

Going Bit-less *a personal experience*

For quite some time I'd been intrigued by the idea of a bitless bridle, but never pursued it. After all I had plenty of bridles, bits, and nose bands since I was always seeking the ideal combination. Besides bitless was not allowed in dressage competition.

I'd ridden our P.R.E. Andalusians in halters with lead ropes, side pulls, and Spanish serretas and figured a bitless bridle would be similar. So what happened to change my mind?

After having 3 foals in the past 3 years our 14 year old gray broodmare, Jabalina D, was returning to under saddle work. At first she was enthusiastic and willing, but soon showed discomfort with her bit and any other bit I tried. She drooled copiously and did not want to go forward. It had been a while since she'd seen the dentist, so she was floated and nothing unusual was mentioned. The bit problem did not improve though she was happy longeing and riding with a halter. Then I noticed melanomas about the size of the end of my thumb on the insides of her lips, both sides, top and bottom. That's when I ordered Bitless Crossunder Bridle designed by veterinarian Dr. Robert Cook.

It took a couple days for Jabalina to realize she could go, stop, back, leg yield, shoulder in, without pain and without drooling. Then she began to offer to go more forward and she was more relaxed. She was enjoying her work again.

Well this was pretty exciting. What about my other horses? Bryssa RC, a very young 6 year old P.R.E. training First Level, had recently starting grinding her teeth on whatever bit I tried. She had not done this before, and did not grind her teeth unless there was a bit in her mouth. Here is a bitless prospect, I thought.

Now Bryssa has always been very opinionated. And she does not hesitate to express these opinions. Her vote was YES!!! What a difference with Bryssa. She was going forward more freely and was immediately responsive to the aids. It seemed like she was more aware of the aids now that she was not fighting the bit and she was very willing to respond.

Of course I had to try it on my 11 year old gelding, Marchoso D. The first time we used the Dr. Cook's Bitless was on a trail ride at Lake Ray Roberts with a couple of Tennessee Walkers. We had to do a lot of trotting to keep up. He was energetically forward and had no problem halting. But would he be able to do his Second Level stuff in the arena?

Marchoso has always been high headed and in the arena with this new bitless gizmo his head was up. I had to ride with virtually no contact for a few days and slowly review his repertoire, beginning with walk/halt, showing him that he could do it. Now after a few weeks he understands that he can do Second Level with contact as before, and maybe even a little better. Half pass trot and canter are coming along. Of course the goal, as always with Marchoso, is more relaxation, and that's coming along too.

I put Marchoso back into the snaffle after we had a less than stellar day in the bitless. Strangely enough we had the exact same problems with the bit. The next day, back in the bitless, he was perfect. Hmmmm.....

So what am I going to do at show time? Bitless bridles are not permitted in dressage competition, though they are allowed in some Western classes. No, I don't plan to go Western. Dr. Cook has requested the USEF Dressage Committee approve his bridle for competition but wheels of change turn slowly.

In short, I'm not sure if I will show. Although I like to measure my progress by showing before qualified judges, my horses' happiness, comfort, and relaxation are more important. That's what really makes me happy too. Of course the best thing would be if the USEF Dressage Committee recognized that the benefits of Dr Cook's Bitless bridle are totally in line with what dressage is supposed to accomplish-relaxation, suppleness, strength, collection, etc. (Training Pyramid) and that there's no unfair advantage to riders going with or without bits.

There is a wealth of information on Dr Cook's website, <http://bitlessbridle.com>. I am merely relating my experiences and maybe you'd like to try it. Once the horse is used to the bitless bridle, which may take a day to a week or so, the feel, in my experience, is very close to that of a dressage snaffle bridle. Perhaps driving into heavy contact would not work, but I'm not sure since my guys prefer a lighter contact anyway.

Would you like to try it? I have a spare you could borrow. You just might make your horse very happy!

Submitted by Sharon Small