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## **THE BITLESS BRIDLE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

The following pages provide brief answers to the most frequently asked questions but for more details please visit our website at [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com)

### **What is special about *The Bitless Bridle* and how does it work?**

It works on an entirely new concept compared with other bridles, including all other bitless bridles; i.e., the Hackamores, bosals and sidepulls. The current bitless bridles work primarily by potentially painful pressure on the nose, bringing about poll flexion. A bit also controls primarily by poll flexion but brings this about through potentially painful pressure on the mouth. In contrast, *The Bitless Bridle* is special because of the way it works. It provides control by applying gentle and painless pressure, distributed to the whole of the head. In other words, there is pressure across the poll, behind the ears, down the side of the face, behind the chin and across the nose. It does not depend for its control primarily on poll flexion. Whereas the bit exerts focal pressure on the mouth, *The Bitless Bridle* distributes its pressure over a wide area (one or both sides of the head, depending on whether you are steering or stopping) and over less sensitive tissues (skin and mainly underlying muscle). It does this through two loops, one over the poll and one over the nose. Essentially, it gives the rider an inoffensive and benevolent headlock, as compared with the bit's potentially offensive and painful control of the mouth. The difference between the two methods of control, in terms of pounds per square inch (psi) and the distribution of pressure, must be considerable. *The Bitless Bridle*, because it spreads the pressure and applies it to less sensitive tissue, is more humane than a bit. At no one region of the head does the degree of pressure amount to anything more than a squeeze. In this way, the bridle promotes improved performance without inflicting pain, without interfering with breathing or striding, and without disturbing that sense of partnership and harmony between horse and rider that is a fundamental of good horsemanship.

### **Why does a bit interfere with a horse's breathing?**

Just as food in the mouth stimulates digestive system reflexes, so also does a bit. A bit tells the horse to 'think eat'. Yet a rider needs the horse to 'think exercise'. Exercise requires very specific reflex responses from the respiratory, cardio-vascular and musculo-skeletal systems. Eating and exercising are two incompatible and mutually exclusive activities. Horses were not evolved, anymore than we were, to eat and exercise simultaneously.

For the purpose of eating, the horse responds with an open mouth, reflex salivation, and movement of the lips and jaw. When food is present, or when a bit is in place, there is also movement of the tongue and, frequently, retraction of the tip of the tongue. Place a pencil in your own mouth and you instinctively explore the foreign body with the tip of your tongue. The horse does the same with a bit. Consequently, the root of the tongue often bulges upward in the back of the throat and moves the soft palate in the same direction. The throat, which is capable of serving either swallowing or deep respiration, (one or the other but not both at the same time) is, by the presence of a bit, geared for swallowing. Accordingly the tongue tends to be mobile and so also is the soft palate which lies on the root of the tongue. From time to time during exercise, the soft palate will tend to be pushed up by the root of the tongue or by reflex 'gagging'. This results in an

enlargement of the digestive portion of the throat at the expense of the respiratory portion of the throat, i.e., it enlarges the food channel at the expense of the airway. The airway becomes partially or completely obstructed, depending on the degree to which the soft palate is elevated. For swallowing, this elevation or - as it is commonly called - dorsal displacement of the soft palate (DDSP), is perfectly normal and acceptable.

For the purpose of exercise, the horse needs a closed mouth (the horse is an obligate nose-breather), a relatively dry mouth (contrary to traditional thinking), and little or no tongue movement. Throat should be geared for deep breathing, not swallowing. Accordingly, the tongue should not be on the move and the tip of the tongue should not be retracted. The soft palate should be immobile and lowered, to enlarge the respiratory portion of the throat at the expense of its digestive portion, i.e., to enlarge the airway at the expense of the food channel. DDSP is normal for swallowing but abnormal and, in fact, disastrous for deep breathing. Predictably, episodes of DDSP are common in the racehorse, and particularly so in those racehorses (the Standardbreds) that race with TWO bits in their mouth.

Use of a bit sends conflicting messages to the horse's nervous system and the confusion is particularly evident in its effect on the horse's wind. Human athletes could not perform well with a bunch of keys in their mouth.

### **Why does a bit interfere with striding?**

At fast exercise, a horse takes one stride for each breath.<sup>1</sup> Striding and breathing are coordinated so that they occur in synchrony. Anything that interferes with breathing (such as a bit) also interferes with striding. The bit, to a degree that varies with the individual, results in a loss of that grace and rhythm of movement that is so characteristic of a horse at liberty. The constraint of movement is expressed in a more stilted gait and a shorter (therefore slower) stride. For more information on other ways in which the bit interferes with the stride, see the references listed below (especially #'s 10, 14 and 20).

### **Is it safe to ride without a bit in a horse's mouth?**

Allowing for the fact that there is an inherent risk attached to all horsemanship, *The Bitless Bridle* is safer than the traditional bit method of control. An ever-present risk with a bit is that a horse will respond to actual or remembered pain and do one of two things. It may attempt to negate the effect of the bit by placing it under its tongue and trapping it there, in which case the horse will be perceived by the rider to have a 'hard mouth', to be 'leaning on the bit' and be 'heavy on the forehand', or to be an inveterate 'puller'. Alternatively, and even more disastrously, the horse may choose to block what it perceives as the rider's offensive means of communication by 'taking the bit between its teeth'. At this point, the rider has no control, for the horse is controlling that by which it was previously controlled. Furthermore, in response to fear of pain or actual pain, the horse may become a runaway or bolter.

With *The Bitless Bridle*, control is both painless and permanent. At no time can the rider be deprived of the means of control. Furthermore, at no time can other instances of dangerous and unacceptable behavior (rearing, bucking, headshaking, stumbling etc.,) be triggered by bit-inflicted pain.

### **Will *The Bitless Bridle* give me as much control as a bit?**

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1. <sup>1</sup> Cook WR The diagnosis of respiratory unsoundness in the horse.  
*Veterinary Record*, 77:516-528, 1965.

Yes, and more so (see answer to previous question). Comprehensive dressage performances are possible with *The Bitless Bridle*. Steering is greatly improved and the rider's ability to slow or stop a horse are better than with a bit, i.e., the 'brakes' are safer and more reliable. Many a horse that was a habitual runaway in a bit, no longer exhibits this disturbing feature when the bit is removed (see the many testimonials to this effect in the User's Comments section of the website).

**Where can I obtain a bridle?**

From: *The Bitless Bridle Inc.*,  
Toll free: 1 866 235 0938  
[www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com)

**Do the bridles come in different sizes?**

Yes. The synthetic bridles (nylon and beta) come in three sizes, large, medium and small. Warm bloods take a large size; Thoroughbreds and other breeds of horse take a medium size; ponies take a small size. All sizes are adjustable. Unless you have a warm blood or a pony, you need a medium size. We also offer a black beta bridle designed for draft horses. In the near future, we plan to offer this headstall with blinders attached. We are also in process of developing a driving bridle for the Miniature Horse. The driving headstall is identical in basic design to the riding headstall but with the addition of blinders.

The leather bridles are made in England and come in four sizes, extra full (for warmbloods), full (for all average sized horses), cob, and pony.

**Do they come in different materials?**

The synthetic bridles, assembled out of man-made materials, come in nylon, or vinyl (Beta). The nylon bridle is a straight webbing material. Beta comprises a nylon foundation with a covering of flexible vinyl. It looks and behaves like a synthetic rubber, being flexible but – because it has a nylon foundation – it does not stretch. It has a slightly grainy surface and, from a respectable distance, can easily be mistaken for leather.

The standard leather bridles and padded bridles are made in England from top-quality English leather. The custom leather bridles are made from the same materials but are crafted in the USA by an English Master Saddler.

**Do they come in different colors?**

Nylon bridles can be ordered in a variety of whole colors. Black and brown are standard and are kept in stock but custom orders can be taken for nylon bridles in red, blue, white, green, gold and purple.

The Beta material comes in three standard colors, black, dark brown and chestnut brown.

**Can I purchase the headstall only and use my own reins?**

Yes. The headstall is designed to allow this. Your reins attach to 'O' rings on the crossover straps and the only thing you have to be prepared for is that you will end up with a loop of rein in your hands that is about 5' longer than usual. As long as you can handle this extra length there is no reason why you should not use your own reins.

**What sort of reins come with the bridle if I order the whole set?**

For English and Western riding the standard width of rein is a 5/8" rein. The racing rein is a 1" rein.

The standard set of reins in the synthetic materials has attractive clay-colored rubber grips. When these are fitted on 5/8" reins, the total width of the rein is a little less than 1". Plain reins can be purchased in Beta but plain reins in nylon are not available as such reins would be too flimsy to handle.

In leather, reins are plain, laced or fitted with rubber grips, as required.

### **What is your return policy?**

If you are hesitating about committing to a Bitless Bridle on account of its unfamiliarity, its cost, or some uncertainty as to whether it would work well for you or your horse, here is the company's offer.

- Purchase any synthetic bridle (nylon or Beta), using a credit card (Visa or Master Card), a personal check, cash or COD
- We will ship you a bridle
- If within 30 days you don't like it (improbable), return it to us and we will give you your money back, less the cost of shipping. No questions will be asked, though if you cared to tell us why you were unable to get on with it, we would be interested.
- If, on the other hand, you love the bridle (much more likely), but would now like to upgrade to a leather version, then return the synthetic bridle to us within 30 days and we will give you full credit for the synthetic bridle against the price of a leather one.
- Leather bridles may be returned immediately if they do not fit, either in their entirety or in part. There will always be a few horses that do not comply with the 'average.' For example, a given horse may take a medium size bridle but need a large size noseband or a small size browband. We regret that, for a full refund, it is not possible to accept the return of leather bridles after they have been used.

Essentially, the warranty allows you to try the concept of the bridle for a month, and the only expense you will incur is the cost of shipping.

### **Which is the best of the materials?**

This is very much a question of personal opinion. The answer depends on what you prefer to be seen riding in and how much time you wish to invest in maintenance. As far as function is concerned, there is nothing to choose between the materials. They all work as well as each other, so it comes down to a choice depending on economics and utilitarian considerations, with tradition playing its usual role.

Leather is lovely but expensive and needs a lot of careful maintenance. In the synthetic materials, nylon needs more care than Beta. Beta is the most popular synthetic material, as it has a leather-look and is both soft and flexible, yet is durable and cleans up easily with a dunk in a bucket of water.

### **I understand that the reins cross over under the chin. Does one have to use different aids?**

No, the hand aids are exactly the same. Instead of pulling on the mouth, you push one half of the head to steer and you squeeze the whole of the head to slow or stop.

### **Is a running martingale an essential part of this new system of control?**

No. Those horses that are normally ridden in a running martingale because they toss their heads when controlled by a bit will probably cease their head tossing when the bit is removed.

**Does horse need a long training period to get accustomed to *The Bitless Bridle*?**

No. Most horses gladly accept the benison of the bitless state more or less immediately. There is little or no learning curve for the horse. Some riders may take a few days to get accustomed to the new method of control but most take to it quite happily on the first day.

**Can *The Bitless Bridle* be used on all types of horse and for all activities?**

Yes. As far as type and temperament of horse is concerned, there are no known contraindications for its use. In fact, it can be said that *The Bitless Bridle* can be used more universally than a bit. For example, if a horse has a sore mouth, lip sarcoids, dental problems, lacerations of lips, gums or tongue, a bit may be unusable. Horses that with a bit are confirmed pullers, 'hard mouthed', 'headshakers', stumblers, or difficult rides in other ways may well be found to be those very horses that benefit most from being ridden in *The Bitless Bridle*.

There are some activities for which the bridle has not yet been thoroughly tested (polo being the one that springs to mind, at present) but it is probably only a matter of time before these gaps are filled rather than because there are contraindications. To date, for example, it is known that the bridle is being used for eventing, show jumping, dressage, foxhunting, pleasure riding and driving. It is already popular with trail and endurance riders, where it has the advantage of allowing a horse to eat and drink easily during rest periods without the need to remove the bridle. As implied above, there is no reason to believe that *The Bitless Bridle* would not be equally applicable to all forms of driving, as it is to riding.

The only restrictions on its use are man-made, in the sense that currently there are FEI/USEF regulations in place which require that a bit be worn for certain competitions. These regulations seem to be governed more by tradition than for reasons of safety, practicality or equine welfare. For example, there is the slightly bizarre situation whereby a rider is currently required to use a bit for the dressage phase of a combined training event but can use *The Bitless Bridle* for the cross-country and show jumping phases. In the UK and the USA, the stewards of racing at all tracks currently require a Thoroughbred to wear a bit.

**Under riding school conditions, can *The Bitless Bridle* be used by a novice?**

Yes. One of the many advantages of the bridle is that no harm can be done to the horse. An instructor may be loathe to allow a novice to use a bit when riding a fully-trained horse, for fear that a novice might do some damage to the horse's mouth. No such reservations apply to *The Bitless Bridle*. This means that a novice can now have the pleasure and educational experience of riding a properly schooled horse and benefit by having the horse do much of the teaching.

For the same reasons as above, the bridle is being used by many organizations that run 'Riding for the Handicapped' programs.

**Are there any particular points to watch with regard to first using, fitting or adjusting *The Bitless Bridle*?**

Before using the bridle, read the manual carefully. If possible, use the bridle in a covered school or small paddock in the first instance, so that horse and rider can gain confidence under optimally safe conditions. Horses can be introduced to the feel of the bridle by being lunged in the bridle first, before they are mounted (for details, see the Manual). The exercise riders of young Thoroughbred racehorses can gain confidence in the bridle by first using it in conjunction with a second snaffle bridle (see Manual). They may choose a compliant horse for their first bitless ride

or take the steam out of a more aggressive horse by first longeing it or by giving it a turn round the track in a bitted bridle before using *The Bitless Bridle*.

*The Bitless Bridle* relies on leverage applied from a firmly positioned 'O' ring on a noseband that is much lower on the head than is customary with a bit. The most common mistake in fitting is a failure to place the noseband low enough. The second most common mistake is failure to tighten up the noseband sufficiently.

### **What if competition regulations require the use of a bit?**

In the passage of time, it is hoped that competition organizers will come to recognize the many practical and welfare benefits of *The Bitless Bridle* and adjust the rules accordingly.

### **Might *The Bitless Bridle* be of help in eliminating the problem of headshaking?**

**Yes.** The mouthpiece of a bit lies on the tongue and the bars of the mouth, and the various rings and shanks of a bit lie in contact with the lips. The tongue, gums and lips are all richly supplied with sensory nerves. The bit is lying directly above the terminal branches of the sensory nerve to the mouth (the mandibular branch of the fifth cranial nerve, known as the Trigeminal nerve) and in contact with the exquisitely sensitive lips of an animal that, left to its own devices, is fastidious about what it puts in its mouth.

In the past, Cook has not been able to put forward any convincing explanation for the cause of headshaking in the horse. Even less has he been able to suggest any satisfactory treatment. But, from studying the effect of *The Bitless Bridle*, he now recognizes that the bit is the most common cause of headshaking. He concludes that headshaking may be a sign of trigeminal neuralgia (tic douloureux) brought on by persistent pressure of the bit. In man, "the fifth cranial nerve is often the seat of neuralgia." In the horse, local pain in the lower jaw (sensed by the mandibular branch of this nerve), and referred pain in the upper jaw (transmitted by the maxillary branch of this same nerve), could well be experienced by affected horses.

Current theories about the cause of headshaking support the idea that the cause is multi-factorial. This new theory provides a unifying hypothesis for the cause of headshaking as it provides an explanation which is compatible with all the different manifestations of the headshaking syndrome. For example, many 'headshakers' show great anxiety, immediately after exercise, with the need to rub their faces on anything handy.<sup>2</sup> Cook believes this to be a manifestation of facial pain. Similarly, some headshakers appear to get comfort from the pressure of a fly net over their muzzle during exercise, and this too may be effective because slight pressure may help to block out the pain of trigeminal neuralgia. The problem is seasonal in many horses, occurring only in the warmer seasons of the year. Once again, the bit hypothesis can explain this as trigeminal neuralgia in man is often aggravated by heat and sunburn. Similarly, the sneezing and sensitivity to bright light, which are characteristic of the headshaking syndrome, can both be explained on the grounds that they are secondary to trigeminal neuralgia.

It will be simple enough, in time, to put this new hypothesis to the test on a large number of headshakers. Indeed, such a project may soon commence in England. From our present experience, most horses stop headshaking immediately the bit is removed. A few horses may need a little more time for the neuralgia to subside.

### **What is the history of the present company?**

Publicity for the bridle started in a small way in December 1997 but grew steadily. Dr Cook first demonstrated the bridle during a talk he gave in December 1997 at the American Association of

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<sup>2</sup> Some headshakers even try to rub their faces on their forelegs during exercise

Equine Practitioner's Annual Convention in Phoenix, Arizona and was a speaker at Chesapeake College's Horseman's Event in November 1998. He gave two seminars on bits and bitlessness at the Virginia Horse Center, Winter Equine Expo in January 1999. In February 1999 he made a documentary film on the bridle for Deutsche TV, which was shown in Germany in April 1999. The bridle was exhibited at the Bruce Museum, Greenwich, CT as part of a special exhibit "Science of the Horse" which ran for 6 months in 1999. A web site for the bridle was created in November 1999 and in 2000 a modest advertising campaign was commenced through Cook's company, ELG Inc. In the summer of 2000, Cook was the keynote speaker at an equine veterinary conference in Berlin, Germany and on 21 October, 2000 was a guest on the nationally syndicated radio show 'The Horse Show with Rick Lamb.' (The interview is available for a year at [www.thehorseshow.com](http://www.thehorseshow.com)). During 2000, the bridle was featured at a number of trade shows and was awarded the prize at Equitana 2000 for the most innovative item of tack. In late 2000, Cook went into partnership with a businessman, Paul Yeagle, and the present company, The Bitless Bridle Inc, was formed. The company now has a business office in York, PA. It markets the bridle online and by mail order, in this country and abroad.

### Where can I obtain more information about the bridle?

The following articles and letters have been published and are listed here in order of publication. Articles in scientific journals are shown in bold type. The underlined items are available online at [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com):

1. Cook W.R.: "**Use of the Bit in Horses**" *Veterinary Record*, 21 February 1998
2. Cook W.R.: "**Use of the Bit in Horses**" *Veterinary Record*, 13 June 1998
3. Bonner J.: "**Changing Tack: Horses may prefer bridles with a bit missing.**" *New Scientist*. 4 July 1998, p16.
4. Cook W.R.: "Death in the Afternoon; Breakdowns, Bleeding and Bits" *Thoroughbred Times* 5 September 1998, p21
5. Dishington Heather: "Spirit Bridle: Revolution or Gimmick?" *The Australian Arabian Horse News*, September 1998
6. Schuelein S.: "New Bitless Bridle touted to Californian Trainers" *Thoroughbred Times*, 28 November 1998
7. Cook W.R.: "An Explanation for Headshaking" *Thoroughbred Times*, 16 January 1999
8. Sykes Melissa F.: "Bitless Control" *The Backstretch*, January/February 1999, p21-23
9. McFarland, Cynthia: "Spirit without the bit's bite." *Thoroughbred Times*, March 6, 1999
10. Cook W.R.; "**Pathophysiology of Bit Control in the Horse**" *Journal of Equine Veterinary Science*, vol. 19, pp196-204, 1999
11. Cook W.R.: "The Penalties of Bits and the Benefits of Bitlessness." *Horse America*, May 1999
12. Sykes Melissa F.: "Less is More." *The Homestretch*, August, 1999
13. Sykes, Melissa F.: "Equipment Change," *Florida Horse*, August, 1999
14. Cook W.R.; "Asphyxia as the cause of bleeding, and the bit as the cause of dorsal displacement of the soft palate" *Thoroughbred Times*, 27 November, 1999
15. Barakat, Christine; "A Bitless Bridle for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." *Equus*, April 2000, p108
16. Whitfield, Pam; "The Bitless Bridle." *Equine Journal*, April 2000, p 132.
17. Cook, W.R.; "**Respiratory and other Problems Caused by the Bit**" *Pferdeheilkunde*, June 2000
18. Editorial. "Equitana, and the winners are ...". *Horseman's Yankee Pedlar*, September, 2000
19. Cook, W.R.; Interview. *The Horse Show with Rick Lamb*, October 21, 2000  
[www.thehorseshow.com](http://www.thehorseshow.com)
20. Cook, W.R.; "The Penalties of the Bit and the Benefits of Bitlessness." (An expanded version of a previous article) *Pferdegesundheit (Health of Horse)*, December 2000.
21. Gimenez, Rebecca. "The Bitless Bridle", [www.EquineBovine.com](http://www.EquineBovine.com) December, 2000

Other pamphlets and instruction sheets are available on request