



BITTED  
— OR —  
BITLESS?

# BITTED OR BITLESS?

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## CHAPTER ONE



## Why ride bitless?

Like it or not, most bits work on a pain principle.

The horse does as he's told to avoid any pain in the mouth. For the most part, this is how they're designed to work. And even the so called 'mild bits' cause pain in the hands of an unskilled, insensitive or careless rider.

It's often assumed the bit is needed as a safety measure.

"I would love to ride without a bit," I hear people say. "But I can't take the risk. What if my horse spooks, bolts etc?"

Well, a bolting horse is running scared. He'll only put the brakes on when he feels safe. And the bit won't make a difference there.

On the contrary. Pulling hard on the bit will hurt your horse. It's more likely to make matters worse.

A bolting horse doesn't have a tack problem. It's either a training issue or a rider issue. It explains why you must spend time going over the groundwork exercises.

**And if you don't need a bit from the ground,  
why do you need one in the saddle?**

Outsiders assume the horse is similar to a car – that we 'steer' it by the head. This is wrong.

When you ride, you actually only need minimum pressure from the reins.

A horse's power comes from the hindquarters. Starting, stopping, collection and turning all begins here. The bitless philosophy takes this into account.



*A friend's horse, wearing her own version of a leather bitless bridle.  
Bitless bridle reins have been added to either side of a normal cavesson noseband bridle.  
This horse responds just as well as any other – bitted or bitless.*

It forces you to use your entire body for control – seat, legs, mind. Everything.

It forces you to use the reins differently. Not to point the head in the right direction, but to keep it from moving in the wrong direction.

It demands that a bond exist between you and your horse. If you achieve this with reliability, consistency, persistence and patience, your horse will do anything for you.

Bitless riding is not for the insensitive, nor the impatient. Horse's are creatures of habit.

### **So what of the bitted bridle?**

Are they evil, torture devices, cast down by the devil?

No. Not in the right hands. A skillful rider with light, quiet hands, can achieve

remarkable feats with their bitted horse. Not to mention a companion that welcomes the bit.

But you still need that essential bond with your horse. You still need the same level of control. It's no less important.

There was a time my horse would barely come near me. Now he follows me everywhere, free rein and without a halter. He'll follow me over tarpaulin – an unnerving surface for any horse. He even runs over to me when I whistle.

Consider this and the reason I don't use a bit is simple. I don't need one, and neither do you.



*A leather cross-under bitless bridle*

## CHAPTER TWO



## Action of The Bitted and The Bitless Bridle

There are many different kinds of bitless bridle. Knowing a bit about the mechanics, and how they work, will definitely help you choose one that is right for you and your horse.

The Bitless bridle is a bridle that is worn on a horse, but it has no bit and you use it to communicate with a horse just like you would a normal bit and bridle, except that it has no bit and works on light pressure either on the nose or around the nose and poll areas.

The mechanics of the way the bitless bridle works is very different to that of a normal bit and bridle. When a rider is using a bitted bridle the communication with the horse is via the bit, which sits inside the soft tissue of the horse's mouth and works in this way:

1. Harsh action, or a nutcracker action on the tongue, depending on which bit is used.
2. A bit sits on very sensitive tissues in the horse's mouth.
3. Direct pressure.
4. Over a small area.

When the rider is using the bitless bridle the communication works on a much wider area, using light pressure evenly distributed throughout these areas of the bitless bridle:

1. Around the head.
2. The poll.
3. The cheeks.
4. The nose of the horse.

The bitless bridle looks similar to a normal bridle, but the noseband is fitted slightly tighter than a cavesson noseband and sits quite a bit lower than a normal noseband and resembles more like that of a drop noseband.

There are very many different types of bitless bridles, all with slightly different effects and you should consider this carefully before you go bitless and decide which bridle is best for you. However, most bitless bridles have two types of action, one that operates on the nose only and one that operates on the nose and poll areas.

There is the rope bitless bridle, Dr. Cooks bitless bridle, a hackamore (which tends to be very severe and I would definitely not recommend this type of bitless bridle, as some serious damage can be done to the horse) to name but a few. Dr. Cook described his bridle as being a bit 'like a nudge to the horse', or a hug to the whole of the head when it is used for stopping.

If you are in any doubt about which type of bitless bridle to go for then please seek professional help with this matter.

1. **A Hackamore** has metal side-plates, to which bridle headpiece and reins attach and are joined to one another over the nose and under the jaw by leather (and sometimes chain) straps with various degrees of padding. Severity depends on the length and thus leverage, of the side-plate shanks.
2. **Dr. Cooks Bitless Bridle** has two straps crossing under the jaw and then coming up over the poll. These bridles give a level of nose and poll pressure and so I feel, in my humble opinion, that this is a slightly stronger bridle than the scawbrig.
3. **The Scawbrig bitless** is an old English design where the nose-piece has a ring at each end through which pass a leather strap that sits below the jaw, also with a ring at each end. Reins are attached to the rings of the jaw strap and this bridle can vary from mild to medium severity depending on the width of the nosepiece and the strap.

A bitless bridle should never be selected as a fashion trend or as a fix it training gadget, as there is never a short cut in training a horse. There is



the need for the hands that hold the reins to have an educated feel, because un-educated, harsh hands can cause a horse considerable discomfort even in a very mild bitless bridle and in turn cause resistance. If there are issues it is not the bridle at fault, it is the way it is used. I will highlight and underline that correct technique is essential to train your horse and to develop refined horsemanship communication. Please take the time to consider which bridle is most appropriate for you and your horse and never be afraid to seek advice from an expert.

You can also consider the try before you buy option and you can always hire or borrow a bridle for a test period. Also consider a few lessons, if you feel you need support to develop your horsemanship skills to effectively communicate with your horse. I have been around horses for over 30 years and I still make mistakes, have lessons and seek out friends to run things by and learn from and learn indeed learn I do and I am never afraid to say “I don’t know” or “how does that work” and I know that I have always got someone to bounce with and sound things out and that can come in very handy if I run into a problem, as often a different slant on something from another person is a golden nugget of invaluable information for the knowledge bank and in return I offer the same to my friends and in general we all have happy horses.



*The type of bitless bridle shown in the photo is a Scawbrig bitless bridle.*



The photo above shows a pony in a Wilkinson snaffle, designed by a man called Peter Wilkinson. This bit has a very mild gag type action.

The designer thought it up mainly with children in mind, because the bit works in a way that means pressure is put on the poll first, so it does away with children having to haul on the mouth to stop. The other idea behind it is that it saves horses from less stable hands as children often don't have still hands in, say, rising trot, and because of the way this one works, in theory it prevents the pony being jabbed in the mouth at every stride by a child who doesn't quite yet have an independent seat and can't avoid using the rein to balance.



*This bit has a very mild gag type action.*



*The photo above shows a Hackamore, which in my opinion is far too severe.*



*The photo above shows a leather variation of the Dr. Cook's bitless bridle, notice how this bridle works on the nose and the poll, it has a different action to the scawbrig. Straps from the noseband rings on the cross-under bridle cross under the jaw and those same straps go up over the poll, in effect hugging the whole head.*

## CHAPTER THREE



## Bridles Bitted and Bitless – Case Studies

Bitted or Bitless?

I happen to feel that neither bitted or bitless are right or wrong. Which one you use depends on the horse and rider.

Here are two case studies of opposite scenarios – they demonstrate some horses and riders are naturally geared to go bitless and some prefer bitted.

When I asked my 13 year old daughter (although her pony will be trained to be ridden both bitless and bitted), if she would like to ride bitless, she said she wouldn't feel safe because she wouldn't feel in control. Obviously for her it is a security issue and what she is used to (riding with a bit).

But she is a sensitive enough rider to go bitless - she knows how to use her body language very well, but she has to feel right about going bitless. Even after all my explaining, help and support she is still opting for the bit at the moment.

*If it doesn't feel right for the rider – it won't feel right for the horse.*

So there you have it, sometimes it is just down to personal choice and neither bitted or bitless is good or bad. It truly is a joint decision between you and the horse that dictates what is best.

### **From bitted to bitless**

I took on one case of a horse and rider, when the rider just couldn't keep control of their horse any more. Riding was becoming more and more dangerous, the horse just kept on getting the bit between its teeth and was gone like the wind, shaking its head and bronking - no amount of pulling was going to stop him.

First, we got the horse's teeth and back checked. All was fine there, so the work began.

I took the horse and rider back to basics, working with the rope and rope halter doing the ground exercises listed in my groundwork exercises book.

We did this until the rider could do all these exercises when I wasn't there, because it all boils down to this: your horse must respond perfectly to everything you are asking from him on the ground, before you are going to ride.

The rider worked for several months in this way on the ground. Then one day I looped a rope around the halter and asked her to get on. She looked terrified and said, "What without a bit?"

But she got on. I then helped her with her body language and thought. I said, "Look where you want to go and think at what speed."

The horse walked in the direction she was looking and at a walk. I then asked her to lengthen her body and think halt and that is what happened - the horse halted.

I left her working with this for a few weeks and went back again to find a marked improvement with both horse and rider.

We then upped the speed and distances, but each time making the transitions back to halt. It took about a year to rehabilitate this pair completely, but it was very rewarding seeing them riding out and going to shows in control, with a bitless bridle.



*All the groundwork with a halter and rope prepares your horse for being ridden in a bitless bridle*

*(Have a look through the groundwork exercises book for an in-depth list of practical exercises for you and your horse).*

## From bitless to bitted

One horse and rider contacted me for help despite having ridden for years, done lots of groundwork exercises and transitioned his horse from bitted to bit-less.

He called me saying no matter what body language and thoughts he was using, his horse just seemed to drift and without direction.

When I went to see them, sure enough the rider was doing everything correct and he had done all the groundwork exercises, but somehow he just wasn't getting any attention or direction from his horse and things just seemed to drift.

I suggested trying a bit just to see if it would help and I couldn't believe my eyes after the rider put in a regular snaffle that he used to use. It was like the horse suddenly woke-up and started paying attention. I laughed and said "I guess some horses are just meant for a bit".

The rider didn't change anything other than reverting back to the bit and that was all that was required in this case.

Bitted or bitless it's definitely 'horses for courses' and you can normally genuinely feel which option is right for you and your horse. If you are having any types of problems with a bitless or bitted bridle always seek expert advice.

Bitless bridles have been known to work on headshakers - although headshaking can be caused by a number of different things like horses being sensitive to pollen, a type of neuralgia or sunlight. (This means any form of headshaking is best checked out before just changing to a bitless bridle.)

I feel, as with everything, it is horses for courses, if you pardon the pun.

No two horse and rider are the same. Remember to bear this in mind.

It is plain common sense that not every technique works the same on every horse and not every horse can go bitless - and not every horse needs a bit.

## CHAPTER FOUR



## The Proper Fitting Of Horse Bits

Can your horse wear a bit?

You probably know at least one that can't.

Because the horse's mouth tissue is extremely sensitive. The slightest of fitting mistakes brings untold misery to both you and your horse.

Sadly, this often goes unnoticed. The horse is punished – deemed uncooperative – and ridden with a harder hand. A solution is never found.

If you prefer using a bitted bridle, that's fine – obviously. But please make sure it fits properly.

**This is often overlooked. So here are some guidelines to help you...**

Start by checking the corner of your horse's mouth. The bit shouldn't over crease this area. There should just be a gentle wrinkle on either side. Many people adopt the 'one wrinkle' rule when fitting a bit.

When the bit is fitted correctly, no part of the bar should be visible. Adjusting the headstall will raise or lower the bit's resting point on the mouth's bars. If it's too low, it will knock against the horse's teeth. This is both uncomfortable and ineffective. However, if it's too high, it will strain the horse, pinching the corners of his mouth.

Your horse should salivate well, and the bit should not be dry. If your horse chomps at the bit more than usual or hangs out his tongue, the bit may not be fitted correctly. Head shaking or tossing often points to the same problem.

The trouble is that many equestrians (beginner and expert) are stuck in a 'one size fits all' mentality. However, bits are made in inch and half inch increments.

One size certainly does not fit all. It's important you don't guess. Measure your horse's mouth before shopping for a bridle.

### **Taking measurements**

One of the easiest ways to measure is with a soft material – a string or shoelace. A piece of garden hose also gives you a clear idea of how the bit will fit in place.

Measure horizontally across your horse's mouth – behind the teeth, but over the tongue.

A general rule is to choose a bit  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch longer than this measurement. This allows space for the bit rings or shanks, meaning your horse's mouth won't be squeezed.

Of course, your measurements may not be a nice round number. So focus on a manufacturer who makes this length or can custom make it for you.

This takes longer, but it's worth the wait. Ill-fitting horse bits cause severe problems further along in a horse's life.

### **Considerations when fitting the bit**

Look closely at the bit's design. Are there any areas that could pinch or chafe?

There are many designs for different disciplines. While some are very mild, others are quite brutal. Look at how they attach to the bars, tongue and roof of the mouth.

A horse bit with hinges or moving parts can easily cause sores. Often the smallest of movements are transferred from the reins.

If you notice this happening, give your horse a break. Let him recover. Use Vaseline or an antibiotic ointment to stop the sore drying out or getting infected.



You may consider replacing the bit with a different type. Or try rubber bit guards on each side of your horse's bit.

If you are riding with a metal bit, temperature is very important. Remember, those tissues inside your horse's mouth are extremely sensitive. Take care to warm the bit on very cold days. If the bit is very hot, take a moment to run it under a cold tap.

Most horses are trained to accept the bit from an early age. Your horse shouldn't throw his head or bite out of fear. If your horse does this, retrain him to accept the bit. Or, if you prefer, try an alternative to the metal bit.

There are tons of products designed to work better than just a hunk of steel laid across your horse's tongue. There are mechanical hackamores (though somewhat severe in my opinion). You could also try one of the bitless systems.

Choose a system based on good control, affordable price, a simple design, durability, and a good reliable company name. Following these guidelines saves you a lot of bother and confusion later on.



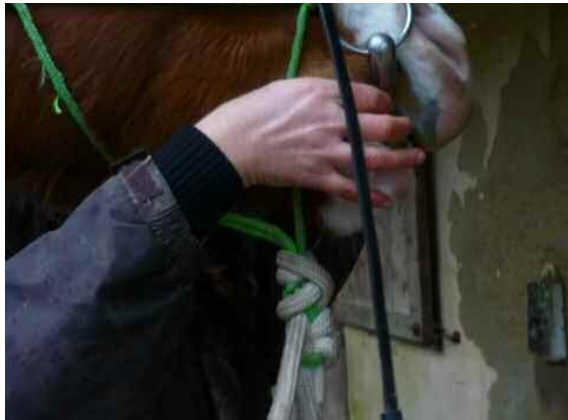
*The Snaffle Bridle without any kind of noseband.*



*Fitting the Loose Ringed Snaffle Bit*



*Gently put your fingers in the side of your horse's mouth. Feel for the fleshy part with no teeth. This is where the bit sits. As you do this, your horse will automatically open his mouth. This helps you insert and remove the bit without it clanging on his teeth.*



*When the horse opens his mouth, gently slide in the bit so it rests on the fleshy gaps behind his teeth.*



*Check the bridle isn't too loose. Otherwise it will bang on your horse's teeth.*



*Bring the headpiece over behind the ears to rest on the poll. You should be able to fit a four fingered hand-span underneath the throat latch. If you are using an ordinary cavesson noseband, you should be able to stick a finger or two underneath.*



*Check both sides of your bit are even. There should be just a gentle wrinkle on either side.*



*You can also let your horse munch at a hay net whilst getting used to the bit.*

## CHAPTER FIVE



## Different Bitless Bridle Comparisons and How They Work

When you are fitting any type of bridle you must take into consideration any bridle will sit on the poll area, directly behind the horses ears. This is also where the Atlas is - the most sensitive area behind the horse's ears.

The Atlas is where the nuchal ligament starts. This ligament is responsible for the whole chain of movements of the horses back. Additionally here the head joins the cervical spine, with the foramen magnum connecting the brain with the medulla. Too much pressure here can cause inflammation of the nuchal ligament, causing your horse tremendous pain.

When it comes to bitless bridles there are mostly two types of action. One is the cross-under style that works on whole head pressure and the other is the side-pull style or variations that work mostly on nose pressure.

I feel it is best to try both the different types of action on your horse, as some horses respond better than others to one or the other, and most horses accept bitless bridles very well.

On the odd occasion you do get some horses that just go better and actually prefer the bit, so it really is just trial and error.

Perhaps the bitless bridle you've heard most about is a Dr Cook Bitless Bridle. This bridle works on the principle of a 'whole head hug' action, where pressure travels through the reins, along the cheek straps and over the poll (this cross-under design has been physiologically validated by a veterinary surgeon).

I like the Dr Cook Beta, which is a vinyl-covered, leather-look nylon.

It's the cross-action under the back of the jaw that makes it so effective.

There is no trouble controlling your horse whilst hacking, schooling or jumping and your horse should worn comfortably in an outline. The synthetic material is really easy to clean – just wipe with a damp cloth. The materials used to make this bridle are soft but strong. I think this bridle is good value for money and I would recommend it for day-to-day riding (buy the next size up, as the noseband part can be quite short)

As you'll find, there are lots of bitless bridles out there.

But out of all the bitless bridles, I personally love the rope bridle best. It is the easiest one to transition my youngsters to - as I do all the groundwork in a rope halter - so they are already half-way there.



*Dr Cooks Beta Bitless Bridle*



*Jeffreys bitless bridle*



*Scrawbrig bridle*



*Libbys Hackamore bridle*



*Rambo Micklem multibridle*

## CHAPTER SIX



## The Rope Halter

My poor parents.

I've a pile of tack from them, built up over the years. Hardly any of it has been used.

I rode my now retired horse in a Myler bit. This is very mild, without the nutcracker action in the middle.

I've ridden with a plain old head collar and lead rope.

As a child, I rode my pony bareback with only a piece of bailing twine around her neck.

And while I definitely don't recommend you do the same, this is a valuable lesson.

If your mind, body language and riding style are firmly in the right place...

If your bond with your horse is strong...

Then you can ride almost any way you choose.

Take the rope halter. This is a perfect way to start a youngster, and a fine way to ride.

This may come as a surprise to you, but study the history of the hackamore. You'll find the rope halter is actually quite similar to some of the earlier makes.

The difference is you're controlling your horse with gentle, even pressure.

And you can even tie a lead rope, using the halter's fiador knot under the chin. This way, you can ride with the rope halter without changing your equipment or buying anything special.

The only thing I recommend you add is the rope bridle. This gives you independent reins on each side, allowing you to convert to a plain long rope if needed.

### Step by step - Tying the rope halter



*Take the crown piece over the ears and thread it through the cheek piece.*



*Pull the halter up. The knot you tie should be level with your horse's eye.*



*Under the crown piece, push the tail of the rope towards the ears to form a loop.*



*Bring the rope's tail piece across and through the loop towards your horse's bottom.*



*This is what the finished knot should look like.  
The knot should be level with the horse's eye.*



I've said it before. The rope halter gives you a gentle method of control. But in the wrong hands it becomes severe – perhaps even more severe than a bit.

Your aim is to have control through your mind, seat and body language. Not just the reins themselves.

As always, this demands groundwork. Be careful how you use these tools. Watch your horse's posture closely as you work through the exercises in the ebook.

Before you head out riding, please make sure you have the single rein stop working on both sides of your horse.

Master turning, disengaging the hindquarters and backing-up. If you do not have these basics, you are asking for trouble. This applies to any bridle.

Remember to try this in a controlled environment first – an arena or small paddock, for example.

Take the time to fit any tack properly. Keep your commands clear and consistent, and make sure your horse understands what you're asking.



*The result of tireless groundwork*

This horse is a marvel. Bitless, barefoot and impeccable manners to boot. He's been with the same owner since a foal.

This owner has been through all the groundwork exercises with him. What's more, she hasn't stopped practicing.

So what can I say? This horse is the perfect example of a bitless barefoot horse. 5 years old and he just keeps getting better

I also know this owner rode with a bitless rope for a while, before switching back to her rope halter and rope. I asked her why.

"My horse goes just the same in it," she said. "Plus, I don't have to change anything. He's always ready to go riding."



*The Myler Comfort snaffle bit*

I've found this works particularly well on my horse, Bob.

When I first bought him, he'd picked up some undesirable habits – rearing and spinning among them. At the time, he'd been ridden in a loose ring Fulmer snaffle bit and a martingale.

So I threw away the Martingale and (after much consideration and research) switched to this Myler Comfort snaffle.

This does away with the nutcracker action in the middle of the tongue. It also helps with direction and lifting your horse's shoulders during schooling.

My seat is light and independent. My contact is still and light.

Every time he span, I asked him to turn back.

Every time he reared, I asked him to back up a few steps.

Eventually, he realised the comfiest direction was forwards.

I suspect Bob was never backed or schooled properly. Perhaps he even controlled his rides, misbehaving whenever he was ready to stop.

For reasons like this, I mostly keep untouched youngsters. They're a blank page, without anybody else's mistakes to undo. Bob's the only exception.

Thankfully, we have a fantastic bond now. It just took twice as long.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



# The Rope Bitless Bridle

The rope bridle is particularly gentle.

Unlike the metal bit, pressure is applied on either side of the nose band. It is an essential step into the world of natural horsemanship. So how should you get started?



Personally, I recommend a rope halter/bridle combo. The noseband includes steel rings, attached to the nose knots. This means you can use your reins. Meanwhile, a fiador knot enables you to lead from the ground (of course, this is slightly more expensive than an ordinary halter).

If you're feeling brave, you can make your own. Once you've mastered a few knots, this can be incredibly cost effective.

### Here are some guidelines to help you

#### DO:

- Get your horse used to the rope halter and rope first.
- Make sure your rope bridle is made from a good quality rope.
- Be sure your bridle fits properly. The easy-does-it website helps you take your horse's measurements.
- Check your rope bitless bridle has cheek pieces. These fit behind the jaw bone, almost to where the throat latch would normally sit. If this moves the noseband too high then the bridle is too small.
- Make sure the reins are the right length for your horse's neck. Use them alternately, with a gentle feel. Lift for direction and halt.
- Go over all the ground work exercises with your horse.
- Make sure your horse responds to your cues for stop, turn left and right, back up and yield his hindquarters.
- Check the noseband isn't too high or low.
- Check your horse's teeth before going bitless.
- Double check that your horse's tack is well fitted and secure.

#### DON'T:

- Give up. Seek help instead.
- Trap your horse's whiskers or chin hairs under the noseband buckle or cross-under straps.
- Just get on and ride without testing your equipment.
- Transfer from a bitted bridle to a bitless without testing your horse's responses.

- Tie up the horse hastily. Read the instructions first.
- Leave your horse tied up in a rope halter or bridle.
- Transport your horse in a rope halter or bridle.
- Expect a bitless bridle to be a quick fix for a particular problem.
- Pull on the reins to stop.
- Get angry with your horse. If he doesn't understand something, take a moment to rethink your strategy. Any improvements you make will benefit your horse in turn.

Finally, when buying a rope halter, you'll find there are two types to choose from. One has two knots on the nose. The other has four knots on the nose.

The four knot halter gives slightly more pressure. If you choose this, remember to ride with softer hands.



*A rope halter with 2 pressure knots*



*A rope halter with 4 pressure knots*

## CHAPTER EIGHT



## Putting On The Rope Bitless Bridle



This rope bitless bridle has low side-pull reins. It uses nose pressure only. You can buy this bridle from easy-does-it for £13.95. Here's how to fit it...

### Putting On The Bitless Rope Bridle and Tying The Knot



*First, bring the bridle over the horse's nose.*



*Next, bring the crown piece over the head ...*



*... behind the ears.*



*Slide the crown piece through the loop at the top of the cheek piece.  
 \Angle the tip towards horse's tail. Pull up on the rope bridle until the throat knot  
 reaches the horse's throat.*



*Bring the tip forward, under the halter, at the base of the loop, above the eye knot.*



*Tie off by bringing the tip of the crown piece back through the loop. Make sure the tail of the crown piece is pointing toward the horse's tail. Also, check there are no twists in the rope.*



*Make sure the knot is snug and the cheek knots are just below your horse's cheek bones.*





*This is how the knot should look on your rope bitless bridle.*

### Halter Fit and Adjustment

The halter shouldn't be too tight under the chin. However, if it's too loose your horse could get his foot caught.



*The reins shouldn't be too long or too short. As your horse stretches his neck to the ground, he mustn't be able to put his foot through the reins.*



*If your horse does this, he should yield to pressure, keeping his head down until you free him. This means working through the Groundwork Exercises e-book.*



This is not my favourite bitless bridle. As you can see, it leaves quite a gap under the chin. I find this causes my reins to swing from side to side.

Also, the clips on the side are made of brass. They seem too heavy.

Personally, I prefer the halter/bridle combo.

I prefer this, because it fits almost the same as the rope halter.

## CHAPTER NINE



## Putting On The Cross Under Bitless Bridle



*First, bring the bridle over the horse's nose.*



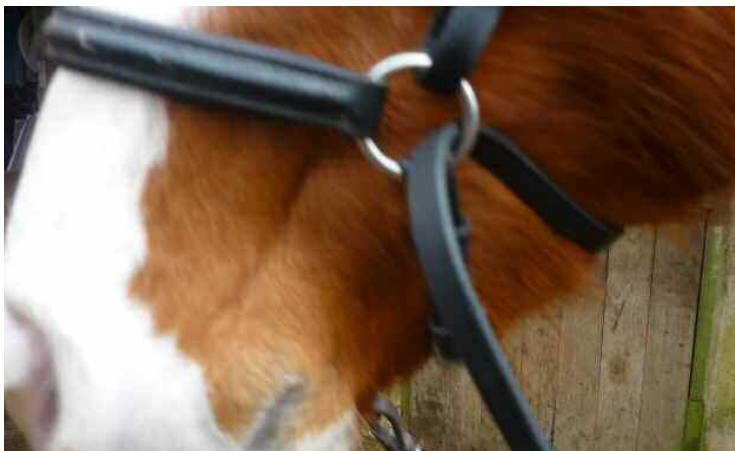
*Put the cross-under bitless bridle over the nose, making sure the cross-under straps are under the horses chin. The cross-under straps under the chin are also connected to the head piece, which goes over the horses head, behind the ears and rests on the poll.*



*Bring the bridle up over the ears so that the headpiece is resting on the horses poll and make any necessary adjustments to the brow-band, throat latch and noseband.*



*You can adjust any of the bridle straps to fit once the bridle is in place. The bridle below has been correctly fitted and shows what the bridle looks like when properly in place.*



*The final fit - correctly fitted cross-under bitless bridle.*

## CHAPTER TEN



## Exercises Preparing You Both For Riding Bitless

Have you followed your Groundwork Exercises e-book?

These next steps are a valuable addition to your training routines.

The first of these exercises use an ordinary rope halter with two knots.

When you make the shift from the rope halter to a rope bridle, these simple exercises help gauge your direction and brakes.

First, check how your horse responds to the bitless bridle from the ground. As always, this is the safest place to be.

Ask your horse to yield to pressure on one rein. Begin to the left while you are standing at the girth. Then do the same on the right side.

Once you've done this, ask your horse to yield whilst putting light pressure on his back – where your bottom would be in the saddle. Yielding the head in lateral flexion is like putting on the handbrake.

If your horse has been taught to yield in a rope halter, look to the e-book's groundwork exercises. This should be a familiar exercise, but remember you are using a new piece of equipment. This may put pressure on a different part of the head. Don't be disappointed if it takes a little time.

You'll find your horse responds better to rhythmic on/off pressure when asking for a halt. Give the reins a gentle squeeze, rather than a steady pull. Open and close your fingers in a gentle rhythm, as you would when squeezing a sponge.

Any steady pull on the horse's head usually leads to a tense response. This

is because of your horse's innate behaviour. Your horse is naturally programmed to oppose pressure. He must know what certain types of pressure mean. Obviously, the more exercises you do, the faster he'll learn.

The cross-under bitless bridle design applies gentle pressure to the opposite side of the head. When turning, your horse moves away from pressure. This is a great strength. A horse that yields well to pressure can be useful in all sorts of situations – whether you are on the ground or in the saddle.

Make sure you and your horse can do all the exercises listed here, as well as those in the e-book. It's a surefire way to prepare for bitless riding.



*If you're safe doing it, stand at your horse's bottom. Ask your horse to meet your hand with a full stretch.*



*Do this exercise on both sides. When you can do this free rein, gently repeat with the reins on each side. Your horse will already know what you're asking of him.*

*It's a good idea to do this exercise with the rope halter, using the rope as reins on either side of the horse's neck.*



*Next, apply pressure on one side of the horse's back, roughly where your bottom would be in the saddle. Now, ask your horse round, using the rein. This introduces your horse to the combination of pressures. As you ride, he'll automatically know what you're asking of him when turning.*



*Ask your horse to stretch his neck right out. Meanwhile, block his legs from moving forwards. Once your horse has finished his neck stretch, you can also ask him to back-up. This is an important part of your brakes system. It must be understood before you ride – bitted or bitless.*

It's a very good idea to repeat any exercise from both sides of your horse (particularly the last one). You may have been taught – as I was – to do things from the left side. This is fine, but there are times where you're forced to work from the right. When you do, your horse could easily spook.

I do everything from both sides – even putting rugs on. Try doing the same. Mount and dismount from the right. If something makes your horse spook during a ride, pass the perpetrator from both sides. Or better yet, stop to have a look at what it is.

This desensitises your horse. If he knows something isn't dangerous, he won't be afraid. Simple.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

## More Groundwork Exercises For Riding Bitless

You're probably wondering if I even own a saddle.

Why do I keep sending you these groundwork exercises?

Well it's true, I'm unashamedly, positively potty about the lead rope. But only because I know what it can do for you and your horse.

If you see a fearful horse, there's probably one simple explanation... Rushed groundwork – not enough time spent taking these steps seriously.

If you see a 'disobedient' horse, think the same again. Often the shortcomings lie in the horse's training.

Yes, horses have different personalities. Some are fearful. Others are head-strong. That's true. But if you know your horse inside-out from the ground, you can work through anything in the saddle.

So, on the following pages are some more exercises for you, and I hope you take them on board. After all, you've already invested in the expensive stuff – the stabling, food, tack, not to mention the horse.

Time is such a small added investment once you see the rewards. So please follow these directions. Most importantly, please enjoy it.





*Coax the head round gently with the horse's nose. This gets the horse used to direction. Once your horse is used to flexing his neck round, you can start incorporating the rein.*



*Notice how willingly this horse brings his nose round. All from a gentle ask.*



*Start to ask for a neck flex with the rein. Notice the trainer does this while keeping one hand on the horse's body, roughly where the saddle would be. This added pressure helps prepare your horse for when you're in the saddle.*



*Next, do the same, only placing your hand where the stirrup would be. This is a good exercise for teaching leg cues. Remember, leg cues are part of your braking system.*



*Yield the whole body along the wall. Ask your horse to travel sideways. This means crossing all his legs and moving his whole body in a straight line. Once you've mastered this on the ground, your horse will know exactly what you're asking from the saddle.*







*When asking your horse to move over, use your stick vertically as well as horizontally as an extension of your arm.*



*Don't worry if you make mistakes. Just remember to smile and carry on. This horse has already set off sideways without his owner.*

*She looks surprised doesn't she? But she still has a smile on her face. Whatever you do with your horse - on the ground or in the saddle - it should be fun.*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

## Trust exercises

You've heard it before: Trust takes time.

Time spent feeding and taking care of your horse. But also going over your groundwork exercises every day. Never stop, until you know your horse inside-out.

If you want to ride your horse bitless, this vital bond must exist between you. So here are some exercises to help.

As you follow them, you learn how well your horse trusts you.

**Can you walk comfortably all the way around your horse without him worrying? Your horse has four blind spots. They are...**

1. The area directly behind his tail.
2. Directly behind his head (where you sit)
3. In front of his forehead, where many people approach horses.
4. The patch of ground under his head, near the front legs.



*Can your horse stand still with the rope dangling? Can you walk away and come back without him moving?*



*Can your horse stand still with the rope dangling? Can you walk away and come back without him moving?*

*This is a good exercise in case your horse steps on the lead rope. If your horse does this, his head should lower. If he raises his head, you've still some work ahead of you.*



*Can you cover one eye? Then both eyes?*

*When you take away your horse's vision, you remove his flight mode. This is his defense against predators. If you can do this comfortably, you have his trust.*



*Being able to put your fingers up your horse's nostrils needs a great deal of trust.  
Try doing this slowly and gently.*



*Can you rub your horse with a numnah, plastic bag, rain-sheet or anything else that makes an odd noise? These objects are potentially scary for the horse.*

Once your horse is used to being rubbed all over with a strange object, you can also make a hissing sound. This desensitises him to the famous spray bottle.

My horse needed some spray on his foot. So I made this hissing sound around him. After that, no more spray problems.

Similarly, I was suffering a cold the other day. As I blew my nose, my horse jumped and shot me a look. So I kept on blowing into the hankie whilst laughing at the same time. In the end he just stood there and sighed, as if to say "Oh here we go. It's just another one of those exercises."





*Can you play with your horse's ears? The fur inside your horse's ears prevents dust from entering the ear canal. This is a delicate spot. A good way to start is to play with the front of the ears.*



*If your horse is head-shy, rest your hands on the poll behind his ears. Let him twitch them back and forth. It works like a dream. This prepares your horse for any bridle type, when he must have his ears touched.*

Once your horse is happy, you can gently try feeling the inside of his ears. Be prepared for him to pull away. Gentleness, patience and persistence is the key – as always.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



## Starting in the Saddle, Bitless

How do you know if it's safe to saddle up?

Just start with some simple ground exercises. Control from the ground is crucial before anything else.

First, walk your horse with a directing rein. Check he understands turning left and right while moving.

Ask your horse to stop with a gentle lift. Feel for one rein, then the other as you do this. Keep a steady rhythm between the two.

Check your horse can yield the hind quarters with a gentle touch from your hand or stirrup. Do this wherever your leg gives the aid when riding.

Once your horse's brake system is working, get him to back up with the same rhythm on each rein. If your horse doesn't understand, take the reins in one hand. Have them press lightly against his chest with a steady rhythm.

After I've worked through these exercises, I like to give simple voice commands. Try doing the same...

"Halt."

"Walk."

"Trot."

"Back-up"

This could prove invaluable to you. Especially when prepping a horse for children and beginners. I've trained a pony for my daughter using this very method. It gave her far more control.

## Starting in the saddle

Once you've completed the exercises on the ground, it's time to transfer everything to the saddle.

Watch your horse's head as you rub it, or when you release the reins over his neck.

Does he give his head and hold lateral flexion for a few seconds? If so, it's safe to saddle up.

To be on the safe side, do this in an enclosed area. An arena, yard or even a small paddock, for instance.

Now, work through the same exercises you did on the ground: Lateral flexion, yielding the hindquarters, back-up, walking, turning, stopping and checking your lateral flexion again. If your horse responds well at the walk, try a trot. Then (if you've reached this stage in your riding) a canter.

***Remember: You don't have to do this all in one go. The key to a responsive horse is patience and groundwork. Pay close attention to the quality of each movement.***

For instance, yielding or disengaging the hindquarters takes energy from your horse's powerhouse. This slows him down. So first ask your horse to yield his head a little towards you. Whilst holding this position, press your hand or stirrup rhythmically against your horse's side.

Don't push too hard. This is a gentle movement. Your horse should feel the movement on his skin – no deeper.

If you need more pressure, add a rhythmic upwards lift to the rein. Keep this going, focusing on the hindquarters until you get a result. This shouldn't take long, provided you keep up the rhythm on both the stirrup and reins.

Can you do this at a standstill? Try it again from a walk or trot to be sure your horse will listen to your leg. This is your brake.

There's another good exercise to help your horse yield the hindquarters. Ride alongside the fence. Yield the hindquarters away from the fence. Next, turn the head towards the fence until you're facing it.



### The Bitless Cross Under Bridle

As with the ground exercises, keep your rein contact light and minimal. You can control the length of the reins simply by opening and closing your fingers. You needn't use your arms.

For a halt, just lift the reins slightly and close your fingers. Do this gently on alternate reins. Meanwhile, keep your body tall and straight.



*Open your fingers. Doing this will automatically give quite a bit of slack to the reins.*



*Close your fingers. This often does enough to tighten them.*



*Keep your body tall and straight, lifting the reins slightly.  
You're asking your horse for a halt.*



*Make sure your reins are the correct length before you set out.*