

THE BITLESS



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OR BITTED



HORSE

Karen Rohlf considers the arguments for each

I write this as someone with years of experience in competitive dressage at all the levels, who has studied natural horsemanship and who has actively trained horses with and without bits.

Some horses really don't like bits. If you train enough horses, you will find one who has trouble getting comfortable in the bit. You try different styles, different nosebands, but the contact is still an issue. For these horses, bits make training more difficult. When you start a horse without a bit you get to know the horse in a way that you can better diagnose when a bit is causing problems with the training, or the training is causing problems with the bit.

To make sure we are all picturing the same thing, the kind of bitless that I refer to is one with no leverage, and no straps that cross or tighten. It is just a simple noseband that is designed to be

loose and has reins attached to the side. This bitless design has the same intention for comfort as the bits that are legal for dressage; nothing sharp or twisted.

Neither bitless nor bitted is inherently more gentle or harsh than the other; it is totally dependent on the heart and hands that are at the other end of the reins. It is possible to be cruel and unfair in a halter and it is possible to have the most magical and gentle connection in a double bridle. It is totally possible to do completely correct dressage without a bit. Some horses do it better without a bit and some do it better with one, depending on their particular comfort level in carrying a bit.

COMMON ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE BIT

Bits are painful to the horse.

Not necessarily, if they are selected, fitted, and used correctly. Although some horses never feel comfortable in a bit, other horses practically put the bit in their mouths themselves when you come with the bridle!

Bits are harmful to the horse.

Not necessarily, if selected, fitted, and used correctly. I do agree that the potential for physical damage is greater with a bit due to the delicate nature of the tissues in the mouth and the sensitivity of the Temporomandibular Joint.

Bits are not necessary.

I agree. A bit is a tool of refinement, which means it should take something that is working well and make it feel even better. So no, they are not necessary, but

This is my bitless bridle. A simple, loose noseband with reins attached to the sides



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for some horses, a bit offers a level of refinement that is too amazing to miss!

A bit puts too much pressure on the delicate mouth when you take contact to ask the horse to be 'round'.

Yes, if you take contact. I believe in an excellent, healthy contact, it is the horse who is taking the bit. This kind of contact can feel amazing and is an honour to feel, because the horse is trusting your hands in his mouth; the hands only receive the feel that the horse offers. That's how I was taught to do dressage.

COMMON ARGUMENTS AGAINST BITLESS

You can't achieve real collection without a bit.

I strongly disagree. Horses can collect themselves all by themselves. Collection is a whole-body dynamic. Nowhere in article 417 of the FEI rule book describing collection does it even mention a bit or the contact.

Dressage is all about the contact with the horse's mouth.

I strongly disagree. Dressage is about biomechanics, balance, and communication. The quality of the biomechanics, balance, and communication will show up in the reins, and it is part of the circuit of energy, but it is not the main part of dressage. Issues of the body will show up in the contact, and issues caused by bad

Solana ridden bitless



contact can inhibit what is trying to happen in the body, but that doesn't make "dressage all about the contact".

You can't judge dressage unless there is a bit in the mouth because it is the most important part of dressage. Without a bit, it is not real dressage.

Unfortunately this may be true based on today's rules for judging, but we can still debate whether 'today's rules' are the determination of what makes 'real dressage'. The Netherlands already tested this and determined that riders could be judged the same way with and without a bit. I have a hard time believing that a judge would not be able to judge the performance of the horse, or critique the connection with the reins if the reins were attached to a bitless bridle.

You can't talk to the horse directly to soften his jaw without a bit.

This is the one conversation you cannot directly have with the horse without a bit. However, you can still influence their jaw indirectly by eliminating the reason for tension in their jaw that comes from their bodies/minds.

Keep in mind also, that much of the tension in horses' jaws is created by uncomfortable or poor use of bits.

Riding bit-less allows the horse to tolerate bad hands, so riders will not develop good hands.

Yes, the nose is not as sensitive as the mouth, but for the lower levels or for young horses we could look at it the same way we look at allowing rising trot. For the upper levels, a rider will need good hands with or without a bit.

These arguments against bitless bring up a big question for me. If quality of the contact is such an important thing to judge, why are flash nosebands allowed? They (try to) hide what is going on in the mouth. From a training perspective, if your horse needs a noseband because he is evading the bit, the trainer needs to be motivated to solve the reason for the evasion rather than simply covering it up. The bottom line is that if you say dressage is about the contact with the bit, then the rules should be such that the judges can really see the quality of the contact by not allowing a flash.

ADVANTAGE OR DISADVANTAGE?

If you cannot achieve real collection without a bit, then does that make riding bitless a disadvantage? If so, then why not allow it, and the scores will work themselves out.

If riding bitless allows horses to more comfortably tolerate bad hands and it avoids the requirement of acceptance of the bit, then does that make riding bitless an advantage? Will a judge be forced to give too high a score to a rider with bad hands?

It is neither an advantage nor a disadvantage. We need this different option the same way we need different types of snaffle bits. There are some horses that don't like a particular kind of bit and there are some horses who don't like any bit.

The biomechanics and the movements will tell the real story. If dressage really is all about judging the contact with the horse's mouth, then why are flash nosebands allowed? Oh wait, I already asked that! But it was worth asking again. I am hoping someday someone will give me a good answer.

DRESSAGE, POSTURE AND CONTACT

To determine whether one can do real dressage without a bit, we first need to determine what real dressage is. Let's look to the FEI rule book. In article 401 we learn that "the object of dressage is the development of the horse into a happy athlete through harmonious education. As a result, it makes the horse calm, supple, loose and flexible, but also confident, attentive and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with the athlete."

I live by this objective. Notice there is no mention of a bit. Article 401 then goes on to say that the above qualities are demonstrated by four things, one of which is the acceptance

Ovation ridden in halter with curb**Natilla ridden in rope halter****Hot Shot ridden in snaffle**

of the bit, with submissiveness/throughness (*Durchlässigkeit*) without any tension or resistance.

There are six more points under the general object of dressage, only one of which mentions the bit, and it does so in quotes 'on the bit'. According to the FEI rules: "A Horse is said to be 'on the bit' when the neck is more or less raised and arched according to the stage of training and the extension or collection of the pace, accepting the bridle with a light and consistent soft submissive contact. The head should remain in a steady position, as a rule slightly in front of the vertical, with a supple poll as the highest point of the neck and no resistance should be offered to the athlete." One of my dressage trainer friends wonders what term to use when she wants to talk about my horses being 'on the bit'. We use the term throughness or talk about the quality of their connection with the reins, and that works just fine!

Dressage is about achieving balance through movement. It's about calm, loose, supple movement and a confident, attentive, keen horse. It is not just about the head and neck, and making sure the horse submits to a piece of metal in his mouth. The mental and emotional state hugely affect posture and movement. We need to train the horse's mind first, then his body, and ride from back to front with hands that wait to receive the contact. That technique can work with or without a bit.

If dressage really is about the sophisticated, refined art of connection with the bit, if that was really the argument against bitless, then dressage better clean up its own act regarding what is tolerated regarding the contact that many horses are enduring in the name of dressage.

Will dressage rules change? If they don't, it won't stop

me from practising the art of dressage bitless with my horses. I hope they do allow bitless in competitions. I realise there will be people who misuse bitless or will use it so their horses can tolerate their bad hands. In the same way there are people who misuse a bit to make their horse's neck round, even though their body is out of balance, or will use a spur to make their horse go because he doesn't listen to their legs. Dressage competition should reflect and serve the best horsemanship. Horsemanship should not have to compromise itself to serve imperfect rules. My advice to the dressage governing bodies is try it!

The best we can do is keep a clear picture of what we are really trying to achieve. Let's remember to act out of love for the horse, to be gentle in our process, to do our best and help others do their best. I am not for bitted or bitless; I am for what works for the individual



**Ovation
ridden bitless**

horse. My horses are allowed to tell me what they prefer. I seek comfort and clarity for them. I am happy to be able to follow my horses' rules. They are my most valued judges.



This is a condensed version of a longer article available at:
<http://dressagenaturally.net/reading-room/essays>

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Being with horses will not make you a better person, it will give you a clearer sense of who you are