

Bitless - Challenges and Solutions

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A look at some reasons why a person chooses to ride their horse bitless. These may be reasons that are not immediately apparent.

The decision by some horse riders to go bitless brings many of them face to face with more controversy, more issues, more challenges and more personal revelations than they might have envisaged.

Just as the barehoof vs. shod modalities of hoof care split the horse world, bitless vs. bitted is the new wave of division in the paddock. Depending on which side of the fence you sit on, your view of some people's reactions may seem quite strange, challenging or just like an insult.

The main difference between going barehoof and going bitless is the reality that many horse riders are now aware that horses can actually cope without metal shoes on their hooves. However the use of bits in horses' mouths is so common, so widespread and so traditional, it just does not even enter into the minds of horse people that a horse can be safely and successfully ridden, or driven, without a bit. This is a clear case of people not knowing what they don't know. Trainers, veterinarians, competitors, equine body workers and many recreational horse owners seem not to be able to grasp the concept that bits cause damage and bits are unnecessarily cruel. They are also unaware that by doing away with bits, many of the problems they face with horses will disappear. It seems like it's too bleedin' obvious. Ignorance though, is not bliss for the horse!

Then there are those who do know that bits are not nice things to put into a horse's mouth, but they keep on doing it.

Why?

Why does the decision to ride without a piece of metal in the horse's mouth challenge so many horse people, horse clubs and organisations, horse sport and industry bodies? Why, especially when it is clearly shown to be a better thing to do for the horse?

A lot of people believe that riding without a bit is unsafe. It may be that some horses are not safe period, bit or no bit. For example; some bolting or out of control horses will not stop - bitted or not. A bit or no bit does not make a horse safe.

A safe horse comes from training, relationship, understanding, consistency, and good horsemanship.

Many horse organisations and clubs mandate the use of bits on horses that come under their jurisdiction. Again the question, "Why?" should be asked. Given that horses are not necessarily safer in a bit, and indeed the opposite has been proven to be true, and given that a bit in a horse's mouth can cause discomfort, pain and injury to the horse, why at least can't the rules simply stipulate, "the rider must be able to demonstrate control of the horse"?

Good questions. And these are questions that people who wish to ride their horses bitless so often can't find satisfactory answers to. They see the current traditional situation as illogical, irrational, archaic and harmful to horses.

If we go back to the beginning of many horse riders' experience with horses, we will often end up at the pony club, or adult riding club grounds. For many, this is where the

seeds of horse-human relationships, horsemanship, horse care and horse riding are sown.

This is often where a rider's balance is developed as well. If the rider is struggling to maintain balance (and most of us have lost it at some stage) and needs something to hang on to and they have reins in their hands connected to a piece of metal in the horse's mouth, what do you think they are going to use to maintain or regain their balance? Can you imagine how the horse feels?

Would the horse in this situation be better off bitless? Ask the horse perhaps.

Conversely, how many people tell you that "they used to ride a pony when they were a kid in just a halter and it went fine". They'll tell you this as they open their horse's mouth and slip in a bit.

Despite many approaches by concerned horse people to the responsible authorities, the current rules of dressage in Australia, and most other countries around the world, do not allow a rider to compete without a bit in the horse's mouth. Why can't the rules give the option of bitless?

So often we see attempts to rectify a problem that appears to be 'tinkering at the surface' rather than taking a deeper and more thorough approach. It is often easier to dabble at the edges. We see this in political, educational, national, and many other spheres. We also see this approach in much of the horse world. However some people do choose to go to the heart of a problem. They can see the basic 'model' is flawed and a complete overhaul or rethink is required to make real and positive change.

We see this with the choice of some horse riders to go bitless.

Some of these people have a problem with their horse and, to give them credit, realise that the piece of metal in the horse's mouth is the cause. So they try bitless and the problem disappears. Well almost. The deeper seated problem may still be there and that may be what is being asked of the horse. The empathy, understanding and compassion of and for the horse may not be fully comprehended or appreciated by the human. But going bitless is a very positive step in a nice direction - for the horse.

When this 'step in the right direction' is followed up with another, and another, the heart of the problem gets closer and there is of course a much greater chance of finding a genuine and long lasting solution.

Now all of this may seem very 'problem focussed', so instead some people work the other way and keep their mind and eye open for opportunities for continuous improvement. They focus on what can be made better, what new ideas there are and what other ways are there of doing things that make life (for horse and human) better. They work on goal or desire based outcomes with their ego locked in the boot of the car while they are with their horse. This is very different from horse people who still have a need to compete in any way shape or form with their horses. Not saying this is wrong; I'm just suggesting that competitions and horses generally doesn't suit many horses - from the horse's point of view that is.

After searching the internet and listening to some horse people, the arguments people come up with to justify the continued use of a bit in a horse's mouth are interesting, to say the least.

However the science is irrefutable. The research is clear. Bits, any type, do cause discomfort, pain and injury to horses. Bits do not enhance a horse's performance - in

fact many studies have clearly shown that bitless horses perform, and stop better. This includes in dressage tests too.

Why then do people still think bits are a good idea? And why do they maintain this stance when so often they have not tried to transition their horse (and themselves) to the bitless option? Which bit don't they get?

The answers can be easily distilled down into two simple words. 'Fear' and 'ignorance'.

Horse behavioural problems can be dealt with in two ways (or three if ignoring the problem is considered 'dealing' with it). One way is harsher control. The other is understanding what is really causing the problem and effectively responding to that. Many horse behaviour problems can be directly attributed to the pain or discomfort that the bit in the horse's mouth is causing. One only has to look closely at a horse before and after the bit is put in its mouth. Often its behaviour changes. The horse may begin to chew on the bit, it may begin the restless head shaking that only ceases when the bit is taken out, or it may become clearly distracted or distressed.

For a person who does not understand what is really causing the problem with the horse, using a stronger or harsher bit may seem like a logical course of action. In this case it is "ignorance" that is preventing the adoption of the bitless option. The "ignorance" also encompasses lack of empathy, or the lack of ability to understand what the horse is experiencing. That horses regularly and constantly put up with bit induced discomfort or pain and only toss their heads or chomp at the bit is truly amazing. If the rider was subject to the same level of pain or discomfort themselves, they would scream!

Fear, the other reason why many people do not try the bitless option, can be a paralysing thing. It can cause people to freeze, to not think clearly, or to fail to try a commonsense and well proven course of action. People fear that their horse will be uncontrollable without a bit - when the opposite is true. Meanwhile the horse is subject to the invasion of their delicate oral cavity with a piece of metal and someone hanging on to it for dear life.

If you have ever witnessed a scared human on a traumatised horse (due to it being assaulted in the mouth) and the horse finally unloads the rider? What does the horse then often do? When the rider finally lets go of the reins, the horse stops and puts its head down to eat. Interesting!

Related to these reasons why bitless is not the current norm, is the widespread lack of knowledge of the good training maxim, "If it's not working, then try or ask more softly".

Mostly, people usually go the other way, the harsher way - but to use the softer way as a 'problem solver' does solve problems. Instead of going to a harsher bit, going bitless so often solves many problems exhibited in the horse. Instead of shouting at the horse, a whisper can be more effective. Instead of slapping him on the bum or digging him in the ribs to get going, lifting your eyes and hands in the direction you want to go quite often gets the go button operating. Instead of hauling on his mouth to stop or slow down, the rider 'thinks' slow or stop, breathes out and perhaps lifts a hand on a rein, and the horse pulls up.

Yes, softer does get a nicer response from a horse, just about every time. And bitless is softer and bitless is nicer because it is more on a 'conversation' level rather than a shouting match.

This may be one of the 'rubs or irritations' of choosing to go bitless. Or maybe 'paradox' is a better word to use here?

Why could this be a paradox then?

The choice to go bitless is felt by many to be of great benefit to the horse. It is believed to be kinder. It opens up to the rider and horse a new way of having a conversation. A horse person who explores this other way of communicating with their horse may not then be drawn to competing with him or her. Yanking and pulling on the horse are not a part of the bitless conversation, nor is forced collection. When people dance for the sheer enjoyment of it, it is very different from competition dancing.

Going bitless is perhaps more about the horse and less about the competition. It is more about subtlety than ego. It is more about softness than 'judged perfection'. It is more about asking than making. It is more about relationship than control. And if bitless is truly embraced, control is enhanced, perfection is achieved, and the ego becomes subtle. Paradox indeed!

Maybe the transition to bitless also embraces for some an attitude change, or even a philosophical change by the horse world toward what and how and why we do things with our horses?

Softer, nicer, quieter, calmer. That's what most people wish their horse to be.

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*Hoofnote: Transitioning to Bitless requires the horse person to learn the differences between riding with a bit and riding without one. These differences are easy to learn. It is highly recommended that this transition process is undertaken in a controlled, safe environment with the guidance of someone trained, or experienced, to help you put these different and new skills solidly into place. Both you and your horse will need to develop an understanding of what is being done and you both will be experiencing something new.

So do it safely, take your time and do it with good help.

More Reading on Bitless:

- www.naturalhorseworld.com Cynthia Cooper's website
- Metal Free Mouths Bitless Transition www.waterfallcreek.com.au/metalfreemouths
- <http://www.naturalhorseworld.com/Downloads/ToBitorNottoBit.pdf> By Janene Clemence
- www.bitlessbridle.com Website of Dr Robert Cook, a long time bitless advocate