



QUESTION: Can the Bitless Bridle be used for driving?

Short answer: Yes.

Long answer: Yes, because ... but take care

Use of the bit for riding is a mistake. Fundamental physiological facts can be cited to demonstrate the truth of this statement. Over the last six years, a thorough testing of The Bitless Bridle, under saddle, has proved this conclusion. Extensive trials have shown that horses perform much better when the bit is removed. The same facts apply equally, if not more so, to driving. The only difference is that, as yet, the testing of these facts in relation to driving is still in its infancy. Nevertheless, early results support the same conclusions and all that is now needed is an extensive trial period and more feedback.

It is a risky mistake to use any method of communication (such as a metal rod in the mouth) that causes pain. This is a mistake with regard to the welfare of the horse and the horseman. An animal in pain does not pay attention to the horseman's wishes and, under these conditions, accidents occur.

The horse is a prey animal and easily frightened. Millions of years of natural selection have evolved this remarkable animal. The horse's well-developed sense of fear and its ability to run has ensured its evolutionary survival. These two characteristics are in no way eliminated in the so-called domesticated horse of modern times. The pain of a bit frightens the horse. When frightened, horses run. It is their first and preferred line of defense, regardless of the source of the pain. If they don't run (bolt) they may, as a secondary option, fight or freeze. But whatever is the manifestation of pain and fear that the domesticated horse exhibits it is potentially dangerous to all concerned. It is a serious mistake to frighten an animal as powerful as a horse.

If a bit is in the mouth of a well-trained horse and the reins or lines from the bit are in the hands of a master horseman, perhaps such a situation is acceptable but only on the understanding that the bit is hardly used, if at all. But a method of communication that requires such finesse is not a method that can be recommended to the average horseman and certainly not to the novice. The bit is a method of communication that, albeit unintentionally, is too easily abused,

My research has shown that the bit is responsible for causing over a hundred problems in equitation (see the evidence in my three-part article “Fear of the Bit” available online at www.bitlessbridle.com). Most of the problems can be classified under the heading of **fear** (manifested as nervousness, anxiety, a tendency to lather-up, and become ‘hot’). The pain of the bit frequently triggers **flight** (bolting, running-away, rushing, and restlessness) and also **fight** (resistance, arguments, bucking, rearing, and a general loss of the harmony between man and horse that is the hallmark of good horsemanship). The fourth ‘F’ is **facial neuralgia** (the headshaking syndrome, which includes muzzle rubbing, sneezing, snorting, head shyness, photophobia etc.). In addition, the bit **obstructs a horse’s breathing** (shortness of breath, ‘roaring,’ soft palate displacement, asphyxia, and bleeding from the lungs), causes **premature fatigue** (falls, stumbling, stresses and strains to the legs) and **reduces performance**. It commonly damages the bone of the jaw at the bars of the mouth and causes the eruption of exquisitely painful **bone spurs** at this site. The frequency with which a horse defends itself from the bit by grabbing it between its teeth, results – over time - in serious **erosion of the first and second cheek teeth in the lower jaw**. The erosion can lead to these teeth being rubbed down to their roots. From this it can be readily understood that bits cause severe toothache. A more detailed indictment of the bit is available at www.bitlessbridle.com and in my book, “Metal in the Mouth: The abusive effects of bitted bridles.” (available online)

The Driver’s Needs:

The driver relies even more heavily than the rider on effective and safe (i.e., painless) communication with the horse’s head. In the absence of any ability to control by seat and legs, the hand aids are of prime importance. Voice aids and discrete communication via the whip are supplementary aids but the rein is the only direct communication that the driver has for most of the time.

The Driver’s Mechanical Advantage:

Because the driver’s feet can be stabilized on the dashboard, it is relatively easy for drivers, when using a bitted bridle, to throw the whole of their body weight against the horse’s highly sensitive mouth. The leverage provided by the long reins facilitates this process mechanically and further increases the bit’s intensely focused pressure on the bars of the mouth, tongue and lips. In reality, such an ‘advantage’ represents a liability, as it is far too easy to inflict severe pain.

The Bitless Bridle Alternative:

The two compelling advantages of the Bitless Bridle are that, first, it is virtually impossible to inflict pain. Secondly, partly because of this pain-free feature but also because of the head-hugging design of the bridle, it provides superior and comprehensive communication. Drivers are safeguarded against the possibility that, in an emergency and albeit unintentionally, they might hurt the horse and precipitate a crisis. In driving, as in riding, I am of the opinion that accidents are less likely to happen if the bridle is bitless rather than bitted.

Can the Bitless Bridle be used for Showing?

The current regulations for competition driving require the use of a bit. Until these regulations are amended, a Bitless Bridle will not be acceptable for FEI sponsored competitions. In due course, national organizations will surely recognize that the Bitless Bridle is entirely compatible with the stated objectives of the FEI to safeguard the welfare of horse and driver, and will update their regulations to bring them into line with the advance in welfare that the Bitless Bridle offers.

In the meantime, the Bitless Bridle option is freely open to pleasure drivers. It is only partially open to competition drivers as their horses cannot benefit from the Bitless Bridle during an actual competition. Nevertheless, such drivers can still choose to train their horses predominantly in the Bitless Bridle. Even though they have to revert to a bitted bridle for competitions, some of the advantages of the bitless training will carry over. For example, come the day of the competition, the horse will not have a sore mouth and may not be quite so nervous, apprehensive and liable to spook.

Product Availability:

A Bitless Bridle headstall specifically designed for driving, as opposed to riding, has been developed and is now available in all sizes from draft to miniature (see www.bitlessbridle.com). The headstall is designed in such a way that the driving lines can be attached to the rings of the crossover straps on the headstall, just as the riding reins now attach. In other words, drivers use their own lines. Every driving headstall is provided with a throat latch. Side checks can be added if a driver so wishes. The headstalls are fitted with blinkers but these can be removed if they are not required.

Until such time as a driving Bitless Bridle is purchased, drivers can carry out preliminary trials using the riding Bitless Bridle. Small modifications are required. For example, it would be a good idea to add a throat latch to the bridle. A throat latch can be supplied by the business office in Wrightsville, PA (Tel: (866) 235 0938) or one can be made-up from a pair of leather bootlaces. If a driver felt that blinders were necessary, a racing hood could be placed over the Bitless Bridle. A racing hood for a Thoroughbred would probably fit most horses.

How should a carriage horse be first introduced to the Bitless Bridle?

The same general recommendations and guidelines apply as described in the current User's Manual for the riding bridle. Similarly, the same reservations apply with regard to the prevention of accidents. Neither the Bitless Bridle Inc nor individuals can accept liability for any accidents that might occur during use of the bridle.

Stage 1: Even though a horse may already be trained to drive in a bitted bridle, it should first be ground-driven in the Bitless Bridle. The ground-driving should commence in a restricted space until confidence is gained with regard to all the basic aids.

Stage 2: The horse should be harnessed to a carriage but still driven in a small paddock rather than the open countryside.

Stage 3: Regular use in open country but preferably in company with one other experienced and companion carriage horse

Stage 4: First trials in company with multiple carriages and strange horses.

Technical Support

I would be glad to work with carriage drivers to help them with their transition from bitted to bitless communication. I can be contacted by telephone in Chestertown, MD at (410) 778 9005 (EST). My e-mail address is drcook@bitlessbridle.com. A collection of Users' Comments about driving are available online (www.bitlessbridle.com, click on the menu options for 'driving' and 'Standardbred racing and driving') and more will be added as these are received. More feedback on bitless driving is needed and will be most welcome. However, even though the huge amount of information currently installed on the website has been developed in relation to riding rather than driving, most of it is also relevant to driving. Drivers will find many answers to their questions already available online.

Robert Cook FRCVS, PhD
Professor of Surgery Emeritus, Tufts University, USA
Chairman, The Bitless Bridle Inc.
Tel: (410) 778 9005