

# Exploring Bitless

by Yvonne Welz

I swear – I never intended to become a bitless advocate!! Back in the early years of the barefoot movement, I was actually a “bit” irritated that many folks wanted to put “barefoot” and “bitless” together (did you hear of the “barefoot, bitless, bra-less brigade”?!). I thought that an over-focus on *all things natural* was actually a turn-off for many of the horseowners that we needed to reach. One step at a time, or so I thought, with barefoot coming first and foremost...

Much time has passed, and barefoot has become increasingly common, now making its appearance in the highest levels of sport riding! And with backyard horseowners and pleasure riders, barefoot has practically become the “normal.” Was our job of “promoting general awareness of barefoot” finally done?

But there was more on the horizon... I had ridden bitless on my horses over the years, trying various designs, and experimenting with training techniques. Bitless has, thus far, been largely embraced by pleasure riders and natural horsemanship riders, who are not asking their horses for collection, and sometimes (unfortunately) not even schooling their horses for good posture. Bitless is also popular with riders who are traveling distances; trail riding, endurance riding. Riding over vast distances is quite different than schooling a horse to collection; and thus far, there have been very few riders (most of them seemed like “special, gifted” people) who were demonstrating truly high quality work without a bit.

I was still quite interested in showing, and thus was well-versed in using both a snaffle and a double bridle. I struggled between a genuine desire to ride bitless... and a fondness for classical principles which seemed to dictate the *necessity* of using the bit as a tool for training. And that showing thing... you cannot show Dressage in the US without a bit. Period.

Then in December of 2013, I received a design of bitless bridle that I had never seen before. That one was an “LG Zaum” from Germany, but there are many other similar designs. Popularized in Europe, this mild mechanical hackamore consists of simple metal wheels on the sides of the face, with a snug noseband and chin strap to hold everything in place. The reins engage the wheel slightly, and the horse receives 4 subtle pressure cues: pressure on the poll, chin, and noseband, plus a small amount of pressure from the metal wheel itself, which greatly aids in lateral bending.

My plans for this bridle was that it simply be a demo piece for photos. However, I took one ride in it, and was blown away. It had the same feeling as riding in a snaffle bit, and my horse performed the same quality of work. There was no transition time, and no retraining. The aids seemed to be very clear to my horse. The release was immediate. And I was hooked!! And most revealing of all is that my mare, who had NO problems with a bit, made it very clear to me that she was HAPPIER without a bit.

Everything changed from that day onwards. Previously, I had been one of those bit riders, defending my use of the bit. I know what it feels like to be attacked for using a bit! I am not going to condemn the bit – it is, after all, only a tool. I’m not going to condemn anyone who desires to ride their horse in a bit; after all, I’ve been there, and I remember how it felt. I don’t think bits are evil, or that all riders need to abandon the bit and/or switch to the tools that I like and recommend. My path is not everyone’s path.

What I do want to let people know is that there is a bitless world that has not been fully explored, and if you want to venture into this new place, don’t let anyone stop you! YES, you CAN school a horse classically using a different tool that works like a bit, but isn’t a bit. You can do it, and you do not need to be a special, gifted rider. If I can do it, so can anyone. Whatever you like to do with your horse, if you would like to do it bitless, you really CAN.

Which tool you pick is up to you and your horse. There are so many different designs of bitless bridles now available; you might prefer something completely different than I do. I have had great success riding in what I call the “bitless-bit” designs, like the LG Zaum, the Zilco Flower Hackamore, the Star Wheel Hackamore, the Orbitless (UK), etc. From what I’ve been able to observe thus far, any bridle in this style works and feels the same way, whichever model it might be. There are riders/horses who prefer simple sidepulls designs (a



This is NOT correct inside flexion! Whenever the head is tilted, instead of perpendicular to the ground, that is a sure sign that the poll has NOT swivelled correctly. However, this photo does show an emergency-only maneuver: a one rein stop, which is easy to do in a correctly fitted bitless bridle.



These 2 photos demonstrate why I think the “bitless-bit” wheel style bridle makes such a good training tool – correct flexion is well-supported. In these photos, Belle has “swivelled” at her poll joint. This is correct inside flexion at the poll; further details about this flexion and WHY it is so important for training are available in Dr. Deb Bennett’s article in *Eclectic Horseman* Issue 51, plus articles on her website: [www.equinestudies.org](http://www.equinestudies.org)



Yvonne schooling 12 year old Warmblood mare Belle in a Star Wheel Hackamore bitless. Belle has not had a bit in her mouth in 1 1/2 years. We can see the full range of work: stretching down, collected canter, medium trot, and passage (on front cover).

nice one is made by Karen Rohlf [dressagenaturally.net](http://dressagenaturally.net)); the cross-under type, such as Dr. Cook's Bitless Bridle; or a sliding chinstrap style such as the LightRider from Australia; I look forward to seeing upper level schooling demonstrated with those designs in the future.

Classical riders of the past were limited by the physical tools available to them, and the expectations of a society that viewed horses as transportation and/or war vehicles. We can take the valuable classical training information and apply it in a *new* way. We live in a modern world, and I think there is exciting information and innovative techniques just waiting for our discovery – all for the good of the horse! 🐾

**More information on Bitless:** If you type in "bitless dressage" in Google, you will find many links to forums filled with heated debates about the virtues and drawbacks of bitted versus bitless riding. Here are a few sources of good bitless articles that I've enjoyed referring to over the years:

*To Bit Or Not To Bit...And What Is 'Real' Dressage?* By Karen Rohlf

<http://dressagenaturally.net/reading-room/essays/69-to-bit-or-not-to-bit>

*BITLESS IN DRESSAGE?* on Horse Hero

<http://www.horsehero.com/editorial?feat=105241>

*Bitless Bridles in Dressage* on Dressage Daily

<http://dressagedaily.com/article/bitless-bridles-dressage>

*Bitless or Not, It's About Having the Choice* on Eurodressage

<http://www.eurodressage.com/equestrian/2011/11/03/bitless-or-not-it's-about-having-choice>

*Dressage in a Bitless Bridle* on Equine Wellness

<http://www.equinewellnessmagazine.com/articles/dressage-in-a-bitless-bridle/>

All of Dr. Robert Cook's articles:

<http://www.bitlessbridle.com>

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