

Introduction to Bitless

By Vicki Jayne Yates BA Hons

www.VickiJayneYates.co.uk

I am not anti-bit, however I am passionate about bitless.

My training approach and my knowledge on bitless has been showcased in many national magazines. For example the article of Achieving Lightness – that appeared in Horse Magazine showcased how to school bitless. I have no vested interest in selling you a bridle. Nor am I selling you my knowledge, what I am sharing here is FREE. **It is MY GIFT to YOU.**

I do not sell bridles or take commission on sales on any bitless bridles I recommend.

Please note it is industry practice for some (not all) bitless manufacturers to enlist horsemanship practitioners to promote, endorse and sell a particular make of bridle.

You should be aware these practitioners are often on a percentage commission. Here you will be getting truly independent advice from someone who has road tested and used a very wide range of bitless bridles for ground work and riding on my own horses and with many clients with their horses.

Here I share my knowledge on bitless for FREE. Why? Because I can only help a very limited number of people; here I can help more.

I no longer take out a vast selection of different bitless bridles for people to try with their horse. I have stopped doing this because I find it sad people wanted a quick fix with equipment, not input on my skills.

My time is very limited and I am interested in working one to one with people who are interested in development of their relationship with their horse. Therefore to replace the service of going out, here I share freely my personal wealth of expertise on bitless bridles.

What matters is the knowledge on what each bridle has to offer, the benefits and limitations. I strongly urge you to use the information alongside support from a horsemanship practitioner of your choice. It is essential to have the knowledge to use equipment compassionately.

With a growing interest in ethical horsemanship training more and more people are looking to try ground working and riding bitless. Many are not aware of how many different styles of bitless bridles there are available and each is different in action. Some are milder and others more severe.



Pressure is pressure, a bit can cause discomfort and pain so too can a head collar, a halter or a bitless bridle. All equipment has the potential to cause discomfort / pain. Some by the nature of design and materials used can cause more discomfort or pain than others.

The horse's head and mouth is packed full of nerve endings. The skull has little padding. The nose on the horse is delicate and fragile. So it is wrong to think it is ok for a horse to brace and resist, or a handler to pull on the rope, or a rider to use pressure on the reins and it won't hurt the horse, because it will. The wrong approach and equipment used badly can result in disaster and can make you and your horse miserable.

Instant Release to a Neutral State.

For me personally bitless bridles fall into two categories those that return to neutral instantly and those that don't.

There is significant research on restrictive, tight nosebands that they cause equines distress and pain. Therefore some (not all) bitless bridles by their design have the potential to tighten, become restrictive, and not offer an instant release.

Uneducated and poor use of a bitless bridle can cause it to tighten and cause distress.

At best bridles that do not offer an instant release of pressure will not provide clear precise cues at worst they have the potential to cause discomfort or pain and in turn cause resistance.

All bridles be they with a bit or bitless must have at least space for two fingers easily between the bridle noseband and jaw area on the horse.

Therefore any bitless bridle that has straps that can tighten on any parts on the horse's head and are either slow to release or don't release pressure in my personal opinion have potential to cause distress.

Ethically I think bitless equipment must offer an instant release of pressure with at least two fingers gap on the release.

Ethical Compassionate Horsemanship is What Matters.

Before I discuss different bitless bridles I would like to highlight tack should never be selected as a fashion trend or as a fix it training gadget, as there is never a short cut in ethically training a horse.

Lots of money is spent by businesses to sell to you the latest bridle and the marketing list of benefits. And it is not uncommon for people to spend lots of money collecting bridles, swapping from one bit of tack to another rather than invest in their technique in search of the magic answer.

Uneducated harsh hands can cause a horse considerable discomfort in very mild equipment and in turn cause resistance. It is not the equipment at fault it is the way it is used. It is to be highlighted and underlined that correct technique is essential to train your horse to develop refined horsemanship communication.



For me it is about connection with the horse using a subtle whisper to suggest to the horse rather than using pressure and equipment to shout instruction.

Horsemanship for me is open and honest dialogue using positive reinforcement. The opinion of the horse matters in our relationship and interactions, they provide us with excellent feedback. So with this in mind when you are reading this information you are 50% of the picture, your horse will have an opinion on the training methods you use and the equipment selected.

All equipment does is amplify your requests. Some types of equipment and training methods will whisper others shout. Once you can master a dialogue of lightness and connection you will no longer need equipment for you and your horse to understand each other. Partnership with a strong bond is better than any equipment

Whatever you choose to use in the way of equipment for your horse regular dental and health checks are essential for comfort.

There are many different bitless bridles available, I haven't listed all.

The Orbitless.

This bitless bridle is my favourite. It is so versatile for non ridden activities, ground work and riding. Every horse I have owned has gone very well in this bridle. The Orbitless bridle works by applying pressure to the nose, chin and poll. It is a can be used as a very mild hackamore that can also be used as a side pull and everything in between. There are at least eight different settings you can use depending on if the ellipses are in the vertical or horizontal plane and where you choose to attach the reins. Set in the vertical plane you will increase poll pressure, set in the horizontal plane you greatly reduce poll pressure. Then dependant on where you attach the reins gives you even more settlings. So it can be varied between poll and chin pressure and nose and chin pressure. Therefore you can try different settings to find the one your horse prefers. It is a very fast instant release bridle. There are no long shanks to apply large amounts of leverage. I love this bridle as the aids can be refined, subtle, soft and gentle as the Orbitless offers precise and clear instant release. It is available in beautiful English leather and in there is a synthetic version in a range of wonderful colours. The Orbitless can be purchased as a noseband to attach to your favourite bridle or you can purchase a high quality headstall from Orbitless that provides more stability for working bitless.



There are other bitless bridles that have similar attributes to the Orbitless, however in my opinion not as versatile.

Star Wheel Hackamore. The Star Wheel Hackamore has circular metal plates with a star shape in the centre. As it is circular rather than elliptical it offers less options than the Orbitless. It is an instant release bridle and one that can be used for non ridden, ground work and riding.

The Flower Hackamore.

This bridle gives you several settings, the difference between this bridle and the Orbitless is it provides a slightly longer shank and a fewer set up options. This bitless bridle is an instant release and suitable for non ridden, ground work and for riding. It is widely available online from many different retailers in leather and synthetic versions.

The Flower Lucky Wheel Hackamore. Is very similar to the flower hackamore and the star wheel. It is circular in design.

The Barefoot Bitless Bit (BBB). Has only 3 different settings. It offers instant release to neutral.

Silk Steel Short Shank. With shorter shanks for a less strong leverage, only 1 option for set up. It offers instant release to neutral.

S Hackamore. Although the shanks are much shorter than an English and German hackamore the shank is much wider. Therefore this hackamore is more severe than the ones listed above in as it can apply more leverage on the nose and curb and poll. One to use with great care, and tact. Suitable for horse and rider combinations that only use the softest suggestions. Not suitable for non ridden activities.

German and English Hackamores.

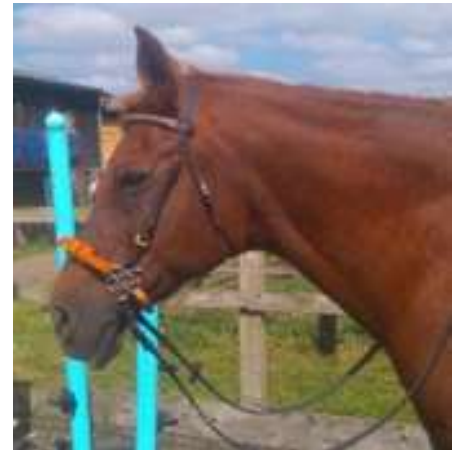
The hackamore family of bitless bridles is the one that is the most well-known and easily recognised bitless bridle. There are many different designs, the very long shanked German Hackamore and English Hackamore and versions of these have the potential to apply large amounts of pressure. Although they offer an instant release in my opinion these are not ones I recommend due to the leverage which has the potential to cause considerable distress to the horse.

All Hackamore type bridles work on a leverage action, putting pressure on the nose, chin and poll. The longer the shank the more severe, shorter shank designs are milder in action.

I personally would only ever use the shortest shank hackamores. They do release back to a neutral position instantly and can be very precise in their action.

Noseband Design Matters.

The noseband design is also something to factor in. Hackamores have a variety of different styles of noseband, from wide leather fleece lined to narrow synthetic and little padding. The noseband selection is just as important as the metal plates, as if you try the metal plates in different noseband designs it will increase the intensity of the pressure the narrower the noseband.



Curb Strap Matters.

Just as the noseband design effects the action and feel of the hackamore so too can the choice of the curb strap. There are many different curb straps available. Personally I would never use a chain curb. I prefer leather or an elasticated curb strap.

Comfort Bridle Matters.

There are bridles that are designed to take pressure off the facial nerves. That are shaped and padded. Many of these bridles you can attach a bitless noseband to. Therefore it is possible to make up a bespoke bridle to suit you and your horse.

The Matrix Multi Bridle.

The Matrix is another one of my personal favourite bridles, I use it for non ridden ground activities and is great for riding too. It is a very versatile bridle. Great if you are looking for a bridle that gives you lots of different bitless choices. It can be used as a Side Pull, Scawbrig, Crossunder, Paso Fino, Bosal, Hackamore and as double bridle with a rein attached on the side cue and a rein attached on the hackamore. Most of these options offer an instant release, however in my experience the crossunder and scawbrig is slow to release pressure, so these are the only two options I don't use for my own horses. The Bosal - This is another light easy bitless bridle, American style with the reins attached to a ring under the jaw, no pressure points, just easy light riding. The Paso Fino Bosal - Similar to a side pull except the reins clip underneath the jaw, similar to a bosal but with two rings.

Side Cue / Side Pull.

A side pull bridle is a very simple bridle that has a rein attachment on each side of the nose to direct the horse. It is an instant release bridle. It is great for non ridden activities, groundwork and riding. The benefits of this bridle are:-

- It is a very mild bitless bridle.
- Side cues / side pulls are available in a range of designs, materials and prices.

I have used many different side pull bridles. They vary from soft padded leather, to rope and each feels very different to ride in. The wider and more padded the milder the bridle is and softer the action. The more narrow or harder the noseband the bridle can be harder and the action can feel more direct and must be used with great care. Side pull / side cue bridles are widely available in lots of designs, materials from leather to synthetic. It pays to shop around as you are sure to find one that fits your style and budget. Great for horses that are sensitive and respond to very light aids. Here are just a few places you can purchase side pull bridles from:



If you are into classical riding the Gentil Bitless Bridle by Jenny Rolfe is well worth looking at, it is beautifully bespoke made for your horse. The headstall is stunningly beautiful and well thought out for comfort for the horse.

2 other suggested places to check out are: Bitless Horse and Bare Foot and Bitless.

Lodge Ropes - Enduro Bridle

If you are looking for a finesse bridle the Enduro is well worth checking out. For a horse to go well in this bridle it must be well educated to the softest suggestion. As the design is all about the softest touch of pressure and release. It is an instant release bridle. It works by applying pressure on the nose and jaw via a very ornate bow and loop style curb when both reins are used. When a rein is used independently the Enduro acts like a side cue to turn the horse's head. My horse Merlot adored this bridle.

The benefits of this bridle are:-

- This is a very light weight and gentle bridle.
- It is very easy to fit and adjust.
- You can also use this bridle as a halter.

This bridle is good for sensitive horses that respond to light and soft pressure. This bridle is suitable for horses that fully understand being soft and relaxed. An Enduro bridle is available from Lodge Ropes.



Horsemanship Rope Halter.

A simple rope halter is also a bitless bridle. It offers instant release of pressure. Great care must be used with rope halters as they have the potential to focus pressure in a narrow area. So only the softest suggestion of pressure and instant release is strongly recommended.

However because the rope halter is so lightweight it easily fits under a bridle with a bit. So very useful to use with riders and their horses who want to transition from using a bit to bitless. The rope halter can go under their regular bridle. It provides safety during the transition phase as you can ride with two sets of reins and gradually switch to just using the bitless bridle. When you can stop and steer using this bridle you are ready to go bitless.

Some rope halters are available with rings to attach reins to each side of the face. Others you attach the reins under the chin. It isn't the most precise bridle as it is very loose and can move about. When you try others in comparison you will feel a difference.



Bosals.

With a bosal type bitless bridle the reins are attached at a single point behind the horse's jaw. If they are simple in design and do not have cross under straps they offer instant release. These are suitable for non ridden activities, groundwork and riding. The hard solid bosals need very careful fitting and when riding at speed can bump on the horse's nose. This type is not one I personally recommend. As it can have the potential to be uncomfortable and irritating. On a sensitive horse this could be detrimental to training. Some designs of the cross under Indian bosal can be slow to release pressure or don't release and in my opinion should not be selected. Bosal style bridles are widely available in a range of designs, materials and prices.

The Cross Under Style of Bitless Bridles.

I know this is a very popular type of bitless bridle. And there are lots of wide range of styles made in different materials, leather and synthetic. However for me it's not the type I would choose. I have tried many cross under style bridles and found some of them to be slow in the release back to neutral and others don't release at all.

As horses respond well to instant release of soft pressure in training some of these bridles don't provide the clear release I am looking for. Some horses dislike the head hugging action. The slower to release the worse these bridles are.

So this family group of bitless bridles is not one I use with my own horses. Many of my clients who are using this style of bridle are very happy with their selection until they get to a level in their horsemanship where using an instant release style bridle makes a huge difference.

This type of bridle has its uses and fans. I certainly say if you and your horse love a cross under style bitless bridle then all is good. However my advice is if you are considering purchasing this type of bridle; try before you buy, check out if the bridle fully releases pressure instantly to allow two fingers under the tightening strap without you having to move the strap. Many don't. Plus expect that as your journey toward finesse progresses you may find you outgrow this bridle and switch to another type of bitless bridle.

Curb Strap Designs. Light Rider / Scawbrig / Transcend.

These bridles work with a sliding tightening jaw curb strap which in turn because it is attached to the bridle on or near the noseband tightens round the nose and lower jaw. However unlike curb straps on a bitted double bridle there is no leverage of a long shank of the curb bit so the curb action is much milder and not on the poll. Each design is slightly different and available in different materials and prices. Again some versions of this bridle are slower to release pressure, others are very slow to release.

Also available from Plas Equestrian is a very different style of bitless in the floating curb strap type. No pressure on the nose front at all. Useful for horses that dislike any nose pressure.

I strongly urge you to try before you buy any bridle that has curb straps that tighten, check the bridle returns to an instant release of pressure applied with the reins with two fingers gap on release of pressure.

The Micklem Multibridle.

The Micklem Multibridle is a bridle that provides options for using it with a bit, as a lunge cavesson and as a bitless bridle with three options. The noseband needs careful fitting to get to the correct height and to ensure there is room for two fingers to fit in. Fitting information is available on their website. Once fitted correctly this bridle is good for in hand work in the cavesson setting and set up as a bitless side pull. However in my personal experience the crossunder bitless settings can be slow to release.

Dually.

Also in the sliding / tightening strap style is the Dually. Developed by Monty Roberts as a training head collar for mainly groundwork purposes. It has a tightening sliding strap that goes over the horse's nose. Great tact and care needs to be taken when using this head collar, as if too much pressure is applied it has the potential to cause discomfort. Many of my clients have used this before I work with them. They often transition from using this for groundwork and riding to a different bridle from the instant release group.

I have not covered all bitless bridles that are available.

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