

My Bitless Story

by Yvonne Welz

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to ride (since 1987) in many varieties of bitless bridles, on my own horses, as well as horses owned by others. I have tried out rope halters, jumping hackamores, standard mechanical hackamores, neck ropes, cross-under bitless bridles, sidepulls, and bosals. I have also ridden in nearly every variety of English bitted bridle: snaffles of all makes and models, double bridles, and pelhams. I have always looked upon these devices as simply “tools”: only as good as the hands that use them.

Initially, “bitless” was simply seen as an alternative for horses that would not accept a bit, or had physical mouth problems. That began to change with unfolding scientific research which questioned the high potential for harm with bit usage. I was first introduced to the health reasons for using a bitless bridle in 2000. That put me into a difficult position, as I wished to train my horses classically, and there was no actual method for training classically—up through full collection—without using the tool of a bit. There were a few exceptional examples of bitless horses trained to high levels of collection, but I was looking for something a normal person/horse could achieve, not just those with incredible talents. It was also hard to sort out the horses trained with a bit first, then put into bitless for a demo, versus horses schooled up to advanced levels without using any bit at all. The latter were few and far between.

Yvonne on 5 year old Kendra in 2004, in a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle:



I really enjoyed using the Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle (cross-under) to start out my young horses, but I would quickly switch them to a snaffle bridle for their serious schooling. Why? There simply was no defined method for schooling through the levels in any bitless design, no satisfactory role models available, and I was taking clinics and lessons with professionals that expected the use of a bit. Also, I was showing, and a bit is required—period. And frankly, the bitless bridle did not have the same “feeling” as a bit. The aids were not quite the same, and it was so comfortable that sometimes the horses would tend to lean on it, and feel heavy. (I know, excuses, excuses!!)

Yvonne backing 3 year old Belle for the first time, using a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle:



I did spend a bit of time riding in a regular rope halter. It was a fun experience, but in the end, was not really contributing to my dressage training. Obviously, a halter will never have the feeling or sensitivity of a bit, and I had no expectations for that. It was simply a fun developmental exercise.

Yvonne on 7 year old Belle in 2010, using a simple rope halter:



Still, the subject of bitless intrigued me, so I did give it a lot of thought and experimentation over the years. The photos below clearly demonstrate the situation: without the aids communicated by a bit, I could not induce this horse to raise the base of her neck, so she was on the forehand. Compare the shoulders, the withers, and

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the overall balance between the 2 photos. Which looks in better balance? The difference is subtle, but so crucial: in the snaffle photo (right), the bottom curve of my horse's neck vertebrae is elevated higher, which lifts the shoulders and withers—and the necessity for this to take place in the ridden horse is probably the most important thing you can learn about training horses!

Yvonne riding Belle in 2009; left photo halter, right photo snaffle:



These photos clearly demonstrate the serious potential problem with riding bitless: a horse's loss of correct weight-bearing posture without the aid of a bit acting as a "crutch" for the horse's neck muscles. The problem isn't the bit (or lack thereof); the problem is the horse's overall carriage and form, and use of muscles.

Yvonne riding Belle in a double bridle in 2013:



In classical riding, we use bits not for "stopping" or physical control, but so that we can persuade horses to lift the base of their neck. It really is that simple. With that realization, I continued my use of the bitted bridle. Between shows and clinics, there just did not seem to be any urgent reason for pursuing bitless riding at the time. So with my background revealed, it is important to point out that I was not a rider desperate for any sort of training solution. My horses did not have any bit problem, and I'd spent many years working on my seat, hands, and understanding of proper bit contact. I was perfectly happy, and I really thought my horses were, too.



Left: Yvonne & Belle showing Third Level at a Dressage show in 2013 (Snaffle).

Below: Yvonne & Belle during a Pierre Cousyn clinic in 2013 (Snaffle).



I was intensely focused on Belle's training, but could have easily used bitless bridles on my other 2 horses. At the time, I didn't really see the point. Nothing really appealed to me for classical schooling purposes and riding with connection. I kept my eyes open, and watched the bitless world for new developments, but somewhere along the way I must have lost track—because what happened next took me totally by surprise, and changed my equestrian life!

Sometime in November 2013, I stumbled upon some videos about the LG Zaum bitless bridle, which I had never heard of before. I found a few more videos, but they were all in German. I went to their website www.lg-bridle.com and there was just a small bit in English. However, I found many German testimonials, and began to google-translate them. This bitless bridle sounded too good to be true! The videos showed horses being ridden in collection, and at shows, and they all looked the same as horses wearing bits. The testimonials swore that this bitless felt just like a bit. There were Grand Prix German riders who said they could ride all their upper level horses in it, and perform all the Grand Prix movements, and that their horses were improving in their training using the LG. Of course I was skeptical, but I ordered one to give it a try.

I received the LG Zaum in early December 2013. I put it on Belle, did our normal workout in the dressage arena, and was dazzled and amazed!! I could not believe that this simple pair of metal wheels with straps could feel exactly like a bit! James, even more skeptical than I, tried it out, and confirmed my evaluation. The LG Zaum feels

and rides exactly like a snaffle bit. Everything is there; lateral flexion, longitudinal flexion, exact positioning of the head up or down, and a steady channel for the aids to flow through. Sufficient strength to stop a frisky horse, while remaining gentle. There was no acclimation time; I did not have to train my horses to it—they understood it immediately. It is the perfect tool for teaching lightness, as you can position the head then release immediately. The connection can be kept in a fluid, dynamic contact with no pressure. What is amazing is that I *still* frequently forget that I am not using a bit. It feels *exactly* like riding in a bit! That same pleasant energetic feeling that a dressage rider comes to know and love...

Yvonne riding Belle in the LG Zaum, February 2014:



This “bitless-bit” design seems to duplicate the positive effects of a snaffle bridle, in that it encourages a horse to lift the base of its neck. There is more to it, however; I believe the wheel actually assists with lateral bending. The combined effects of gentle poll/chin/nose pressure

seem to invite vertical flexion. The overall effect becomes almost... better than a bit?!

In this short couple of months that I have been riding in the LG bitless-bit only, so many things have changed for the positive. Small tensions that I had been previously unaware of just disappeared. Belle has always been a bit “stiff” in her neck and body, lacking in suppleness; something we are always working on. To my delight, she has been quickly developing greater suppleness and fluidity. Her canter immediately improved, from the very first day. She began to blow at the trot when we first started warming up, something she has never done in her life (she would only blow at the canter, typically). She had often exhibited what I called a “mare-ish” behavior, with small resistances; this all vanished. Her angry objections to certain aids disappeared. All of her transitions immediately improved, especially the downward ones. She seemed to be moving more correctly through her back and

hindquarters, and has developed more impulsion. Overall, she has a lot more willingness, with relaxed energy, willing to give me what I ask for, while remaining calm. As a result, all of her advanced work has improved; there is no loss of form. Probably greatest of all: it is very clear to me that all my horses are happier without the bit in their mouth. I didn’t want to hear that before, but it really is true.

I was only using a bit to achieve an effect in my horses. This effect can be easily attained with a wheel style bitless bit design! With this discovery, I simply have no reason to use bits. What about showing, you ask? I’m having so much fun right now, I really don’t care! I fully expect the show organizations to change their rules in the future. Meanwhile, I’m going to enjoy training my horses using the newest communication tools that work best for us, because the happiness of my horses simply comes first. 🐾

Note: Every horse & rider is different, and these are simply my personal experiences. You might prefer another type of bitless bridle, and that’s great! Here is some more information on bitless bridles:

A Bitless-Bit for Dressage/High School Riders

http://thehorseshoof.com/art_bitlessbitdressage.html

To purchase an LG Zaum Bitless Bridle (Bitless-Bit)

OR a Dr. Cook Bitless Bridle (cross-under):

<http://thehorseshoof.com/THHStore.html>

Bitless Articles by Dr. Robert Cook

http://www.bitlessbridle.com/index.php?main_page=page&id=33&chapter=1

More links at: http://thehorseshoof.com/THHStore_Bitless.html

What, No Bit?

Better than a bit – it’s an LG Zaum!

Give the LG Zaum bitless bridle (or “bitless-bit”) a try, and you might just agree with us—it is BETTER than a bit! You can do ANYTHING in the LG Zaum that you can do in a bit, including collected riding, schooling in classical movements, jumping, cross country, and more. To the rider, the LG Zaum feels exactly like a bit—and the horse is happier! So if “bitless” hasn’t worked out before, this might be just the tool you’re looking for...



The original LG Zaum bitless bridle (imported from Germany) is available in North America through:

www.TheHorsesHoof.com

The Horse’s Hoof/Wishing Welz Equine LLC
P.O. Box 1969 • Queen Creek, Arizona 85142

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