FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS[1]

Robert Cook

Prior to interviewing me in 2005 about my research on the horse's bit and the crossover bitless bridle, a Dutch journalist[2] sent me the following questions. The questions are here listed in bold type and my answers in plain type. It should be mentioned that the journalist, at the time of the interview, had never herself used the Bitless Bridle:

As I see it you consider all dressage riders and show jumpers to be horse abusers. That is quite a statement.

Strictly speaking, not just dressage riders and show jumpers but anyone that uses a bit (other than a master horseman) is in danger of being abusive, albeit I hasten to add, both unknowingly and surely unintentionally. I plead guilty myself to having being unaware of the degree of pain that my own riding has inflicted in years past.

Cruelty is defined as *the unnecessary infliction of emotional distress, pain or suffering.* It has to be conceded on the grounds of fundamental physiology that bits undoubtedly cause pain, the lips, gums, tongue and oral cavity being a highly sensitive area of the horse's anatomy, generously supplied with pain receptors.

But, in the absence of any alternative, the bit method of control could be defended (prior to 2000) on the grounds that it was a **necessary** method. A different view seems appropriate since the introduction of The Bitless Bridle in 2000. Now riders have the option of using a method of communication that is both practical and painless. It being no longer necessary to use a painful method of communication (*pace* the FEI rules and regulations which, in my opinion are now outdated and in need of revision), this puts the bit method of communication in a different light. It renders it open to the criticism that the bit method is a cruel method.

Bits can only be used by advanced riders without there being a high risk of (unintentional) abuse. And even advanced riders of Olympic stature are sometimes unwittingly abusive during the perils and hazards inherent in

[1] Many more FAQs are available online at www.bitlessbridle.com

[2] Tessa van Daalen-de Graaff

competitive horsemanship. But all users of bits for dressage have had the defense and excuse up to the year 2000 that:-

1. They were not aware that the bit was cruel, no evidence having been advanced and no accusations having been made. My evidence to the effect that the bit causes over a hundred behavioral and medical problems for the horse has only been published and made available in book form since 2003 ("Metal in the Mouth; the abusive effects of bitted bridles). In fairness, considerably more time has to be allowed for such evidence to be debated and generally accepted. The history of science suggests that this could take 40 years or longer.
2. There was no alternative method of communication available that was universally applicable, practical and non-abusive. None of the traditional bitless bridles (bosals, hackamores, and sidepulls) gave the dressage rider the ability to communicate subtle messages and all of them are pain-based.
3. The FEI rules for dressage still permit no method of communication other than a bitted method

Show jumpers have used hackamores and have had this alternative, though the option has not been widely adopted, probably because, once again, riders have not been satisfied with the degree of control that a hackamore provides, especially in regard to lateral control.

Why do you seem to be the only one stating this?

All new discoveries in science can ultimately be traced to individuals. Pioneers are, by definition, swimming against the current, and history indicates that initially they are invariably accused of heresy and are punished according to the methods of the age. These days, such people are rarely burnt at the stake but they are at risk of being ostracized, vilified, ridiculed and ignored.

If this is the case, and you can prove it scientifically, why are bits not prohibited?

A strong case could be made for prohibition but I am not intending to lead such a crusade. Prohibition may not come, if at all, for a hundred years. In the short term, all that I would hope for is that the present rules and regulations will be updated to permit the use of the BB, alongside bits, in competition dressage and other disciplines.

What needs to be done to get dressage and show jumping societies to change their attitude towards bitless bridles?

People need to petition for rule changes, constantly, repeatedly, persistently, in large numbers, and for as long as it takes.[3] At present, the FEI and national

[3] For more information see "On the Bit and the FEI" available online at www.bitlessbridle.com

federation rules are no longer in compliance with their own stated objectives to promote the welfare of the horse. Until such time as a rule change is introduced, I encourage riders to take part Hors Concours. This way judges will be influenced by the evidence that the BB enables riders to achieve exemplary performances that often justify higher scores than the 'legal' winner. Organizations might also consider sponsoring events specifically for bitless riders. Standards of judging have to be adjusted. For example, judges should be looking for a horse to be ' on the bridle' or 'on the aids,' not 'on the bit.'

One could say that if anybody wants to perform in a bitless bridle, why not let them, as it seems more difficult then with a bit?

On the contrary, it is actually easier to ride bitless. The bit causes riders so many problems that bitted riders are handicapped. With the BB, riders avoid hurting their horses. A pain-free horse is more compliant, willing, rhythmic and graceful. It listens attentively to its rider's cues and a true partnership is developed. A calm, spook-free horse is likely to be a better scholar and superior performer.

You are promoting the bitless bridle. How can Dutch people acquire such a device? Where and at what price?

We have agents in many countries (see our home page at bitlessbridle.com) but, as yet, no agent in Holland. In the meantime, we ship all over the world, so there is no difficulty in purchasing online. The 30-day warranty clock does not start running until the bridle arrives so people can buy without financial risk. Prices are on the website.

You claim a bit is not stopping the horse. It is inflicting pain and that's a signal to the horse. But apparently that pain signal has worked for many many years?

Horses are prey animals and pain or the threat of pain triggers avoiding action. For this reason, pain is often the trigger for a horse to bolt, buck or rear. Riders use a pain aid at their peril. The reason that the rein aid has 'worked' for many years is that most horses are tolerant and very forgiving. They have also evolved to hide their pain to a great degree, as it is not in their best interests in the wild to advertise any impediment to a predator. But experienced riders know that the way to signal a horse to stop is not though the reins at all but through seat and legs, breathing and balance.

'Hands' are regarded as very much a secondary method and one to be used both minimally and with great discretion. In fact, a master horseman will signal his horse to stop by releasing any contact on the reins, not by increasing the contact and 'pulling.' 'Seat and legs' can be described as a direct method of communication, in that the rider's seat and legs are fairly intimately in touch with

the horse's body, the degree of intimacy depending on the type of saddle employed. It is also a non-invasive method, as signals are transmitted to the horse's skin only and no internal organ is penetrated. Finally, if one assumes that 'legs' are not armed with spurs, and that the saddle is fitted properly, it is a painless method and one by which it would be difficult for even a novice rider to hurt the horse.

In stark contrast, 'hands' is an indirect method as the communication is by remote control through the intermediacy of reins and bit. As the bit is placed in a body cavity, the 'hand' method of communication is also an invasive method. Finally, it has to be admitted that because of the invasion of the highly sensitive oral cavity and the mechanical advantage that a long strap provides, the 'hands' method is a potentially painful method for the horse unless the hands are the hands of a master horseman.

Imagine that bits had not been invented and that riders were blessed with very long arms that did away with the need for reins. How do you suppose such a person would use his hands to persuade a horse to turn to left or right? Would he insert a metal rod in the horse's mouth and pull on this or would he simply place the palm of his hand against the horse's cheek and push? The latter I think. This is what the Bitless Bridle (BB) does.

A metal rod on the end of a pair of reins probably came into use because the horse chewed through any fiber, rope or leather thong that was placed in the mouth. Metal was more permanent and therefore more convenient as a method of 'remote control.' But the multitude of behavioral problems that it introduced (over a hundred …see "Behavioral Profile Questionnaire" online at www.bitlessbridle.com) were largely unrecognized and the handful of problems that were recognized were accepted as being 'necessary evils.'

The BB provides a humane and effective method of remote control.

Imagine again that the bit had not been invented and that a continuous leather loop was still being used in the 21st century as the method of communication between rider and horse, with one extremity of the loop being placed in the horse's mouth and the other end of the loop being held in the rider's hands. Now along comes some research veterinarian with an idea for a research project that he would like to get funded. His hypothesis is to test whether:

1. the section of the leather loop in the horse's mouth could be replaced with a metal rod
2. whether the change of material would be acceptable to the horse and
3. whether the change of material would improve the rider's communication with the horse.

The same hypothesis rendered in the form whereby the null proposition is tested might be phrased as follows:- "The insertion of a metal rod in a horse's mouth, in place of a leather thong, will cause no adverse change in a horse's behavior at exercise."

Imagine the howl of disapproval that a research grant with this objective would cause if submitted to the Animal Welfare Committee of his University Veterinary School. Such an objective would be instantly rejected on humane grounds and the grant would never be forwarded to a funding agency.

I think a lot of readers will follow your thoughts about the pain bits inflict, but will be scared to try without.

After a lifetime of indoctrination that bits are 'OK' it is perfectly understandable that riders should have misgivings about abandoning what they think of, incorrectly, as some sort of promise that the bit does indeed 'control.' But this fear has been successfully overcome by thousands of riders from novice to advanced. Some prior reading helps (eg., articles available online, a review of the Users Comments, and a careful study of the manual that accompanies every bridle), followed by a cautious start in an arena or small paddock. Then a trail ride perhaps with a quiet companion horse, preferably one in a BB. Confidence quickly follows as riders recognize how much calmer and compliant their horses are when they are not being frightened by the bit.

How will they be able to stop?
By seat, balance and breathing. The ideal and correct aid for slowing and stopping is to sit back in the saddle and release hand contact. A rein aid for stopping should, strictly speaking, only be used as a back-up. A read through the User's Comments online shows that, over and over again, riders comment that they have better 'brakes' than with a bit.

Steady or intermittent pressure on both reins applies a whole-head-hug that seems to trigger a 'submit' response, perhaps analogous to the way a babe-in-arms relaxes when cuddled. The actual mechanism may invoke balancing receptors at the poll, pressure on which triggers an inclination to slow and stop. Pressure on the noseband also encourages poll flexion, which triggers the same effect. In an emergency, a one-rein stop can be applied. Or the reins can be 'see-sawed to get the horse's attention but without the fear of hurting the horse. Horses should also be trained to respond to a verbal command WHOA.

A bitless bridle works by giving a sort of poll pressure. Isn't that just a different kind of pain signal?

No. It is virtually impossible to inflict pain with the BB. This is one of its many strengths and the source of its greater safety. The BB does not, anyway, work

by poll pressure alone. In fact the pressure at the poll is even more trivial than it is elsewhere. For steering, pressure is applied to one half of the head (left or right) and for stopping, pressure is applied to the whole of the head.

If a horse really bolts (because he's frightened by something spooky for instance, not by pain), isn't a pain signal just what you need to get his attention back to the fact that there is somebody still on his back? You might need a strong signal then? Can a bitless bridle do the same?

A'pain signal'?! … absolutely not. If a horse is frightened, say by sight or sound, it will spook and the result is that 99% of riders will clutch at the reins and bang the horse in the mouth. Now the horse associates the sight or sound with real pain and will be even more nervous next time. With the BB, even though the horse may still spook, and the rider still become unbalanced, all it feels is a painless tug at its head. The result is that it 'recovers' from its initial fright much more rapidly and is far less inclined to bolt, buck or rear. Riders should not look for 'strong signals' and least of all painful ones. They should look for safe signals. These a BB provides.

We have Anky van Grunsven, I don't know if you have ever seen her or heard of her training methods (which in some eyes are considered quite cruel). She has just received an award for the happiest athlete horse. Her horse seems to perform happy and willing. What is your point of view on that? (www.anky.com)

I am not familiar with her training methods so cannot comment but it is interesting to read that you say some feel her methods are 'cruel.' My 'point of view' is that you cannot know how happy a horse really can be until the bit has been removed. Many a BB user has been astonished to discover how much happier their horse is than when ridden in a bit, even though they were previously satisfied with their horse's attitude in the bit and obliviously unaware of all the signs of pain that it was then exhibiting.

Horses are strong creatures. {Agreed, which is why it is unwise of us to try and use our puny strength to control them] **Why do they let us inflict such pain on them by using bits for centuries?** [Many are remarkably forgiving, as already mentioned, but others are just worn down and become miserably defeated] **Why don't they fight it off much more often? [**They do. Many horses are extremely resistant and fight the rider all the time] **It is quite easy to get a horse used to accept a bit.** [Sorry, I disagree. Perhaps the more phlegmatic ones are simply expressing defeat rather than acceptance]

One of your statements is that the way a horses head is held (by using a bit) in dressage or show jumping is impairing it's breathing. [Yes, if the head is vertical or behind the bit]] **But even if you would be doing those sports in a bitless bridle, you would still want the horse to move with his head in that**

position. [Why would you? A horse (like any athlete) can perform better with an unrestrained and freer neck/head position and should be allowed this freedom. Collection should not to be judged by the position of the head but by the balance of the body. Judges should distinguish between true collection (self-carriage) and false collection (bit-induced poll flexion without true hindquarter impulsion). **So here the bitless bridle won't make any difference, it is the riding itself that is cruel?** I am not sure I understand your point here. You cannot be cruel with a BB.

I own a headshaker myself (so this is why I came across your articles) unfortunately. If a bitless bridle seems to work for some of those patients (I haven't tried it yet) how do you explain headshaking takes place in the spring [the warmer ambient temperatures and brighter light exacerbates the trigeminal neuralgia. As someone who was kicked in the face by a horse many years ago and has trigeminal neuralgia as a result, I can vouch for this from personal experience. It clouded my year in Kenya that followed soon after.] **and seems strongly related to hayfever-season?** [Pollen and summer dust may likewise irritate the nasal mucosa in a horse that is already hypersensitive because of bit-induced trigeminal neuralgia. On the other hand, the apparent connection may be a false one and be attributable to the increasing temperature of the season] **I can ride with a bit indoors and he doesn't shake at all, but as soon as I go outside he starts flipping up his head, the poor boy. What is the relation with using a bit? [**The explanation is referred pain from the bars of the mouth via the mental branch of the trigeminal to other branches of the trigeminal nerve, in this case the branches supplying sensitivity to the cornea of the eye.

Please read all the literature that I have already sent you, with more on the website. I am also attaching a diagram so that I can talk you through the anatomy.

It always seems a bit dodgy if a scientist or a vet promotes a device that he or she seems to make money out of. Can you take away this uneasyness?

The BB is the end result of 53 years of research and experience, following a lifetime's study of the horse's head, neck and chest, with a focus on the mouth, ear, nose and throat. During this time, I have made many discoveries that I have published and, as it were, given away for free. I am now 74 and have been a scientist for 53 years and a salesman of a product for the last six years only. When a product and its validation is based on a deep understanding of the physiology of the horse, is this not reassurance enough? Why might you prefer to buy a bridle from the owner of a tack shop that has never done any original research? Would you think better of the BB if, after all the sweat and tears I have invested to get this far, my company was going bust and I was losing money? I am glad to report that business is booming and this should surely indicate the confidence that the public is expressing in this quiet revolution. I am not a snake-

oil salesman and the BB is no scam. Neither am I a mere sponsor of this product, using my professional status to promote a product. I developed it, validated it and introduced it to the public, using knowledge that I had gained through many years of research. But my prime reason for doing this is not for financial gain (welcome though this is after living for so long on an academic salary) but my conviction that I am doing more to help the horse and the horse owner than at any previous time in my career.

The article based on the above interview was published in the Dutch journal "BIT' IN April 2006.

Reference:

Tulp, Marjan and van Daalen, Tess*, Een beter bit – versus – beter geen bit.* Bit #.131, April 2006 pp 16-19