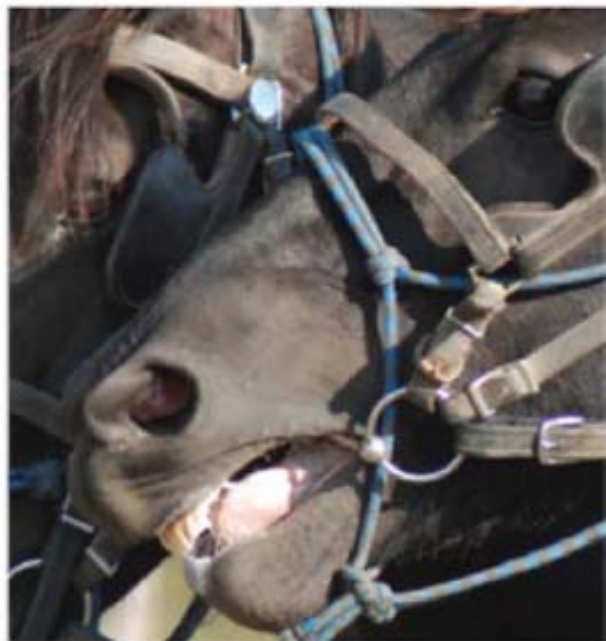


To Bit or Not to Bit?

by Bethany Caskey

Work animals were domesticated in this order: the ass, the ox, the camel, the water buffalo (and perhaps even the reindeer and elephant) before the horse, according to archaeological evidence. Horses were kept like we keep cattle today—chiefly for milk, meat, and hide. Toward the end of the New Ice Age 11,500 years ago, humans began using horses in a new way, for work. At that time the only metalwork was done in copper, and pure copper is too soft (and too poisonous) to be used as a bit.

The most substantial evidence of the domestication and use of horses as driving animals comes from the Sintashta chariot burials in the southern Urals of Russia, around 2,000 BC. But horses may have been driven even earlier. The Standard of Ur in ancient Sumer, around 2,500 BC, shows horses or some kind of onager (an Asiatic wild ass) or donkeys hitched to solid wheeled carts with yokes around their necks and a ring in the nose, similar to the yoking of oxen.



Most horses and mules that are labeled “hard mouthed” resist the bit because they have been handled aggressively.

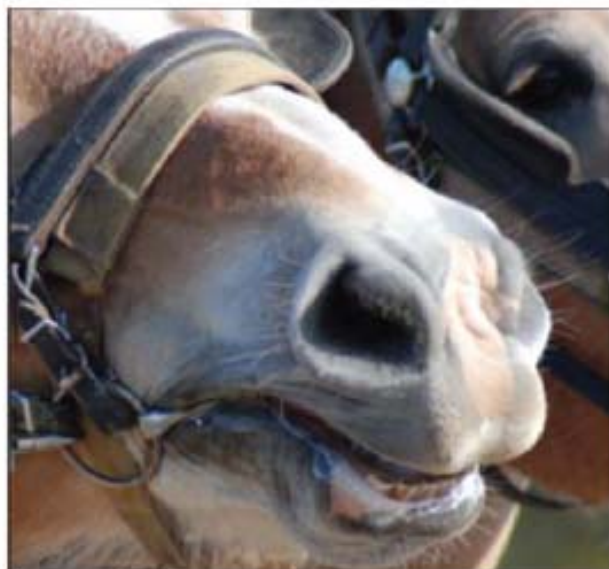
The Numidians of North Africa were introduced to horse riding from Spain around 1,000 BC. They rode horses without any headgear, only a strap around the neck and a light crop to apply directional cues.

Somewhere among the nomads of the steppes between the Black Sea and Mongolia, the first bits anyone has discovered were made of twisted rawhide pieces with cheek pieces of stag horn. If bits had been made of natural fibers or hide, earlier examples would not have survived the ages.

The use of bits flourished with the bronze age, when European horsemen hardly rode horses at all. Transportation was dominated by the driving aristocracy. Most bits were of the snaffle types we know today.

The natives of North America learned from the white-faced intruders the secret of controlling the “magic dog” to carry them. Like the nomads of Asia, they had only stone and bone tools, so their bridles were fashioned from a loop around the horse’s lower jaw and a thong passing back over the withers. This Indian bridle worked well for more than a century with no significant improvements.

The snaffle bit, or variations thereof, has dominated the driving world up to the present time. Some modern



Most teamsters use the power of the bit as a method of force to elicit compliance.

clinicians start colts in a snaffle bit, but many more start animals in a rope halter.

Bitless bridles are used in combined driving over courses where speed and accuracy count. So why would a teamster, who tends to work slowly and methodically, not embrace the use of bitless bridles? Because horsemen, particularly teamsters, are tradition minded. It's difficult, if not impossible, to find a work harness with a bitless bridle and most teamsters don't care for the look of a rope halter on horses in harness, and many teamsters also want blinders.

Manufacturers of bitless bridles specifically for driving produce quality leather and biothane bridles that could replace the traditional work bridles. But unless a bridle breaks, most teamsters would not replace it just to go bitless and most would replace a bridle with something easily available from a harness shop or farm auction.

So why go bitless? Light handedness with a horse is the mark of a superb horseperson. Yet man has traditionally used force and fighting methods to get what he wants from the horse. Does force and intimidation work? Of course it does. But it causes a loss of rapport and is not the best way of getting along with the horse. A far superior method is to handle horses in a way that makes

them want to be with us, and want to do what we ask.

A trainer who begins with severe signals, then lightens up later, never develops the degree of lightness he could get by using the reverse procedure. A horse given minimum signals until it responds positively begins to anticipate each signal and respond to the slightest request. Horses learn quickly, and after three or four experiences feel the lightest signal, anticipate the request, and move in the desired direction. The horse does what is asked with a minimum of fear on his part and a minimum of effort on the teamster's part.



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Dr. Cook's bitless bridle (www.bitlessbridle.com) is based on a simple but subtle system of two loops, one over the poll and the other over the nose, to create a figure eight that embraces the head.



Another look at Dr. Cook's bitless bridle and how it wraps around the horse's head.

An older or problem horse or mule is more challenging to train than an untrained animal. You have to start from the beginning as though it had never been driven. Most horses and mules that are labeled "hard mouthed" are not hard mouthed; they are hard minded. They have stopped responding to, and resist, the bit because they have been handled aggressively during their training or working lives.

Natural horsemanship clinicians have made this information available to everyone. The majority of people who do not, or cannot, achieve lightness do not understand how it works. Most teamsters use the power of the bit as a method of force, and it is effective in eliciting compliance. The bit serves as a safety measure

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The Canadian-made Natural bitless bridle (shown above and at right and found at www.naturalhorse.com) has a circular keeper under the horse's jaw that holds the rein straps consistently in the best place for the horse.

for the less skilled teamster. In the hands of a skilled horseperson, though, it may be used to achieve the ultimate in communication. As Robert M. Miller, DVM, says in his book *Natural Horsemanship*



Explained, "Skillful fingers, delicately handling reins attached to a bit, are the most effective and humane means of communication."

Driving without a bit is obviously not for everyone. Safety dictates many reasons to use a bit, and

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Using parachute cord you can make this clever adaption to fit your existing headstall; several craftsmen offer similar bitless adapters on the internet.

changing the headstall to a bitless model or a rope halter without remedial training can be hazardous.

Modern horsemanship embraces better methods than most of the traditional methods, and drivers who cling to the old ways soon will be left behind. So the next time you start a colt, or think about sharpening up an older animal, consider the bitless bridle. If you do decide to change, you will find handsomely made bridles available. And if you continue driving with a bit, at least drive as though you don't need it. 

Bethany Caskey drives bitless in Albia, Iowa.

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