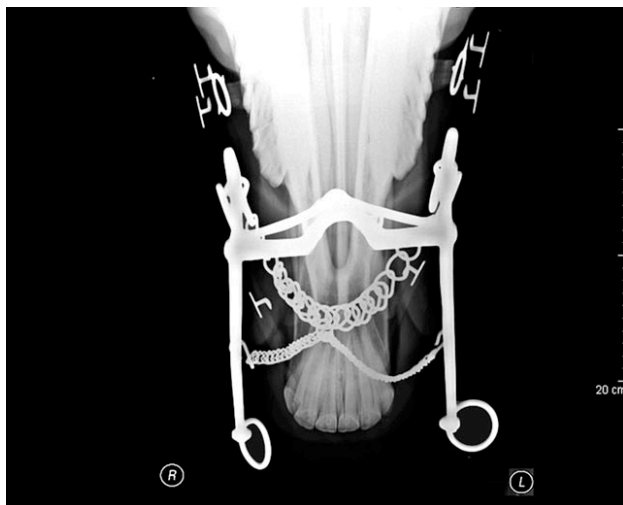


## An Apology to the Horse After 88 Years of Pain: *an interview with Robert Cook, FRCVS, PhD*

Congratulations to the Royal Dutch Equestrian Federation for being the first national federation to permit bitless dressage. In the next few weeks, the USEF has the opportunity to pass a similar rule and give further impetus to the reform. Figure 1 depicts the intra-oral devices that have been mandated by the FEI since 1921 for advanced dressage competitions. Provision of a humane option in the Netherlands sets an enlightened example for other federations to follow.

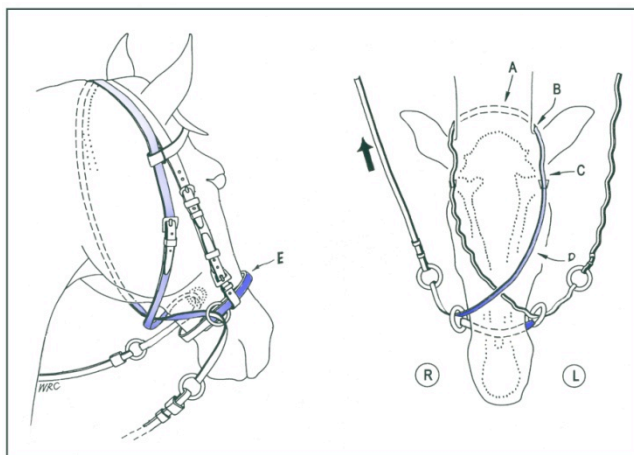


**Figure 1. The double bridle: painful, frightening, and dangerous**  
(Radiograph courtesy of Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University)

### NH: What is the status of the move to allow bitless bridles in the USEF?

RC: A proposal to allow the crossunder bitless bridle for dressage was filed in January 2009.

On September 1st, Breana Larson of Academia Liberti sent members of the USEF Dressage Committee a copy of their iPetition containing over 2000 signatures from all over the world. Many of the signers added comments. I particularly liked the comment from one signer who apologized to all her bitted horses in past years. The fallacious argument that a horse in a bitless bridle cannot be 'on the bit' may be cited in committee, so the members have also received copies of an article which reminds them that this misleading phrase arose out of a poor translation of the original FEI regulations in French (Cook 2009a). A more accurate translation would have been "on the aids"; something that is eminently possible with the crossunder bitless bridle (CBB) (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. The crossunder bitless bridle: painless, effective, no side-effects**

Members of the Dressage Committee have also received copies of a report on an experiment in October 2008 at the Certified Horsemanship Association's Annual Conference (Cook 2009b) and were asked to view the video on YouTube at [www.bitlessbridle.com/cat/Video.html](http://www.bitlessbridle.com/cat/Video.html). Four riding-school horses completed a four-minute exercise test, first in a snaffle bridle and then, immediately after and with the same rider, in a CBB. None of the horses had ever been ridden in a CBB and only two of the four riders had ever used the bridle. The average score was 3.7 when bitted and 6.4 when bitless. In four minutes, riders

improved their score, on average, by 75%. A statistical analysis provided strong evidence that the improvement was not the result of chance (Cook and Mills 2009).

The committee has also received a 12-page CBB bibliography (Cook 2009c). As I was the first to investigate the effect of the bit on the behavior of the horse it is not surprising that 97 items are my own articles, books and videos. As I have a conflict of interest, it is fortunate that my veterinary research contributions have been outnumbered by 133 supportive publications from independent authors.

Finally, the committee's attention has been drawn to this article - one on the prevention of accidents caused by bits, saddles and shoes (Cook 2009d), and another on the high prevalence (88%) of bit-induced damage to the bars of the mouth and teeth (Cook 2009e).

At the time of writing, the date for a meeting of the Dressage Committee to discuss the bitless rule change has not been set. It is to be postponed until early December or even January.

**NH: What is the next step in getting the USEF to see the light that bits are not necessary in matters of communication or collection; bits can be a source of accidents; collection is supposed to be free and not forced by the bit; and many people do not need or want to use bits?**

RC: Rule change proposals, such as this one, that have not been filed by a member of the Dressage Committee will have a harder time getting passed. The support of at least one committee member is probably vital to success. Please lobby committee members now. By the time this article is published there may only be a few days left before the committee meets. There are 20 members and most of them have posted their email addresses and telephone numbers on the USEF website ([www.usef.org](http://www.usef.org), click About USEF > Committee list > Dressage Committee or go directly to [www.usef.org/\\_IFrames/AboutUs/Committee/CommitteeDisplay.aspx](http://www.usef.org/_IFrames/AboutUs/Committee/CommitteeDisplay.aspx)).

USEF members can submit an online comment about the proposal. Find the CBB rule change on the USEF website by clicking in succession on Rules and Regulation > Rule Book > Rule Change > Currently Active Proposed Rule Changes > DR=Dressage Division > COMMENT FORM (or go directly to [www.usef.org/\\_IFrames/RuleBook/RuleProposals/PRCChater.aspx?chapter=DR](http://www.usef.org/_IFrames/RuleBook/RuleProposals/PRCChater.aspx?chapter=DR)). Enter your name, Member ID# and the Tracking# 006-09. Members and non-members can click on the tracking number (in the window prior to the Comment Form window) to see the proposal itself. Scroll down to the bottom of the proposal to see what committee action has been taken.

If the proposal is rejected, the earliest that a similar proposal can be resubmitted is 2011. If action is recommended, the final decision will be voted on by the Board of Directors during the Annual Meeting at the Marriott Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky, January 13-17, 2010. Forums at the Annual Meeting are open to non-USEF members. The bitless dressage proposal will be discussed at the International Rule Forum for dressage, eventing and jumping from 2-3 pm on Wednesday, January 13<sup>th</sup>. One hour provides a limited opportunity but I would be glad to hear from anyone who is able to attend.

The USEF Dressage Committee has an opportunity to make history by conferring a major welfare and safety benefit on horse and rider. Let's encourage them to grasp it.

**NH: Congratulations to you on the Royal Dutch Equestrian Federation's decision to permit bitless dressage. We are very encouraged by this news, and we are very grateful for all your efforts on behalf of the horse. We hope there will soon be further congratulations!**

**References (available online at [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com)):**

Cook, W.R. (2009a): *'On-the-bit': A misleading and mischievous phrase*

Cook, W.R. (2009b): *Bit vs. Bitless, Update*

Cook, W. R. (2009c): *The Crossunder Bitless Bridle's Bibliography*

Cook, W. R. (2009d): *Prevention of Accidents to Riders caused by Tack: Feel it, log it, fix it*

Cook, W.R. (2009e): *Prevalence of Bit-induced Dental and Interdental Pathology*

Cook, W.R. and Mills, D.S (2009): *Preliminary Study of Jointed Snaffle vs. Crossunder Bitless Bridles: A quantified comparison of behaviour in 4 horses*

**About Dr. Cook:**

Robert Cook FRCVS, PhD is Professor of Surgery Emeritus, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Tufts University in North Grafton, MA and is Chairman of the Bitless Bridle, Inc. Dr. Cook was introduced to the crossunder principle by Allan Buck in 1998 but the idea seems to be one that a few horsemen have been aware of for generations - its history traces back, so far, to the 1950s when it was developed by 'Ink' Grimsley for a group of his friends on the rodeo circuit. Dr. Cook's contribution has been to draw on his research into diseases of the mouth, ear, nose and throat of the horse to explain why the bit does not work and why the crossunder bitless bridle does. [drcook@bitlessbridle.com](mailto:drcook@bitlessbridle.com); 866-235-0938