

HORSE-TO-MAN: An Urgent Message

by Robert Cook

**The iron bit he crusheth 'tween his teeth,
Controlling what he was controlled with.**

– William Shakespeare, 1593 (*Venus and Adonis*)

The message

(translated using horse body-language from Cook and Kibler 2018)

"We horses have been trying to get a message to you since the Bronze Age. The message is simple but urgent. Bits cause pain. We could help you to enjoy our company better and to benefit more fully from what we do for you, if only you would let us do this without causing us suffering and distress. Your mandated-bit rules are hurting riders and drivers. They are also hurting us. If you would put these rules aside for a while, perhaps for a probationary period in the first instance, we will show you what we mean. It's a win-win situation; increase comfort, reduce risk."

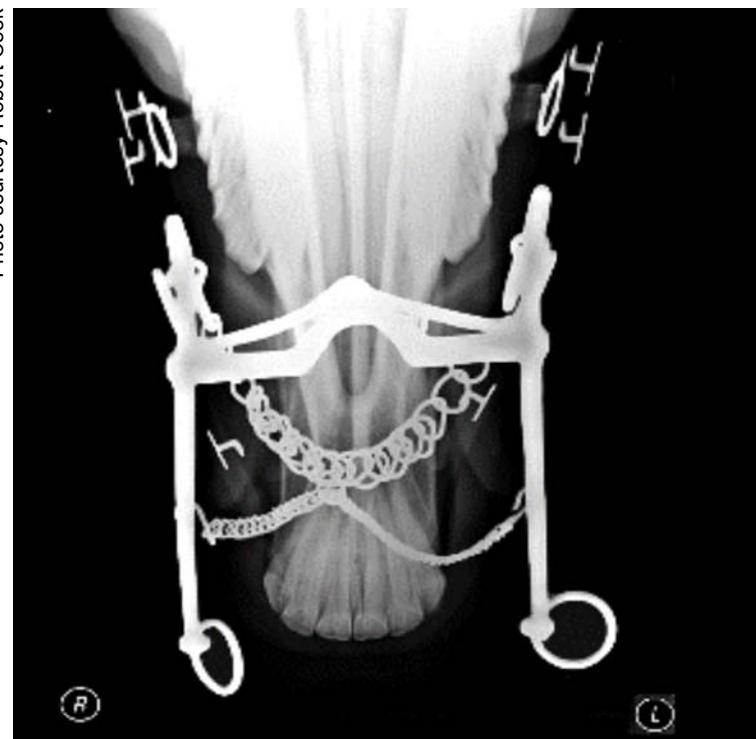


Figure 1. Metal meets bone when a double bridle is used, as mandated for Grand Prix Dressage. **Gum tissue is bone.** It's the 'skin' and most sensitive part of bone. A two-bit bridle comprises a ported curb and chain, together with a jointed snaffle (bridoon). Each constitutes a foreign body bigger than a bullet, strapped in a sensitive body cavity for the duration of ridden exercise.

Within the lifetime of *The Horse's Hoof* journal, two pilot experiments for bit-free riding have been completed. They herald the promise of a bright future for horsemanship. Let's take a look at the results.

The first natural experiment studied the dressage performance of four horse/rider combinations. It was possible thanks to an invitation from the CHA, the Certified Horsemanship Association. The horses, on loan to the CHA for their 2007 annual conference, were mature riding school horses that had been bitted all their life. The riders were CHA-certified instructors: Nicole Ebert, Tiffany Ehnes, Ali McMillan and Brie Messier. This unique experiment took place in front of a live audience, as the last item of the day. It was videotaped and the results published in a peer-reviewed journal (Cook and Mills 2008). The horses were transitioned from bit to bit-free in two identical and consecutive four-minute dressage tests. Judged by an experienced CHA judge (Mitzi Summers), who was scoring bit-free performances for the first time, riders improved their scores from a mean of 37 when bitted to 64 when bit-free just a few minutes later; an improvement of 27%.

The second natural experiment was a long-term testing of bit to bit-free transition for 66 horses (Cook and Kibler 2018). Thanks to 66 riders who twice completed a six-page questionnaire, 69 indices of bit-induced pain were identified. The total number of pain signals for the population when bitted was 1575 and when bit-free 208; an 87% reduction. The time for which the horses had been bit-free before the questionnaire was completed a second time ranged from one day to three years, averaging out at 35 days. The data showed that bits cause pain but that pain did not control. On the contrary, bit-pain was found to be a common cause of loss of control.

The fundamental flaw of the bit method of rider/horse communication is that it causes a horse pain and is unethical. Pain prompts a horse to develop strategies to avoid, escape and defend itself from pain. The strategies are many and varied and they increase in number over time. Understandably, their underlying objective is in some way to take control of the bit. This sets-up a direct conflict with the rider's objective. The bit method of control enables a horse to take over the controls and 'disconnect' the rider. It follows that such a method is neither humane, methodical, nor logical. A method of control that prompts loss of control is flawed both ethically and rationally. The flaw was recognized by Shakespeare. He refers to it succinctly in his first publication. Clearly, it was familiar to riders in the 16th century. Yet the bit method remains revered to this day. Its use is mandated as a condition of entry in the rules of most horse sports.

A comprehensive review of horse welfare during exercise has been published (Mellor and Beausoleil 2017). The authors conclude that *"most horses exhibit clear behavioural evidence of aversion to a bit in their mouths, varying from the bit being a mild irritant to very painful. This in itself is a significant animal welfare issue that should be addressed."*

One of the authors, Professor David Mellor, is the founder and developer of the Five Domains Model for the evaluation of animal welfare in all species; now the standard for such evaluations. Last year, he published two videos with a deliberate pun in their titles

For those who recognize the potential of bit-free horsemanship, its progress may seem agonizingly slow. But such things take time and progress is perhaps being made behind closed doors.

"Do we have a bit of a problem?" (Mellor 2019 a, b). This year he has been the lead author on four articles relevant to this incongruous device (Mellor 2020 a, b, Mellor and Burns 2020, New Zealand Thoroughbred Welfare Assessment Guidelines 2019).

The public attitude towards horse welfare has noticeably changed in the last 20 years. The increased concern with regard to the horse may be part of the surge in awareness about the welfare of animals in general, but also a response to a book about the abusive effects of bitted bridles (Cook and Strasser 2003). Disappointingly, most administrations have yet to announce any plans for addressing the problem. Nevertheless, administrators are presumably aware that their sport's public licence to operate is being questioned. For example, issues raised with the RSPCA in Australia (Jones 2009) included:

- 'Unnecessary invasive interventions', a phrase which includes the bit
- 'Training and riding techniques that involve punishment or extreme control'
- 'Use of specific types of tack that have a high potential to cause pain or distress, including double bridles, lever bits and cranked nosebands'

Much to their credit, the Royal Dutch Equestrian Federation currently allow bit-free dressage at all levels short of Grand Prix. Getting this far, by cautious incremental stages from level one – year by year – has, understandably, taken time. But they have established a wonderful example for others to follow.

Similarly, the New Zealand Thoroughbred jurisdiction has recently adopted new guidelines for equine welfare in racing (Mellor and Burns 2020, New Zealand Thoroughbred Welfare Assessment Guidelines 2020).

Since rein tensions were first measured, it has been possible to derive estimates for the likely pressures generated at the bit/bone interface, the point of primary pain (Mellor 2020b). The range of possible pressures is wide, from zero kg per sq cm with a loose rein, to what must be excruciating pressures in excess of 20 kg per sq cm. Try the Mellor pen test for yourself and the hand baggage test (Mellor 2020a). With a double bridle, such pressures are applied at two different locations, one from the curb and one from the snaffle but both on the bars of the mouth. Incremental pressures for the curb bit will add to a horse's experience, depending on the length of the curb shank. Another add-on is the unmeasured force applied to the mandible by the curb chain.

For those who recognize the potential of bit-free horsemanship, its progress may seem agonizingly slow. But such things take time and progress is perhaps being made behind closed doors. If readers will excuse me tooting my tin trumpet, the reference Cook and Kibler 2018 was one of the top downloaded papers in the journal of Equine Veterinary Education for 2018-2019.

For help on the bit-free choice ahead from a respected author of page 44 Fall Finale 2020-Issue 80 thehorseshoof.com

many books on horsemanship, please read the article "Increase comfort, reduce risk: The Bit-free Bridle" (Jahiel 2016). Dr Jessica Jahiel sums up the question of rider and horse safety with her most excellent aphorism.

As someone who has been associated with the bit-free movement from the start, I celebrate a couple of facts. First, that there is now a World Bitless Association. I wish it well. Secondly, that during these most vulnerable early years of the movement's growth, I have not been made aware of any accident or injury, anywhere in the world, that has been attributed to a horse being bit-free.

In conclusion, the question has to be asked, if the bit method is so flawed, how is it that it nevertheless remains mandated? The simple answer, I think, is that the arbiters of rules are not yet convinced that bit-free methods of communication are better. In the meantime, evidence refuting the bit continues to become more and more compelling, incriminating the bit as a causal factor in many a catastrophe. A tipping point in equestrian sports has been reached at which, at the very least, trials of bit-free methods need to be tested. Bit-free methods themselves are still evolving. The new and almost laughingly simple 'whisper rein' deserves serious and widespread testing (Hanson 2019). The story of horsemanship continues and there is a bit of good news ahead, free for the taking. ☺

Acknowledgements

The above observations could not have been reached without the help and collaboration of many. I am especially grateful to the 66 bit-free pioneers who, in the early days of the movement, enabled a unique opportunity to be grasped.

References

- Cook, W.R and Strasser, H (2003): "*Metal in the Mouth: The abusive effects of bitted bridles*" Sabine Kills, Qualicum Beach, BC, Canada
- Cook, W.R. and Mills, D.S. (2010): Preliminary study of jointed snaffle vs. cross under bitless bridles: Quantified comparison of behaviour in four horses. *Equine vet j*, 41, 827-830; <https://doi.org/10.2746/042516409X472150>
- Cook, W.R and Kibler, M. (2018) Behavioural assessment of pain in 66 horses, with and without a bit. *Equine vet. Educ.* 2019, 31(10), 551-560; doi.org/10.1111/eve.12916
- Hanson, E.F.F. (2019): The Positive Reinforcement Rein: Game changer and rule changer? *The Horses Hoof*, Issue #76 <https://www.horsetalk.co.nz/2019/10/22/positive-reinforcement-rein-game-changer-horsemanship>
- Jahiel, J (2016): "Increase comfort, reduce risk: The Bit-free Bridle." *The Horse's Hoof*, Spring Issue #62, pp 34-40
- Jones B (2009) "What's in it for the horse? Proceedings of the 5th International Equitation Science Conference. Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

- Mellor, D.J. (2019a): Equine welfare during exercise 1 Do we have a bit of a problem - Slides: <https://www.slideshare.net/SAHorse/equine-welfare-during-exercise-do-we-have-a-bit-of-a-problem>
- Mellor, D.J. (2019b): Equine welfare during exercise 2. Do we have a bit of a problem? - Audio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rY4yEC7lhco>
- Mellor, D.J. (2020a). Mouth pain in horses: Physiological foundations, behavioural indices, welfare implications and a suggested solution. *Animals* 10(4), 572; <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani10040572>
- Mellor, D. (2020b). Bit Blindness. *VetScript*, 33, Issue 9, 32-34. [Monthly Magazine of the New Zealand Veterinary Association]
- Mellor, D.J. and Beausoleil, N.J. (2017). Equine welfare during exercise: An evaluation of breathing, breathlessness and bridles. *Animals* 7(6), 41; doi:10.3390/ani7060041. Click on: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/7/6/41>
- Mellor, D.J., Beausoleil, N.J., Littlewood, K.E., McLean, A.N., McGreevy, P.D., Jones, B. and Wilkins, C. (2020): The 2020 Five Domains Model: Including Human-Animal Interactions in Assessments of Animal Welfare. *Animals* 10 [Under review].
- Mellor, D.J. and Burns, M. (2020). Using the Five Domains Model to develop Welfare Assessment Guidelines for Thoroughbred horses in New Zealand. *New Zealand Veterinary Journal* 68, 3. 150-156. Available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2020.1715900> (accessed 15 March 2020).

- New Zealand Thoroughbred Welfare Assessment Guidelines (2019). New Zealand Thoroughbred Racing, Petone, NZ. [https://loveracing.nz/OnHorseFiles/NZTR%20Thoroughbred%20Welfare%20Guidelines%202019%20\(FINAL\).pdf](https://loveracing.nz/OnHorseFiles/NZTR%20Thoroughbred%20Welfare%20Guidelines%202019%20(FINAL).pdf) (accessed 10 September 2020)

About the author: Robert Cook is Emeritus Professor of Surgery, Tufts University, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine, Massachusetts, and former Chairman of BitlessBridle Inc. Contact him at email: bob.cook@tufts.edu

THH All Access Pass!

All 80 Issues of
The Horse's Hoof Magazine
PLUS FREE BONUSES

Special Price until Dec. 31, 2020:
only \$25⁰⁰ total!

See details on Page 6 and 73.

Sign up at:
www.thehorseshoof.com

Limit Forage Effectively and Safely



Harmany
HALTER & MUZZLE

Lighter, adjustable & easy to clean • 50% more breathable than other muzzles • Halter is sold separately and is designed for used with the muzzle • The Harmany Muzzle is made with Dupont Kevlar® and veterinarian approved. Visit www.HarmanyMuzzle.com. 540-364-4077

DOC'S HEMP

Supports Normal GI Health/Function and Helps keep your horse Calm & Relaxed

No Solvents, GMO, or Pesticides
Third Party Tested

A bottle of Doc's Hemp Hemp Oil and a bowl of hemp powder are shown. To the right is a diagram of a horse's torso showing internal organs. Blue circles indicate CBD1 receptors and green circles indicate CBD2 receptors. The areas highlighted include the brain, spinal cord, heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, intestines, and joints.

Available in Oil or Powder
DocsHemp.com