

To bit or not to bit – a health issue? By Lissy Seidel

We all worry about our horses' health, right? We carefully scrutinise the environment they live in, obsess endlessly about what to feed, what not to feed, how much to feed and that's before we go anywhere near the range of supplements available claiming to deal with every problem under the sun, from competition nerves to mud fever.

As a holistic vet I am fully supportive of people working out the healthiest way to feed and look after horses, but in the proper sense of the word holistic I look at every aspect of management, starting with foot health and taking into account the influence of equipment and tack. Again, the importance of a well fitting saddle is at the forefront of most thinking riders' mind. Very few people, however, consider the piece of metal in a horse's mouth.

Problems with a horse's mouth? Call out the dentist. I applaud the growing tendency to have the teeth checked at least once a year, but once the teeth have been ruled out as a trigger for unruly or difficult behaviour the only advice people generally get is to find a stronger bit.

A client of mine contacted me because she had reached the end of the road with Zabary, her 20 year old ex racehorse. She had given up on jumping, competing was completely out of the question and hacking was not very relaxing, to put it mildly. As is so often the case, everybody else was brimming with confidence and knew exactly what to do, but even instructors could only think of advising her to ride him in a stronger bit. Rachel's concern was that he was already quite violent, on occasion snatching at the reins so hard he nearly pulled her out of the saddle. He also seemed quite uncomfortable in his back, but had proved almost dangerous to treat, refusing to cooperate with a chiropractic manipulator to the point of becoming quite dangerous, kicking when touched in the lumbar area.

On the whole he was not a happy horse and Rachel felt that all the fun had gone out of riding him.

Equipped with a purpose made bitless bridle Rachel ventured forth into a large paddock. Watching her I felt amazed just how restless Zabary was with his head, throwing it up and down, occasionally snatching at the reins. After a few minutes walking and trotting in circles and figure of eights Rachel rode up to me and remarked on how much calmer he was with his head! She was brave enough to canter him several times and had no problem pulling him up or indeed steering him.

To summarise the outcome, she bought her own bitless bridle, started to x-country school

him and competed again in a hunter trial, producing a clear round, which had been a rarity before. She commented how she was looking forward to riding him now as it wasn't such a hassle, how she had had zero confidence jumping and now there was just one happy horse and rider.

It is of course not the bit that hurts a horse, it is the hand holding the reins. How many people can honestly say that there is never a situation where their use of the reins is less than perfectly controlled?

When I run my course 'The holistic horse' at Marlborough Summer School I show my students a horse skull and demonstrate, how delicate and thin, almost fragile the horse's jaw is where the bit lies. I then get them to experience the pressure of the bit on their finger, sandwiched between the jawbone and the bit. Their facial expressions invariably turn rather thoughtful. In a live horse the padding between bone and metal is a thin layer of mucous membrane. Most of us can probably relate to how painful pressure on gums is. Bones themselves have, of course, no nerve supply, but the periosteum, the thin layer of 'skin' bones are sheathed in, has extensive nerve supply, as anybody who has ever banged their shin can testify.

So the potential for causing severe pain is certainly there. Hand on heart, have you never pulled on the reins in a temper or even just a desperate attempt at control, when leading a spirited horse perhaps?

The resistance to the whole idea of riding without a bit is simply extraordinary. Reasons given by organisations mainly rely on the whole idea that you cannot control a horse unless it has a bit in its mouth. But where is the evidence that you can control a horse through a bit? When a horse bolts there isn't a bit in existence that will stop it. In fact, riders who have reached the end of the road with a pulling horse and try a bitless bridle frequently report that the horse listens much better and brakes and steering work better than ever before.

The next argument that is inevitably wheeled out that bitless bridles put too much pressure on the nose. I can only imagine that it is the fact that a rub or swelling on the nose is very visible, whereas bruising and swelling on the gum over the jawbone is well hidden unless you specifically look for it. I find it hard to believe that pressure on the nose is more painful than pressure on the bars of the lower jaw.

Quite apart from the debate about control and pain, some serious health issues have been linked with the bit, most strikingly headshaking. Headshaking must rate as one of the most frustrating and enigmatic conditions you can come across as a vet. Many reasons have been suggested, but treatment is rarely successful, so suffering horses frequently have to

be retired or, in extreme cases, put down.

So, if riding bitless really is as effective and safe as riding with a bit, why has it not been taken up on a large scale?

Long ago I learned that any innovation, any new way of doing things and any new invention is greeted by people with the three laws of immobility:

- We've always done it like this.
- We've never done it like that.
- Anybody could come and tell me that!

The only thing you can do is endlessly lay out the facts and lead by example.

I personally started riding with a bitless bridle because one of my horses made his opinion of the bit very clear – he stood patiently without being tied up for me to lift the saddle on but took off like a bullet when I took the bridle off the fence. The proof was, however, delivered by my other horse, Demon, the open team chaser. Always a strong horse I had come to the point of simply dreading having to canter him in training as he pulled my arms out. As for competitions – well, I was more or less a passenger, no matter what bit I tried. In his bitless bridle he stays much calmer before the start and although he still is very strong I am confident in the knowledge that I can stop him if I really need to, even with the other horses galloping away from us.

Both my horses are visibly happier and there is no way I would consider going back to a bit for either of them.

Links: www.bitlessbridle.co.uk

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwyHqmsAXRs>