horses are prey animals. They are programmed by evolution to hide their pain and discomfort, as exhibiting dis-ease makes them easier targets for predators. Their apparent ‘tolerance’ of pain is easily misinterpreted.”*

Cook says, *“Master horsemen know that seat and leg aids are more important than rein aids. A definition of ‘good hands’ is ‘the least amount of hand.’ As long as sharp spurs are not used, seat and leg aids signal painlessly by touch and pressure to large areas of skin over the chest and abdomen. Unlike the bit, which ‘invades’ the oral cavity, no body cavities are penetrated.”*

Cook has developed an entirely new design of bitless bridle that allows riders to signal rein aids painlessly to large areas of skin over the whole of the head.<sup>1</sup> The design is based on a simple but subtle system of crossover straps. When I suggested to him that

---

<sup>1</sup> The Bitless Bridle. The Bitless Bridle Inc. 2020, South Queen Street, York PA 21620  
Telephone: 717 812 1598

A version of the article submitted by Tessa Van Daalen was published in joint authorship with another person. The reference is as follows:  
Tulp, Marjan and van Daalen, Tess, Een beter bit – versus – beter geen bit. *Bit* #.131, April 2006 pp 16-19

some people might be suspicious of a product marketed by a veterinarian, he replied, *„I have made many contributions to the literature on equine medicine but by explaining the flaws in the bit method of control, and by providing this bridle, I know that I am doing more to help horses and their owners now than at any previous time in my career.”*

The only reasons for not using the new bridle are neither medical nor practical but administrative. The current rules and regulations require use of a bit for dressage and certain other competitions. But why not bitless too, I asked? *„The FEI is a conservative institution. Rule changes take time but I hope I live long enough to see a rule change introduced. The recent advance in the welfare of the horse that this bridle represents means that the FEI and other national federations are currently no longer in compliance with their own objectives which are ‘to promote the welfare of the horse.’”*

Until the new bridle is allowed, Dr. Cook encourages riders to go HC. *„Such a stance will help convince the judges, as a bitless horse will perform better than a bitted one. But a change of judging standards is also needed. A horse should be ‘on the aids,’ not ‘on the bit.’*

*“Obviously everyone reading this now thinks, ‘this is not for me as I have very soft hands.’ But even riders of Olympic caliber will occasionally apply steel to bone with injudicious pressure. One bit is potentially dangerous. Two bits and items such as draw reins simply exacerbate the danger. Martingales are used to prevent a horse from throwing its head up in response to bit pain and various nosebands are used to prevent a horse from opening its mouth to evade the bit. But the only logical and effective treatment for any problem or disease is removal of the cause rather than suppression of the symptom.*

Finally, I raised the question of rider’s fear at the very thought of abandoning a device that, rightly or wrongly, they have relied on for so long. *“The theory behind the new bridle is supported by six years of practical application. Thousands of riders, of all ages and experience, in just about every discipline, have made the leap of faith and discovered to their delight that, without a bit, they had a better horse than they previously thought. Furthermore, they have found that they were better riders than they previously recognized. The fact that even novice riders can make these discoveries should give all riders courage. The evidence supports the conclusion that one is less likely to have an accident when riding with the new bitless bridle than with a bitted bridle. It is not only safer but also more satisfying. Visit the website, read the articles, browse through the user’s comments, and study the comprehensive manual that comes with every bridle. You might choose to do a little groundwork in the bridle, then ride first in a covered school or small paddock to gain confidence. Progress to a trail ride with a companion horse and finally ride with the herd and be happy .”*

Do you want to try Dr. Cook’s bridle? Don’t rush to your local tack shop, as they are not available there. *„We have appointed agents in many parts of the world but, as yet, we do not have an agent in Holland. But we export to every country and you can order online at [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com).”*