

September 23 2013

DR 121.2 - DR 121.6

RULE CHANGE PROPOSAL TO PERMIT THE CROSSUNDER BITLESS BRIDLE FOR DRESSAGE (Tracking # 006-09)

Dear Co-Chairs Ayers & Gorretta and Ms. Gurney,

Thank you, Ms. Gurney, for telling me about the Dressage Technical Committee's new and rather surprising additional prerequisite for a rule change approval.

This recent correspondence started out as an email to you Ms. Gurney, as you had shown an interest in the crossunder bitless bridle as an alternative to the bitted bridle and encouraged USDF riders to keep an open mind about its potential. But, in view of what you now tell me about the further requirements of the committee, I must also address my remarks to the committee co-chairs.

When you, Ms. Ayers, wrote to me in 2010 about the committee's consideration in 2009 of the rule change proposal submitted by Michelle Guillot you gave me the following four reasons why a decision on the rule change had been tabled:

1. The committee required evidence from an independent researcher. The implication was that the scientific evidence I had submitted in support of Ms Guillot's proposal was inadmissible because of my conflict of interest.
2. Acceptance of the rule would require a major editing of the rule book and this would take time.
3. Judges would need to be given additional training to evaluate bitless dressage.
4. The committee needed time to gather data from its members on this proposal.

No mention was made of a requirement that I should fund a research project to be carried out by Dr. Hilary Clayton, a member of the USEF

Dressage Technical Committee, to measure the pressures that a crossunder bitless bridle applies to the horse's face. If this was one of the committee's prerequisites for approval of the rule change, I wonder why you did not tell me four years ago? I could have responded then, as I do now, and shown that the request was inappropriate, unjustified and unnecessary.

The pressure applied by the straps of the crossunder bitless bridle (CBB) to the skin of the horse's head could certainly be measured. Technically, this would be a relatively simple and non-invasive experiment. However, supposing this was done, to what would the committee compare the data? The pressure that a bit applies to the lips, tongue, bars of the mouth and hard palate has never been measured. Technically, this would be a much more difficult experiment and, by definition, an invasive one on a fully conscious horse.

But in fact there is no need for a fully-fledged, university-approved experiment that, even if conducted, would always be subject to criticism by anyone with a mind to claim that the results were invalid. If members of the committee need to be reassured about the harmless and painless pressure that a CBB rein applies to the skin of a horse's head they can obtain this for themselves with the personal experience of a simpler, more sensitive and far more convincing test.

All that they have to do is to stand by a horse's bridled head and place the forefinger of one hand under the CBB straps at various points while they apply pressure and release to the reins with the other hand. Even the most vigorous rein pressure when tested at the bridge of the nose (the region to which the CBB distributes its greatest pressure) is not enough to cause pain. All that the examiner's finger will feel is a gentle and painless squeeze, essentially a touch rather than a pain. As the human finger is a great deal more sensitive than the skin of a horse's head, this is all the proof needed. The test can be carried out by every member of the committee.

If you think of pressure on a scale from 1 to 10, the lower pressure ranges (say 1 to 4) will be 'touch' pressures and it is only pressures in the range

from 5 to 10 that cause pain. The CBB, correctly placed, is virtually incapable of applying anything but touch pressure. The pressure, such as it is, is well distributed but is also applied to an area of anatomy that is far less sensitive than the mouth. In contrast, a cylindrical metal rod applies focused pressure to highly sensitive tissues. It is difficult, even for the most talented of riders, not to cause pain with such an instrument in such a place.

A 'thought experiment' is enough for members of the committee to realize that the well-distributed pressure of strap on skin will be less than the pin-point pressure of a metal rod on a knife edge of bone, the bars of the mouth.

A rein cue should be a touch signal not a pain signal. Touch is enough and pain too much. A horse feels and responds to the pressure of a fly alighting on the skin of its face; it does not need anything more severe. Horses do not respond more willingly, compliantly or graciously to a pain signal – quite the reverse.

With regard to the committee's aspersions about the validity of my research because of my conflict of interest, the research I have carried out in the last 15 years is a logical continuation of research into a field of study I have focused on since 1958. The only difference is that the treatment I now recommend, as a vendor and veterinarian, for over 40 bit-induced diseases and over 150 bit-induced behavioral problems is now firmly based on the removal of a known cause. In the past, this was not possible as neither I nor any other veterinarian recognized the enormity of the bit as the cause of so much trouble. I submit that it is inappropriate, with my track record of well-received research over a period of 40 years (what I might call my pre-bit research) that my more recent and highly relevant 15 years of research on the bit should be summarily dismissed. These days, conflicts of interest are a commonplace in science. When they are present, they must be declared and this is something that I freely do without apology. But a conflict of interest is not, by itself, automatic grounds for dismissing the evidence. Refutation of research is dependent on further research uncovering new knowledge, not a committee vote.

So successful has the bridle design been that I developed, scientifically validated, tested in the field and introduced to the horse owning public that the benefits of the CBB were quickly recognized, copied and marketed by many different companies at home and abroad. I am glad that horses and riders are happier and safer as a result of this wide availability of a more humane and effective method of rein communication. If it makes the committee feel more comfortable, BitlessBridle Inc., is not a monster corporation with a market monopoly. It is a small company started by a veterinarian who (like all others) swore an oath on graduation in 1952 to promote the welfare of the horse.

As the aspersions require me to defend my reputation as a scientist, I must also draw the committee member's attention, once more, to the endorsement of the rule change proposal by Professor Dwight Bennett DVM, PhD. Dr. Bennett is one of the very few veterinarians who have published articles and books about the bit. His endorsement is the more remarkable (and greatly to his credit) in that his book 'Bits and Bridles: Power tools for thinking riders,' published in 2000 in co-authorship with Betsy Lynch, contains no reference to the crossunder bitless bridle. At the time of the book's publication, he was of the opinion that the bit was a fundamental means of communication between horse and rider.

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I am a veterinarian who has been studying horses' mouths and biting and bridling systems for more than 50 years. I have approximately 350 bits in my personal collection; have lectured internationally to horsemen, veterinarians and veterinary students on the use of bits and bridles; have published a book, "Bridles and Bits, Power Tools for Thinking Horsemen," 2000; have published two book chapters on biting; and have published numerous articles on the subject in professional journals.

I believe strongly that with biting systems, "less is more." In my opinion,

rules in nearly all disciplines requiring particular bits and biting systems, such as the double bridle, are archaic and outmoded. If a horse can perform optimally in a milder bit than the current rules require, in a bitless bridle, or with no headgear at all, why require a more severe biting system? The horse and rider that can perform without any bit at all receive my highest accolades.

Dwight G. Bennett, DVM, PhD
Professor Emeritus of Equine Medicine
Colorado State University

22 November 2009

My 2013 ISES paper shows that the bit triggers a host of unwanted and potentially dangerous behaviors. You have already received a link to this evidence but, I am appending the link again for your convenience. In this study, the raw data was provided by 56 independent riders. I simply listed the unwanted behaviors and compiled the data. If the committee would like to have the raw data analyzed by an independent compiler I would be glad to make it available. Alternatively, the committee could compile their own psychometric questionnaire and repeat the experiment from scratch.

A study I published in the peer-reviewed journal Equine Veterinary Education in 2010 on the damage that a bit causes to the bars of the mouth and teeth provides further evidence in support of a bitless alternative (copy attached). If the committee wish to commission an independent researcher to repeat this study, the museum specimens are freely available and I would be glad to provide a list of the specimen catalog numbers at four Natural History Museums on the East coast.

With reference to the study that Professor Daniel Mills and I published in the peer-reviewed Equine Veterinary Journal in 2009, its results were 'independently' achieved (copy attached). I took no part in the Certified Horsemanship Association experiment other than to design and introduce it. The data was provided by an independent judge and it was statistically analysed by Dr. Mills who has no conflict of interest. Once again, the committee could repeat this experiment to see if they get similar results.

With the facilities and expertise that the USEF have at their command, reiterations of the experiment would be easy for them to conduct.

May I also remind the committee that the rule change proposal under consideration was endorsed by the Presidential Council of the International Society of Equitation Science. They wrote:

“As the Presidential Council of the International Society for Equitation Science (ISES), we are writing in support of the proposal to allow bitless bridles in the sport of dressage. Given that it could so promptly follow the acceptance of bitless bridles by the Dutch Federation in 2008, an affirmative decision by the USEF would enhance the profile of the USA as a leader in equine welfare.

The horse’s mouth is highly sensitive and vulnerable to the development of behavioural conflicts arising from incorrect bit use. In some horses, such conflicts can escalate to active coping mechanisms, such as hyper-reactive behaviours. In others, we see habituation to bit pressure to the extent that they become unresponsive and capable of bolting. Allowing bitless bridles will widen and sustain the spectrum of horses fit to work, and will have a positive effect on public perceptions of good welfare allowing the sport to move in a more enlightened direction. These are important considerations at a time when there are public concerns about various training regimes in dressage.

As the only scientific organisation in the world in the sphere of equitation, the International Society for Equitation Science exercises great caution in voicing its collective opinion regarding matters of equine welfare. Our aim is to hold the scientific process at the highest level, so that only robust and evidence-based information is supported. There is adequate science now to support the use of bitless bridles in horse sports.

We warmly encourage the USEF Dressage Committee to embrace this opportunity to advance horse welfare and rider safety.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'A' followed by a horizontal line that ends in a small flourish.

Dr Andrew McLean BSc, PhD (President, ISES)



Prof. Natalie Waran BSc, (Hons) PhD (Acting Senior Vice-president, ISES)



A/Prof. Paul McGreevy BVSc, PhD, MRCVS, MACVSc (Junior Vice-President, ISES)

The penultimate sentence is worth emphasizing, “*There is adequate science now to support the use of bitless bridles in horse sports*”. The committee could not ask for a more authoritative and independent opinion. It is worth noting also that it was possible for the ISES to take this position in 2009, before two further peer-reviewed articles of mine on the bit were published in scientific journals.

With regard to the second reason stated for tabling the decision, four years have now passed and this will have given the committee ample time to do the necessary editing of the rule book. As I see it, all that is required is that the phrase ‘dans le main,’ so poorly translated in 1920 from the original French FEI rules as ‘on the bit,’ should be replaced by ‘on the bridle.’

A perceived need for the re-training of judges was the committee’s third reason for tabling a decision. The Royal Dutch Equestrian Federation also anticipated this need when they introduced bitless dressage in 2008. In the event, they have found – as I had anticipated on welfare and safety grounds – that the principles guiding evaluation of a bitless performance are no different from those for a bitted performance. The criteria of excellence are the same and judges need no special training.

The committee will also have had ample time to elicit what science-based evidence its members have to offer. Throughout this process, the emphasis should have been on evidence relating to the welfare and safety of horse and rider. Personal expressions of belief about how it is thought ‘easier’ for a rider to ‘get their horse into a frame’ with a bit than without

one, or an opinion (unsupported by evidence) that the CBB does not provide 'release' are irrelevant. The committee members do not need me to tell them that self-carriage, balance and collection is achieved through training, not force. Nothing should be allowed in a dressage performance that is incompatible with the physiological requirements of a horse at exercise or its humanitarian needs. Any 'opinion' from the USEF membership that is not about welfare and safety is null and void. Standards of welfare and safety are matters to be determined by science, not by tradition or the status quo. Unless these standards are maintained and updated when the science advances, neither the USEF nor the FEI can claim to be honoring their stated objective that the welfare of the horse is paramount.

Thank you for reading this necessarily long email. It will take you a little time to consider but I am sure you agree that the time is well spent on a matter that concerns horse welfare, rider safety, legal issues and public relations. When you, Ms Ayers, informed me of the committee decision to table discussion of this proposal, I wrote you a comprehensive email in which I outlined what I would do to provide the committee with additional evidence. I have kept this promise. I also made some suggestions with regard to steps that the committee could take to further investigate the proposal. I received no reply to this letter.

I see several possible ways for the committee to respond to this follow-up letter. A short communication simply informing everyone that the rule change has been disallowed will not be acceptable. After a four-year wait, if the committee has reservations over details or what they feel are legitimate reasons for rejecting the proposal they will owe the USEF membership and horse owners at large a full and reasoned explanation. As USEF rules are followed by the US Pony Club and the 4H organization, the USEF has a responsibility that extends far beyond their own membership. The very best way to respond would be with a short and rapid announcement telling patient horse owners in the USA that the USEF have approved the rule change. I most sincerely urge the committee to make this decision.

Yours in the hope of a vote in favor of the horse and the safety of riders of all ages,

Bob

[Signature added]