

The Bitless Horse

Part 2: Recent developments in bitless bridle design

By Wendy Wainwright

Until 10-15 years ago bitless bridles were seen as the bridles of no choice, typically used by people whose horses had unusual mouth conformation or were recovering from a mouth injury. The choice of bitless bridles was limited to the mechanical hackamore (English-Blairs pattern or German) or the Scawbrig and they were mainly used by showjumpers and endurance riders.

The last decade has seen an increase in the variety and availability of bitless bridle designs. There are now over 20 different bridles available, many of which demonstrate an innovative approach to this method of communication. This has allowed bitless bridles to emerge as a real alternative to bitted bridles and here we will examine some of the factors that motivated their designers.

The growth in availability and popularity of bitless bridles has benefited from the growing interest in natural horsemanship/ holistic horsecare/ treeless saddles etc. as people continue to challenge conventional methods of horsemanship. A growing section of horse owners and riders are expressing views that range from the bit being unnecessary and probably uncomfortable to the horse through to those who consider it an instrument of torture.

Probably the most prolific and complete research carried out on the effects of bits on horses is the work of Dr Robert Cook – designer of the Bitless Bridle™. A veterinarian originating from the UK, Dr Cook went to the USA over 25 years ago, where his work has centred on the diseases of the mouth, ear, nose and throat of the horse.

Dr Cook's research focuses on the effects of bits on different parts of the horse; including the mouth and jaw which he states are extremely sensitive parts of the horse. The bars of the mouth, on which many bits activate, are not flat but are ridges of bone protected only by a 2mm layer of fibrous tissue and membrane. The bars also contain part of the mandibular branch of the trigeminal nerve which is distributed throughout the whole of the horse's head. The mandibular branch is also present in the soft tissues of the tongue, lower lip, chin and gums. Research has shown that pain experienced in one part of the trigeminal nerve can appear as pain and sensitivity in other parts of the head. This pain can manifest itself as facial neuralgia and may be the cause of many other problems such as headshyness, hypersensitivity and headshaking.

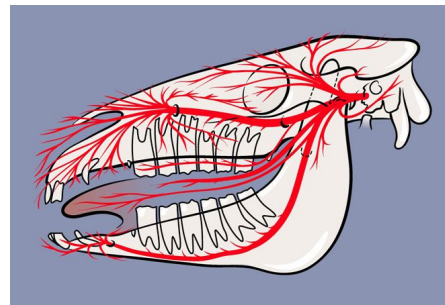


Fig.1 Showing the position of the trigeminal nerve.
Picture reproduced by the kind permission of Dr Cook.

Dr Cook also asserts that having a bit in the mouth results in the mouth never being fully closed which has a detrimental effect on the physical anatomy of the horse when exercising. Normally, the horse mouth has two distinct states, it is closed when the horse is moving at speed in order to maximise the supply of oxygen through the nostrils to the trachea, whereas, when the horse is grazing, the mouth is open to allow the passage of food through the mouth to the oesophagus. These two systems cross over in the throat

and Dr Cook's research states that if the mouth has a bit in it (and is therefore not closed) then the horse's ability to breathe at full capacity is compromised and the horse will not be able to achieve full performance.

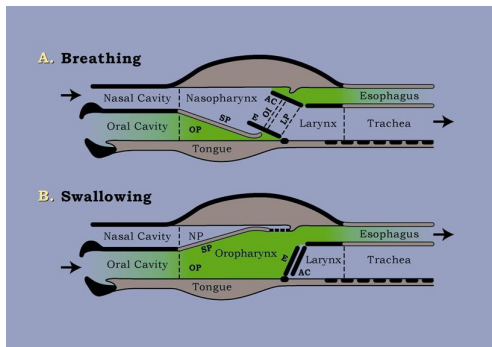


Fig.2 Showing two distinct systems that the horse utilizes for breathing and for swallowing. Picture reproduced by the kind permission of Dr Cook.

Other areas that the research investigates are the effects of the bit on teeth, the generation of energy, the neck, back and legs and even on the rider. One of the results of this research has been the creation of a list of 95 signs of aversion to the bit. It is not uncommon for a horse to display 25 or more of these indicators, even if existing problems had not been previously attributed to the bit; many of these indicators have been shown to disappear on the introduction of the bitless bridle.

These aversions manifest themselves as problems for the rider in terms of difficulties with catching, handling, bridling, mounting, bucking, rearing, jogging pulling, leaning on the bit and grabbing at the bit. As behavioural concerns such as napping, fidgeting, panicking, spooking and nervousness. As physical signs such as lip slapping, crossing the jaw, rubbing the face, putting the tongue behind or over the bit, excessive salivation, head tilting, toe dragging and false collection. A full list, which has been made into a questionnaire, can be downloaded at <http://www.bitlessbridle.com/FOTB-Q.pdf>

Many people, without access to the work of Dr Cook, have also decided against the use of the bit. Some, through empathy with the horse, are concerned about the discomfort caused by contact with the bit in a sensitive area, for others it was triggered by experiences with a particularly difficult (or more likely sensitive) horse. How often have you seen a severely bitted horse continuing to pull and fight, regardless of the severity of the bit (or bits) being used to 'control' it? Users of bitless bridles have provided anecdotal evidence of testing bridles by riding stallions past fields containing mares. Whilst the stallions continued to show interest in the mares, they were able to be guided past with an equal degree of success to that shown when being ridden in a severe bit. However, the amount of conflict was noticeably reduced when using a bitless bridle; does this suggest that the absence of pain (a well-documented cause of heightened endorphin and adrenalin levels) allowed greater communication between horse and rider? In some cases people have decided that 'enough is enough' and that to continue fighting is futile so have sought bitless alternatives on the principle that 'less is more'. Add to these factors an innovative approach to the problem and the result is many of the other bitless bridle designs now available.

This is certainly true of Louise Hutchings of Equine Whispers and inventor of the Be-Kind bridle. Her journey began over 16 years ago with a horse called Foxy, he was considered to be a difficult and challenging horse and, after a particularly bad experience at a road junction, she dropped her reins which immediately prompted the horse to stop resisting and stand quietly. This was enough to set her thinking about doing things differently and, after meeting like-minded saddler, these ideas were developed into the Be-Kind bridle.

Monika Lehmenküler – inventor of the LG Bridle™ or ‘Happy Wheel’ had a similar experience. She had been thinking that perhaps horses would move better or more beautifully without a mouthpiece. She found that ‘problem’ horses often behaved much better when ridden in a halter than a bit. However, it was a Trakhener called Marti who, by persistently sticking out his tongue and chewing heavily on his bit, convinced her to completely convert to bitless riding. Monika developed the unique action of the happy wheel specifically to pursue her interest in classical dressage.

Zoe Brooks – designer of the Nurtural No-Bit Bridle™ can also relate to these stories as it was a Canadian mare called Hazel who, by fighting with the bit, sent Zoe searching for another way. She researched other bridles and developed her design until both she and Hazel were perfectly happy with it. Zoe will always maintain that her bridle was ‘designed out of love, not science’.

Whatever your reasons for choosing bitless bridles there are now a wide variety of designs to choose from, with many different types of action. However, this diversity can lead to confusion over the best type for you and your horse. Part 3 will attempt to describe the types of bitless bridles available and the different actions that they use.

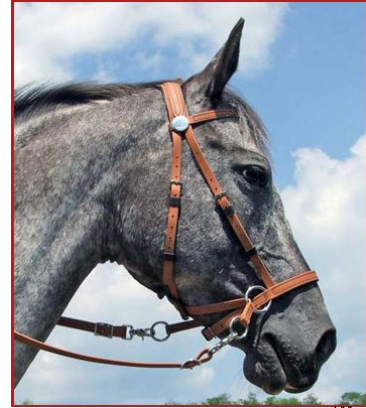


Fig.3 The Nurtural No-Bit Bridle™ for breathing and for swallowing. Picture reproduced by the kind permission of Zoe Brooks.

For those that have an interest in investigating bitless options, you can share your thoughts, ideas and experiences with other bitless riders at www.bitlesshorse.co.uk. To find out more about Dr Cook’s research, he has written a thought-provoking book ‘Metal in the mouth – the abusive effects of bitted bridles’ that outlines the conclusions of his studies.

References:

‘Metal in the Mouth’ – W. Robert Cook & Dr Hiltrud Strasser. ISBN: 0-9685988-5-4
www.bitlessbridle.com
www.equinewhispers.com
www.lgbridle.com
www.nurturalhorse.com