

FURTHER BITLESS Adventures

Leslie Smith Dow in
a Nurtural BRIDLE™

When Zoe Brooks of Worthington, ON (near Sudbury) read about my 'witless' experiments with a bitless bridle in the July/August issue, she offered to let me try out a bitless bridle of her own design, called a Nurtural BRIDLE™. Its name refers to both 'natural' horsemanship and a nurturing, non-confrontational environment for horse and rider. Here is what happened when I bridled up my stargazing 16-year-old National Show Horse.

The experiment

Monday, August 8. Arriving back from a two-week vacation, during which time my horse was turned out to pasture, I opted not to use the bitless bridle, fearing that his tendency toward exuberance might not jive well with what I (wrongly) feared might be the Nurtural bridle's lack of control.

Wednesday, August 10. Bridling up my horse in a spanking new leather Nurtural bridle, we head out to the grass ring. I warm up as usual and find relaxing my fingers slightly causes my horse's camel-like head and neck to descend nearly to the ground. Using a little more leg and a little less hand than usual (not bad things for us), I can keep him consistently ahead of my leg. Progressing through rising and sitting trot without his usual head-flinging, I ask for a canter. After a few misfires, my horse stops his usual leap into the air, instead giving me a smooth and balanced transition!

Both of us are pleasantly surprised that this work can seem (almost) effortless. We try a few low jumps, all without head flinging or his usual careening around. He tries to rush a low diagonal in mid-ring but when I close my fingers ever-so-slightly in a quick rhythm, he slows and takes the jump beautifully. I'm starting to think about trying a few cross-country jumps.

Sunday, August 14. More trot-canter transitions and jumps. My horse flings his head only when I try to gingerly gather up too-long reins. He is mostly round over jumps. He



rushes a bit but comes back quickly, feeling light in my hands. Once, inexplicably, he puts his head between his legs while cantering — despite me having adequate leg and almost no hand contact — and gives two half-hearted bucks. Is this his way of telling me the old head-flinging isn't appropriate anymore?

Tuesday, August 16. The head-flinging when I gather the reins is diminishing. I feel my horse in front of my leg when I canter and don't feel like I have to hold him up anymore. Canter circles feel round and more balanced.

Trot-canter-trot transitions are achieved more easily and the old 'leaping' is gone. He bucks once as I ask for canter and we head precipitously for the grass-ring fence. I have to pull hard, and sharply to the right, but he calms down almost instantly.

Monday, August 22. Feeling confident, I demonstrate my new-found feeling of superior control over my horse to a friend, who knew my horse in his other more exuberant phase. She is amazed at his transformation and very interested in using a bitless bridle on her two-year-old filly in training.

Thursday, August 25. During a jumping lesson my horse is relaxed and only tried to rush a fence once. There are a few hiccoughs: two refusals and an attempted gallop off, but I am able to bring him under control, faster, in fact, than with a bit, and settle him. After 40 minutes of gridwork, a task which usually causes him anxiety, he did not even work up a sweat.



Friday, August 26. Today the Nurtural bridle passed the ultimate test: My friend and I hacked sedately through largely unfamiliar forests, trails and fields. My horse occasionally became slightly nervous at marshy areas, downed trees and other monsters, but contrary to my fears, he did not bolt, rear or spin (part of his normal repertoire). On the way home, we did several small cross-country jumps. I was easily able to bring my galloping horse under control before and after fences, and twice received a prompt halt from a short gallop after a fence. Last year, it took a Pelham to achieve a similar response!

Monday, August 29. My horse and I managed several flying changes. Thanks to the bridle I could give a meaningful half-half without him getting anxious — and keep him off his forehand.

The end result?

All positive. When riding, I forgot I was using the Nurtural Bridle, since it feels so similar to a regular bit and bridle (though more leg and less hand are required, as with any bitless bridle). I finally feel my riding is progressing (also thanks to my super coach, Liz MacGregor) and intend to keep on using the Nurtural bitless bridle. I'm even thinking of taking it on an upcoming Hunter Pace! 🐾

What is so different about the Nurtural BRIDLE™?

Brooks' carefully-designed bridle is adjusted with a 'circle X' — a piece of leather underneath the horse's chin — which keeps the rein straps from dangling, and allows better positioning of where the straps cross under the horse's cheek bones. The grippy rubberized noseband is intended to give better contact with the nose than smooth leather and, true to Brooks' prediction, seems to help with a horse that likes to fling its head up (see page 8 of the September/October issue). The headstall has a single broad band running behind the ears. The bridle can be ordered with or without reins, allowing riders to use their own. The rings to which the reins attach are almost exactly where the bit would be, giving a similar feeling to both rider and horse. It was no trouble for me to steer a horse that usually feels like an 18-wheeler without brakes.

Brooks, 56, a medical educator and teacher, has just finalized the design of the Nurtural BRIDLE™, which she sells from home in partnership with her sister Marilyn Burris, 61, of Haileybury, ON. They've just received their first shipment of 40 bridles, which should soon be available at major tack stores. For more information on models, prices and on-line ordering visit www.nurturalhorse.com or call her at (705) 672-5957 or 877-877-5845

In keeping with Brooks' philosophy of nurturing, one dollar from the sale of each bridle will be donated to a local anti-child abuse charity called *Protect the Children - Stop Sexual Abuse*.

At her farm, Brooks has used a bitless bridle to train two feisty young Canadian mares from scratch, train a Standardbred from the track to saddle, and switched a newly-trained 10-year-old Canadian mare who had only been ridden with a bit a handful of times.

Brooks' bridle has won the support of Cathy Inch (northern Ontario's most successful show jumper). She is currently organizing the first of what she hopes will be a succession of bitless bridle riding clinics.