

# Less is more

Discover why riders and trainers are fans of bitless bridles, which they say can be more comfortable for the horse, improve communication and resolve behavioural issues

Some essential kit is required if you plan to go for a ride – a hard hat and safe footwear for yourself, and a saddle, bridle and girth for your horse. There is also one other item that a lot of riders would reach for, but many think you should do without – a bit.

Bitless bridles are growing in popularity, with riders ditching the mouthpiece for a variety of reasons, including horse welfare and comfort.

They say a horse or pony in a bitless bridle is more relaxed and responsive, and believe

this tack option can change a horse's way of going and his attitude to work.

Horses that back off are said to go forward, and those that resist the contact may be more likely to work in a relaxed outline.

Plus, it removes the risk of the bit banging, pinching or bruising the horse's mouth.

According to equine behaviourist Justine Harrison: "Bitless bridles are incredibly useful for horses undergoing rehabilitation, or those that have physical issues which make it painful for them to have a bit in the mouth."

However, she says most often riders tend to reach for a different, and maybe stronger, bit if they are experiencing a problem.

"If a rider puts a horse into a situation he can't cope with, his response is to run away," she states. "The rider then thinks they can't control the horse, or that the horse is dangerous, so they reach for a stronger bit or tighter noseband.

"There could be many reasons that the horse decides to run – he may be scared or in pain, which need addressing, but you also need to consider whether the bit is causing the problem in the first place. The horse could actually be happier and safer to ride in a bitless bridle."

A key reason many people don't go bitless is because you are not allowed to compete in dressage or many showing classes.

"You don't have to go bitless all the time, so why not give the horse a rest from the bit when hacking out or for some schooling sessions?" suggests Justine. "You can then use a bit when you want to compete."

## Give riders the choice

Justine is one of a group of horse lovers who have launched a campaign, A Bit More Choice, that is calling for equality for riders who want to go bitless.

"We are raising awareness of the benefits of bitless bridles, and contacting competition bodies and organisations to ask them to consider making rule changes to allow riders to compete bitless," Justine says.

"This is not a campaign to replace or criticise the use of bits, but we want riders to have a choice be able to compete on an equal footing.

"Some horses are struggling in bits, so their riders strap their mouths shut when competing in dressage. Why shouldn't these horses be allowed to compete in bitless bridles?"

Many horses are happier when ridden in a bitless bridle





Horse editor Jo rides her mare Betsy in an Orbitless bridle

## “Removing the bit often leads to huge improvements in a horse’s behaviour” JUSTINE HARRISON, EQUINE BEHAVIOURIST

A fellow member of A Bit More Choice’s campaign team is Johanna Macarthur. Johanna has been a fan of bitless bridles for 16 years.

“I bred a horse and when I went to back her, everything I put in her mouth caused an allergic reaction – her whole mouth blew up,” she says. “I tried a bitless bridle and have never looked back.

“Since then, I have worked with a lot of horses that had behavioural problems and I realised many of the issues they were exhibiting could be easily remedied by using a bitless bridle.

“I have seen huge changes achieved in a lot of horses. It can change horses that are strong and forward going, those that are

heavy in the hand or who toss their heads. I’ve also had experience of bitless bridles improving horses that were exhibiting headshaking behaviour.”

Johanna is training and membership secretary of Norfolk Horse Training & Equitation Club, where members are encouraged to ride bitless. The club’s training is based on learning theory and aims to ensure basic yet essential skills are developed.

“A lot of people who join have youngsters and we have members who were experiencing difficulties with their horses and needed help. We use methods that do not promote conflict and do not compromise the health

### How to go bitless

If your horse is exhibiting signs of a behavioural issue, or is unhappy in his mouth, have him checked out by a vet and/or equine dental technician. Also have the fit of his saddle and bridle checked.

“Sometimes, even a change of [bitted] bridle can help a horse – different bridles exert pressure on different areas of the head, and they don’t suit every horse,” advises Justine Harrison. “Or, change your noseband to a normal cavesson so his mouth isn’t strapped shut.

If you would like to go bitless, Justine offers some tips to help get you started:-

- Research different bitless bridles to find one that’s suitable for your horse or pony. Borrow one if possible – or, some retailers allow you to try before you buy (for example, [www.orbitlessbridle.co.uk](http://www.orbitlessbridle.co.uk) and [www.bitlessbridle.com](http://www.bitlessbridle.com)).
- The bridle may feel very different to your horse, so allow him to get used to it from the ground.

of the horse. A huge number of horses can be positively changed by switching to a bitless bridle, and the evidence is constantly building.”

Johanna, however, states that it isn’t always just the bit – or a lack of one – that has an influence on the horse.

“Whatever bridle you use, the key is the horse’s training and the rider’s ability to communicate with him. Lots of bitted horses are ridden very well and achieve a lot of success.

“But there are horses that are struggling in a bit, and I see this as a welfare issue.”

She says that riders don’t pay enough attention to their horses’ mouths, and if bruising from a bit does occur, it is likely to go unnoticed.

“Bits rest on the bars of the mouth – this is the most sensitive part of the horse’s mouth,” Johanna continues. “Not every rider has light hands, but do they look into their horse’s mouth after he has been ridden to check if there is any bruising? Nobody does that.”

Many riders may dismiss bitless as they don’t see how you can control a horse without something in his mouth.

“Ninety eight per cent of horses will be handled on the ground in a headcollar, and that’s essentially a bitless bridle,” responds Johanna. “I believe that you should establish control on the ground, and then follow the same principles in the saddle.”

Johanna says club members are willing to travel to anywhere in the UK with its bitless ‘interactive demo’ – contact the club for details.



Research different bitless bridles to find the right one for your horse

- In a safe, enclosed area, lead your horse and ask him to stop, turn on each rein and back up. Start by using the gentlest pressure you can, and release it immediately he does what you ask.
- Once in the saddle, practise what you did on the ground. At first, you can ride with the bitless bridle underneath your current bridle. This means you can pick up the reins of your bitted bridle if you need some extra confidence or control.
- Start in walk and only increase the pace when you feel confident to do so.
- If, at any time, the horse starts to fidget or become stressed, stop what you are doing and go back a step.
- If you are worried about being able to stop, give your horse a voice command to stop, at the same time as applying pressure on the reins and immediately give a food treat once you have halted.
- Ensure you are confident in an arena before hacking out. For your first few hacks go out with calm, confident company.

### Pressure and release

The good news for riders is there are many different types of bitless bridle to try (see box, right). One option, the Orbitless – which is a nosepiece you add to your current bridle – was designed by Wendy Wainwright when she was trying to find a suitable option for a sensitive mare that had been badly started before she got her.

“The day I tried her in a bitless bridle, she stopped fighting and started listening,” said Wendy. “I rode her in a bitless bridle, but I wanted something that allowed any pressure to release instantly, so I came up with the design for the Orbitless.”

Wendy believes interest in going bitless is growing, as word gets round to more riders about the difference they can make.

“There are so many benefits,” she says. “They can solve specific problems that are caused by discomfort from the bit – such as leaning on the bit or snatching – and I believe it gives you a better way of communicating with your horse.

“It can improve the relationship between you, as a bitless bridle is not based on something that can cause potential harm.

“Some horses become dead to the bit and don’t listen to the rider. There is such a different feeling in a bitless bridle, that horses soon start responding better.”

Wendy, Justine and Johanna are all quick to point out that while going bitless has benefits, the tack has to be comfortable for the horse, basic training must be in place and the rider must use the equipment correctly.

“Some people worry about not having control, but control comes from training,” says Wendy. “Control is not mouth based, and is about being able to use your body and weight aids effectively.

“As you would when riding in a bit, you take a contact, and you give and release when the horse softens to

you. If you keep on with the contact, the horse will lean on the bitless bridle, as he would lean on a bit.

“Every bitless bridle works by applying pressure, whether that’s to the nose, the poll or the side of the face. There is pressure somewhere, but of varying degrees.

“For me, the release of pressure is key, as the horse knows he has done the right thing.”

### “Four out of my nine horses can’t be ridden in a bit”

Rachel Stock is also lobbying competition bodies and societies in a bid to get them to accept bitless bridles at affiliated shows.

As well as making calls and writing letters and emails, Rachel is out there proving to

## Horseworld Bitless bridles

### Types of bitless bridle

If you are considering going bitless, here are some of the popular bridles that you could try:-

#### Orbitless

Ideal for most horses at any level of training, this attachment can be fitted to your existing cheek pieces to convert it into a bitless bridle. It exerts nose, poll and curb pressure, but the amount and where pressure is focused can be altered, depending on the position of the ellipses and how the reins are fastened to it. The Orbitless is good for training as it offers an instant pressure release.



#### Side pull

This noseband can be made of rope or leather, and reins attach to the noseband. It is an instant pressure-release bridle that is suitable for most horses. However, it only has one setting.



#### Enduro

When you’re established riding bitless you can move on to this bridle which offers more refinement. It features a knot that moves up and touches the horse under the chin when the reins are used, and provides instant pressure release. The Enduro is great to ride in if you and your horse are looking for equipment that is lightweight, designed for finesse and riding using the lightest suggestion.



#### Dr Cook’s

The bridle was developed by a vet, Dr Robert Cook and has two cross-under straps. The rider can apply pressure to the whole head for stopping, or half the head for turning.



## Horseworld Bitless bridles

people that her bitless horses and ponies can hold their own – and even outperform – bitted competitors.

"I want people to have the choice of competing bitless, if they want to," says Rachel, from Derbyshire. "Some horses have physical problems that mean they can't be ridden in a bit, while others are unhappy or uncomfortable in a bit.

"Four out of my nine horses can't be ridden in a bit. If we didn't ride them bitless, they would be sat in a field doing nothing."

Rachel – who has several rescue horses and ponies – first tried a bitless bridle in 2012.

"I have an Arab who is a rescue and the dentist found a lump in his mouth which would make a bit uncomfortable," she says. "I phoned a friend for advice and she said I should go bitless – I nearly fell off my chair laughing!

"I'm pretty open minded, so I thought I would have a go and tried him in a simple rope halter. Hand on heart, there was an instant change.

"This horse had previously reared up and taken 45 minutes to get a [bitted] bridle on – since riding him bitless, I never had a problem and he has gone on to win numerous showjumping championships.

"He has been ridden in a scawbrig bridle, although I use a range of different bitless bridles with my horses."

Rachel, whose daughter been placed at Equifest while riding bitless, in a rescue horse class, says she will continue to lobby for change and reports that she has already had some positive responses.

"I'm hoping at least one showing society will agree to allow bitless bridles, as a trial," she says. "Watch this space." ■



Rachel is lobbying for a change to competition rules

### Contacts

- [www.abitmorechoice.org](http://www.abitmorechoice.org);
- [www.horsetrainingclub.org](http://www.horsetrainingclub.org) (Norfolk Horse Training and Equitation Club)
- [www.orbitlessbridle.co.uk](http://www.orbitlessbridle.co.uk);
- [www.equinebehaviourist.co.uk](http://www.equinebehaviourist.co.uk) (Justine Harrison).

### CASE STUDY

## "We rehabilitate horses that would otherwise have been put down"

Sue Carr runs 'Jigsaw', a riding stables and rehabilitation centre in Lancashire (visit: [www.equinextra.com](http://www.equinextra.com)).

"We rehabilitate horses that would otherwise have been put down and give them a job to do," says Sue. "Our other aim is to educate people about horse welfare and best practice, and we specialise in working with children with autism."

Jigsaw takes an holistic approach to horse care and riding. Sue, who is a BHSAI, uses classical training methods when teaching people to ride.

All of the centre's eight horses are ridden in bitless bridles.

"When I set up Jigsaw 15 years ago, I wanted to run something that was better than the average yard," says Sue. "We started using bitless bridles seven years ago after a friend told me about the Dr Cook bridle. I still use this type of bridle as it works for my horses.

"For me, the main benefit of bitless is that horses that have had mouth problems in the past don't have to cope with having a bit in their mouth.

"I find horses stretch into the outside contact better. One dressage rider who came to use our centre's mechanical horse became interested in trying her horse bitless – she reported back that he can do a canter pirouette better without a bit in his mouth.

"As long as the rider is using the bridle correctly, a horse can go in a more relaxed outline. Bitless bridles work on pressure and release, and you need to be aware of that in order to use them in the right way."



All of Jigsaw's horses are ridden bitless



Not all horses can cope with a bit in their mouth

Sue was introduced to bitless by Katy Moriarty of Sea View Equestrian, Co Kerry, Ireland

