

NEW TOOL BENEFIT DENIED BY AN OLD RULE:

Rider/horse safety trumped by tradition.

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*"The only bit a horse needs is a bit of understanding"*TM

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Tools and rules both evolve over time but the tool comes first and the rule follows. An opportunity is lost when an enabling rule lags long behind a beneficial tool.

When the FEI was founded in 1921 their rules mandated use of the bit for many competitions. A bit was assumed by dressage riders of the time to be the only option and for certain disciplines two bits and a chain were thought to be necessary. The decisions were supported by tradition but no evidence. Since the metal bit was first introduced in the Bronze Age, its validity has been taken for granted by each succeeding generation. To even question its rationale risks a charge of horse heresy. Many 'English' riders are still of the opinion that to ride bitless is reckless, irresponsible and downright dangerous.

Bitless bridles preceded bitted bridles historically and continued to evolve alongside them but have been widely used only by 'Western' riders. In 1998, this changed with the development of the crossunder bitless bridle which – unlike previous bitless designs – was painless and provided comprehensive communication. In addition and importantly, it was possible with this bridle to switch a horse instantly from bit to bitless, without a slow transition for special training. This enabled the behaviour of the same horse/rider combination to be compared, first with a bitted bridle and then a moment later with a crossunder bitless bridle. During the last 12 years, many thousands of these 'natural experiments' have been conducted by enlightened riders as they made the switch. Few have ever put a bit in a horse's mouth again.

The comparisons have uncovered many side effects of the bit that had never before been suspected. Prior to 1998, the bit had been thought responsible for about half a dozen 'aversions.' But now the list exceeds 200 and the longer the research continues the longer

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the list becomes. Some of the more common side effects, such as bolting, balking, bucking and rearing, are potentially fatal to horse and rider. Apart from increasing the risk of accidents, many make life a misery for the horse and destroy a rider's pleasure. Others, such as head shaking from bit-related trigeminal neuralgia, are career ending.

99% of racehorses bleed from the lungs. In my experience, this happens because of airway obstruction at the level of the throat, most commonly caused by a horse evading the bit. When the tip of the tongue is withdrawn, the root of the tongue elevates the soft palate and crimps the airway. As 'bleeding' has been shown to be the most common cause of sudden death in the racehorse, this is yet another side effect to add to the list. The prevalence of 'bleeding' in other disciplines has not been measured but it is known to occur in most disciplines, including dressage.

The age-old belief that a bit controls a horse is a myth. A horse is not controlled by force but by understanding. *Communication* is the key to cooperation, not control. Bit-related pain and fear is a barrier to understanding. A frightened horse and one in pain is slow to train. It cannot 'listen' let alone learn. Sadly, long after the incriminating evidence has been published, the rule mandating bits remains in force. Top-down approaches to get it amended have been rejected, except in Holland. The time has come for a bottom-up approach.

A grassroots approach is particularly necessary at the Pony Club and 4H level as it is the youngest riders that are most at risk. As a group, they are the least able to use a bit wisely. Happily, there are many ten-year-old children riding today who have never ridden with a bit and who are deeply upset at the suggestion that they should do so. This generation will show the way.

For Pony Club and 4H administrators to mandate a bit is akin to requiring children playing 'cops and robbers' to use real guns and live ammunition. Denying a child the option to use a safer and more effective method of communication is akin to denying a child with a dangerous infection a life-saving antibiotic. Fortunately, the majority of riders (children and adults) do not compete and are not constrained by outdated rules. Countless riders are now using the crossunder bitless bridle and setting an example for organization administrators to follow.

As indicated below, current Pony Club and 4H rules contain an internal contradiction. The level of rider expertise likely to be the norm for young riders is not the level that would allow them to use a bit without causing their pony pain and endangering the safety of themselves and their horse.

Rider expertise has been graded as follows:

Beginner: A rider who has limited experience, is unable to post the trot and does not canter.

Novice: *A rider who is capable of mounting and dismounting unassisted, capable of applying basic aids, comfortable and in control at the walk, moderate length posting trots, and short canters.*

Intermediate: *A rider who has a firm seat, is confident and in control at all paces (including posting trots, two point canters and gallops), but does not ride regularly.*

Strong Intermediate: *An intermediate rider who is currently riding regularly and is comfortable in the saddle for at least 6 hours per day.*

Advanced: *All of the above, plus an independent seat, soft hands, and capable of handling a spirited horse in open country*

Only the 'advanced' rider has an independent seat. Not all advanced riders have 'soft hands' but this is a quality that some advanced riders develop after they have first achieved an independent seat.

Yet 'soft hands' are a prerequisite for the humane use of a bit in a horse's sensitive mouth. 'Soft hands' are also essential for minimising the dangers to horse and rider of bit usage. It follows that only the top echelon of advanced riders should use a bit. Even these have only 'advanced' to this level after years of practice; practice gained at the expense of the horse.

Use of the bit poses a dilemma similar to the one encapsulated in the tag, "Nobody should play the violin who has not mastered it." Pony Club and 4H rules that mandate the use of a bit for young riders pose a particular threat to their safety, as few are 'super-advanced' and capable of using a bit without inflicting pain. The hundreds of behavioral responses to pain, fear and physiological confusion caused by the bit are normal evolutionary responses to noxious stimuli. They are not signs of 'misbehavior' and the horse should not be blamed. Unfortunately, when some of these responses occur in the man-made environments in which the horse is used, they can trigger fatal consequences for both horse and rider.

Since 1998, the crossunder bitless bridle has been used and approved worldwide, under many conditions, by riders of all ages and experience, with horses of all ages and temperament and in nearly every discipline. In all this time, I have not been notified of any accident attributable to the bridle. On the contrary, I have heard of a number of occasions when a serious accident might well have occurred if the horse had been wearing a bit.

As a corollary to this new knowledge and better understanding of equine behavior, 'best practice' standards have changed. Pony Club and 4H administrators who continue to mandate use of a device that exposes children to unnecessary risk could be held liable for bit-induced accidents. Furthermore, as bits inflict unnecessary pain and as this is a widely accepted definition of cruelty, administrators could be vulnerable to such a charge under the laws of a country that protect the welfare of horses.

For ethical and moral reasons, Pony Club and 4H administrators are urged to update their rules by providing riders with the option to use the crossunder bitless bridle.

Red Tape Revolution: At Pony Club, 4H, national equine federation, and FEI events, bitless riders who oppose the mandate to use a bit for competitions can signal their support for a rule update by adding a marker to their reins. Using red insulating tape (electrical tape), it is recommended that they wind it around their reins for a distance of two inches (5 cm), starting about nine inches (22 cms) from the snaffle ring and curb (Fig. 1)



Fig.1: Siobhan Kurtzer, a 10-year-old with one year's riding experience in the warm-up ring at a Pony Club Gymkhana. Note the mandated bit and her red-flagged reins. Subsequent to this photograph being taken and before the competition commenced, Siobhan was thrown three times. When bitless, her horse is a model of propriety.