



Bits vs. Bitless – the facts – compiled by the students of Hidden Brook Farm

Myth	Fact
NB 4-H is following all major breed shows in demanding that bits be used with horses showing	All major breed shows including the AQHA and ApHCC allow horses under 6 years of age to show in a hackamore or bosal. 4-H in Western Canada and certain US states allow 4-H members to show in bosals and hackamores. FEI allows cross country competitors to show bitless. In March 2012 in Helsinki, Finland, a dressage competition was held among International riders and attended by over 3000 spectators. Traditional dressage riders rode bitless for the first time and were impressed with their horses' performances. Most had only days to practice, but assured if they had more time, they "would have reached the same results with the bitless bridle as with a bit".
You need a bit for control. It is the emergency brake for a horse	Often when a horse is out of control, it is due to a fear reaction. Although a few major horse people have asserted that "pain" introduced may bring a horse out of instinct and back to their "thinking" brain. More major research asserts that a familiar action is more effective (such as practiced groundwork or a one rein stop) and that introducing pain only frightens a horse more. It is also well documented that in a "run away" situation, horses can grab a bit in their teeth and take off. Control with horses is gained more with their brain and connection than with mechanical devices.
Misuse of a bitless bridle can cause pain and swelling on the nose and jaw; improperly fitted bitless anything and rough hands can cause damage to the cartilage on the horses' nose or even break the fine bones that protect the nasal passages	This is actually not a myth – but true. However, it is true of both bitless and bitted situations. Poor riding is poor riding and is not what 4-H encourages. There is much more damage however, documented from bitted riding as there are more fine nerves in a horses' mouth than on their noses. And on their tongues. The bit acts a lever. And from basic physics, we know that a lever greatly increases pressure. Alexander Nevzorov has done extensive research and autopsies and discovered severe damage to the bone structure of most horses ridden with a bit. The pressure he measured in a horses' mouth from an 11 year old giving a small jerk of the reins is unbelievable. Hundreds of pounds of pressure. He maps the nerve structure in a horses' mouth and shows how extensive it is. Though bitless riding uses pressure points on a horses' nose. There are more nerve endings in the sensitive mouth. One bitless clinician starts all of her talks by asking the participants to put a "human bit" that she has made into their mouths for the hour long duration of the talk. She asks them to fit them loosely – not with the "wrinkles in the mouth" that we often give horses. And just leave them there. Most participants are so uncomfortable – even without anyone pulling on their "reins" that they refuse to use a bit again.
Bits are healthy for a horse. Some horses like to mouth them.	While this is true that some horses like to mouth a bit – many more do so in discomfort. And horses that mouth a bit are generally looking for food. When anything goes into a horses' mouth, the horse's physiology assumes it is food and a flap to open between the lungs and stomach, to prevent food from going into the lungs, significantly reducing the oxygen load that is available to our horse. Most horses are asked to exert themselves with a bit in their mouth. They can perform much better if oxygen is unhampered.
Horses like having something in their mouth	Common and negative reactions to a bit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gaping mouth (some riders use a noseband to hold the mouth shut) • Heads being lifted, tossed or thrown • Tails swishing • Head shaking • Backing to evade pressure (this is often not controlled) • Necks bowed in an un-natural position
People have been riding with bits for thousands of years, why change? It is the status quo.	Bits are a hangover from the Iron age. Native Americans actually controlled their horses without bits. Many Parelli or Stacy Westfall fans among other natural horse practitioners are now showing that control of the horse has nothing to do with their face at all. In fact, even in traditional riding, over 90% of the cues you give the horse are supposed to come

	<p>from the body, not the hands. Natural horse people show that in addition to using the body, control comes from connection with the horse. There is very little that we do today that we did 2000 years ago. Status quo has not existed for thousands of years in very many situations. Why the horse? Why the bit? As we evolve – why can't we leave this behind too? In fact, the bit has not been shown to be an efficient or safe method of communication.</p>
Horses perform better with a bit	<p>Initially, I thought to prove that horses performed the same with a bit as bitless. But I could not. You see, the majority of scientific studies on this matter have shown the "bitless riding provided a MUCH MORE CONTROLLED, SAFE and ACCURATE performance". One study by the Certified Horseman's Association which I am familiar with took school horses which were never ridden bitless – and graded them on a two 4 min. performances with their horses in their normal bitted gear – then switched the horses – and had the same students ride the same horses in the same pattern. None of the horses had received any "bitless training" and all horses performed significantly better and were more comfortable bitless. In the Journal of Veterinary Behaviour, July 2009, Jessica Quicka and Amanda Warren-Smith found that "horses wearing bitless bridles performed at least as well as, if not better than, those in bitted bridles." These experiments have been repeated, varied slightly and repeated again. And the results remain the same. But still people won't listen.</p>
Horseback riding is the most dangerous sport – with the most accidents or injuries	<p>This is not a myth – but true. However, how many of these accidents were with bitless horses? More than 90% of the horses ridden in Canada are ridden with bits. So it is safe to say that many of these accidents (probably at least 90%) occurred with bitted horses. I have not seen any evidence to the contrary or that shows riding with a bit reduces accidents, etc.</p>
AQHA does not allow bitless riding in shows for mature horses.	<p>While this is true, and they allow bitless riding with young horses, it's odd, as many of the association publications promote bitless riding and even a recent article called "Fighting the Bit" talks about the many problems horses have accepting the bit. They even say in the article that "Training horses is not difficult. They are quite willing to perform any task they are capable of, so long as it does not cause them immediate pain." Odd again though as all agree that the bit causes immediate pain. I wonder why this doesn't translate to trying bitless? I'm not sure.</p>
You need to use a bit to ride your horse	<p>The logic of using a bit just does not hold water and science does not support it. But for some reason, this provokes an emotional response in people. Perhaps they feel judged. Perhaps they know it might be better to ride without a bit. I'm not sure. But they can do what they want – we prefer to ride bitless. Logic and science supports it. And our horses remain comfortable and respectful – so we see no reason to back down from our convictions.</p>
We will force our beliefs on others	<p>We don't care if others ride with a bit. It's their horse and their choice. We hope they might consider riding bitless. But the ultimate decision is between them and their horse. We just want to be allowed to ride according to our personal convictions.</p>
Organizations that allow bitless riding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All major breed associations • 4-H groups in Western Canada and parts of the US • Equine Canada (but not in dressage yet – jumping and cross country is OK bitless) • Hunter classes (called "unconventional tack") • Horse and Rider's Lynn Palm (marks over 4 decades of riding bitless) • North American Trail Riding Competition • Canadian Cowgirls and other drill teams • Spruce Meadows Battle of the Breeds • Parelli shows and exhibitions • Extreme Mustang Makeover • The Road to the Horse • Hidden Brook Farm students • This is not an extensive list – but bitless is certainly catching on...