

The Bitless Horse

Part 3: Bitless Bridle Styles

By Wendy Wainwright

Riders who have chosen to go bitless over the last ten years have been able to select from an increasingly wide range of products. It can be difficult to know which bitless bridle is best suited to both your riding style and to your horse. This article attempts to group products in terms of the action on the horse and to describe how each group of products functions.

Bosals

The main identifying feature of this group is that the reins are attached at a single point behind the horse's jaw and neck reining is the favoured method of guiding the horse.

The Western Bosal is a rawhide loop which sits on the nose and is balanced by the fiador in order to create the correct effect and is typically used for starting young horses in western riding. These bridles have existed for centuries and there are many texts describing their construction and use.

The Rope Hackamore consists of a rope halter with the reins attached to the knot behind the chin. It produces a mild action on the nose and is usually favoured in natural horsemanship methods (including Parelli) as it is a simple transition from the rope halter used for groundwork.

The half bosal riding halter is an enhancement of the rope hackamore developed by Lodge Ropes in Australia, the rope-bound noseband is more rigid to give the bridle stability and enable clear communication, whilst still being softer than rawhide.

Mechanical Hackamores

Mechanical Hackamores, which include the German Hackamore and the Blair's Pattern (also known as the English Hackamore) all employ leverage in their action. Pulling on the rein causes the shanks to pivot, applying pressure on the poll, the nose and the chin. The severity of the action is increased by the length of the shanks. The amount of force created by the leverage that these bridles produce has the potential to be severe and care must be used as in extreme cases horse's noses have been calloused from the pressure and even the nasal bones have been damaged.

Bridles using pressure on the poll, nose and chin

The Equibridle has a plain leather strap across the nose and a curb chain with a leather guard. The cheekpieces are rolled leather and pass around a pulley situated at either side of the noseband and then to the reins. The purpose of the pulleys is to distribute the contact on the poll, nose and chin.

The LG Bridle (Happy Wheel) is probably the most versatile in its adjustment of all the bitless bridles available as it produces a range of different actions, depending upon the configuration of the cheekpieces, reins, noseband and chinstrap attached to the spoked wheel. It consists of a leather noseband and either a chain or leather chin strap. The wheel allows different settings ranging from a side pull action, to varying degrees of nose, chin and poll contact, through to an action similar to a mechanical hackamore, via a shank attachment.



The LG Bridle.
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Simple and mild bridles

The sidepull is more common in the USA than in the UK and is available in a wide range of materials and configurations. In its simplest form it can be described as a bridle with rings at either side to which the reins are attached. Its action is similar to attaching reins to either side of a headcollar and acts by using the reins to pull the head towards the direction that the rider wants to go.

The Dually is similar to a headcollar with a second noseband made of rope which passes through rings on either side. The noseband has rings at each end that attach to the reins, providing contact with the top and sides of the nose. The Dually is not typically used for riding but is sometimes used in conjunction with a bitted bridle to aid young horse with transition from a halter to a bit.

The Enduro Bridle, another development by Lodge Ropes, is similar in appearance to a halter, with the addition of rope loops at each end of the noseband, to which the reins and chinpiece are attached. As the reins are not attached to solid rings any action on the rein causes the chin piece to lift and contact with the back of the jaw. It provides a gentle and subtle cue that produces a positive response in many horses.



Pressure around the nose

The Scawbrig consists of a straight noseband and a chin piece which passes through rings on either side of the noseband and back to the reins. The main action it has is to tighten on the back of the jaw, but also produces some tightening around the nose.



The other two bridles in this group are the Meroth and the Indian Bosal which have a similar action to each other in that the noseband continues and crosses behind the jaw before passing through loops or rings on the opposite side of the nose, where it is attached to the reins. The Indian Bosal is traditionally made using rope and whereas the Meroth makes use of leather with a short section between the side of the nose and the ring that the strap passes through.

Crossunder bitless bridles

This last group of bridles constitutes most of the development that has occurred in the last decade. These bridles are easily identified by the straps which cross from just below the ears and pass under the jaw to the side of the nose on the opposite side of the face. The main reason for this is that the bridle contacts around the whole head with a gentle action, as opposed to contact being concentrated on specific areas.

The simplest, and most popular, of these is the Dr Cook Bitless Bridle which has been in production for almost ten years, and is available in a variety of sizes and materials.

The Nurtural No-Bit Bridle has two additional distinctive features - the noseband is lined with a textured rubber (to help with horses who throw their head up or lean a little on the bridle) and has the circle x (a circular section that the cross straps pass through that sits under the jaw and keeps the cross straps on the widest part of the face). This prevents the straps twisting and fully tightening around the face which can be helpful with sensitive horses.

The British designed Be-Kind Bridle has rolled cross straps to aid in the quick release of pressure. It has a highly padded noseband and headpiece for maximum comfort and the cheekpieces incorporate elasticated sections to minimise any pressure on the poll.



The Be-Kind Bridle
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Hutchings

Most horses respond to contact in different ways, some do not like contact on the poll, some prefer the feel of contact around the nose and others like the feel of bridles where contact is distributed around the whole head. The variety of bridles currently available means that there should be a bitless bridle to suit almost every horse, rider and activity.

The following table lists all of the bridles mentioned and their main contact points, for comparison.

Bridle	Areas where the bridle produces contact			
	Nose	Chin	Poll	Whole head
Western Bosal	✓			
Rope Hackamore	✓			
Half Bosal	✓			
Mechanical Hackamore	✓	✓	✓	
Equibridle	✓	✓	✓	
LG Bridle	✓	✓	✓	
Sidepull	✓			
Dually	✓			
Enduro Bridle		✓		
Scawbrig	✓	✓		
Indian Bosal	✓	✓		
Meroth	✓	✓		
Dr Cook Bitless Bridle				✓
Nurtural No-Bit Bridle				✓
Be-Kind Bitless Bridle				✓

The horses comfort and your riding style are just two of the factors that can affect the choice of bitless bridle that you use. It is a good starting point to discover which contact areas your horse responds to and how subtle you are with your signals. The next article will look further into selecting a bitless bridle and methods of introducing it to your horse.