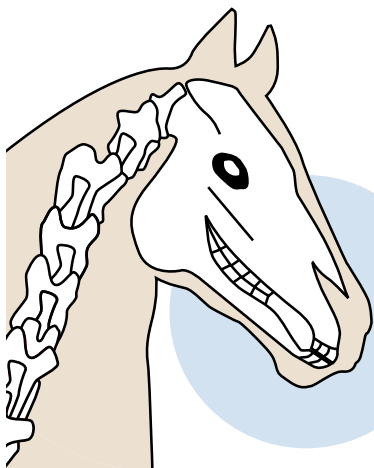


Nr 3

# Bitless Riding

Ending the myth  
of “being on the bit”

by Equine Physiotherapist  
Sabine Ullmann





Bridle  
**Contour Physio**  
Pictured with  
**Shape-It Noseband**  
for bitless riding  
**B**



Bridle  
**Contour Physio**  
Pictured with  
**Cavesson** for bitless  
ground work  
**C**

Bridle  
**Contour Physio**  
Pictured with  
**Hackamore**  
**A**



The Barefoot Contour Physio Bridle has many uses

## Bitless Riding

Bitless Riding – Ending the myth of “being on the bit”



Sabine Ullmann  
Equine Physiotherapist

1. How do I accustom my horse to riding without a bit?
2. Up till now, my horse has been ridden with a bit. How can I safely adapt him?
3. Fear of Bolting
4. Can a bitless bridle harm my horse?
5. What types of bitless bridles are there and how do they work?
6. How should a bitless bridle be fastened?
7. Equestrian Federation approval for competitions.
8. Is it possible to have a collected horse with a bitless bridle?
9. What are the origins of our present training system?

*The knowledge of the nature of a horse is one of the first foundations of the art of riding it, and every horseman must make it his principal study.*

*François Robichon de la Guérinière (1688-1751)*

If we were to ask horses whether they like the idea of having a bit in their mouths, the answer would certainly be “No bits, thank you very much!”

On principle, there is no room for a bit in a horse’s mouth – no matter what type it is. Horses have a relatively small oral cavity, so most common types of bit are too bulky and put pressure on the tongue and/or roof of the mouth. Narrower bits can put more pressure on the horse’s sensitive tongue and very quickly become painful

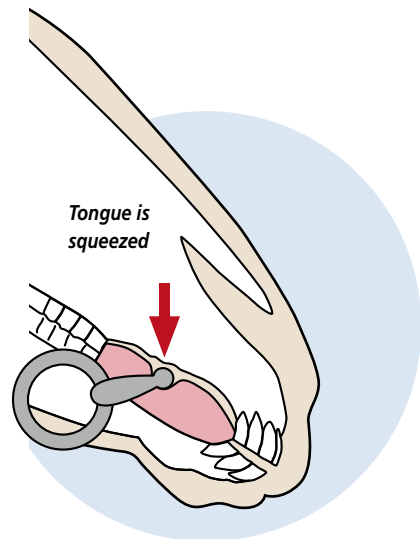
It is possible to ride gently, precisely and as carefully as possible with a bit, but reality reveals a very different picture: Horses’ mouths

are held shut around the bit with a flash strap, making it impossible to resist a heavy-handed rider, for example by opening their mouths. Such horror scenarios have become so normal that many people no longer even question them, accepting them as something normal. We see horses with their tongues hanging out, grinding their teeth or holding the bit between their teeth; horses shaking their heads or leaning on the bit – in fact, doing anything just to avoid the pain. Amazingly, we hear and see incredible reactions to these behaviours, even from experienced riders. “He just does what he wants! You have to show him who’s the boss here!” At this point I would like to ask anyone who witnesses this kind of thing to please take the initiative and express their opinion, as horses remain mute even when they are in considerable pain.

Horses can only react emotionally to pain and riders often misinterpret their reactions as bad behaviour. But horses cannot differentiate between good and bad as we humans do, so therefore they cannot intentionally behave badly.

Fortunately, we also see positive examples: More and more riders are realising that horse-friendly handling is not only possible but also much more fun for both horse and rider. Riders who have decided to dispense with a bit and focus on horse-friendly ways of training and horse-friendly equipment are taking the first step into a better future.

That takes quite a bit of courage. Riders who follow new paths, perceive and try out new



Horse's oral cavity

**Tipp:**

The first step towards horse-friendly riding is to do away with the flash strap. This allows your horse to move its jaws and tongue and to avoid any pressure from the bit.

ideas, will often face criticism, as change always causes anxiety in people who don't want to change. But the courage to embrace change will be rewarded with a trusting relationship between horse and rider. And in time, our many small sparks will create a large fire and change will come naturally.

My team and I regularly receive questions on riding without a bit, which I would like to answer in detail in this brochure. On the following pages you will find answers, possible solutions and arguments to counter certain prejudices:



**Contour Jewel Bridle**

**1. How do I accustom my horse to riding without a bit?**

It all starts on the ground: The basic prerequisite for all types of riding and particularly for riding without a bit is positive, stress-free communication and a trusting relationship with your horse. Once your horse has learned to react to voice commands and to your body language on the ground, the transition to aids via the reins is just a short step away.

Here is one example: We teach the horse during ground training by means of positive rewards to react to the word STOP and stop next to the rider. As soon as the horse reacts well to this command, we then stand to one side of the horse and take up the reins slightly, combining the command STOP with

a slight backwards pull on the reins. In the same way, we proceed to teach RIGHT and LEFT. This way, we can create a positive atmosphere from the beginning and the horse will soon learn to react to aids via the reins.

Later on, we can more or less replace these aids: Our aim is a light hand – ideally leading the horse “by a fine thread” with the help of our breathing, shift of weight and leg aids. The principle here should always be “less is more”. If your horse doesn't yet understand what you want to communicate to him, simply go back a step and never assume that the horse is refusing to obey!

You will occasionally find horses that react very sensitively to any contact with their nose, often as a result of negative experiences with a serreta. In this case, it may be better to ride with a bit, but please, never with a flash strap!

**2. Up till now, my horse has been ridden with a bit. How can I safely adapt him?**

Bridles which can be used either with or without a bit are ideal for re-training your horse. (for example, Barefoot 2-in-1 Bridles).

Usually horses will react positively to the change and no additional tricks are necessary. To make the transition easy and safe, we suggest you ride with two sets of reins – one attached to the bit and the other to the nose-piece of the 2-in-1 bridle. That way, you can always give the horse the commands it is used

**Contour WELLington 2-in-1 Bridle:**  
For use with or without a bit. (patented)



to via the bit, should it not yet understand the new commands. You will find that you gradually need the reins attached to the bit less and less and, as soon as you feel safe, you can leave them off altogether.

If you have difficulty riding with two pairs of reins, you can try attaching the bit-reins to a neck ring (please do not attach them to the saddle, as sudden movement of the horse's head can cause them to tear at the horse's mouth). This way, you will always have the reins within reach if your horse is confused, but you will only have the reins attached to the nose-piece in your hands.

Of course it is possible to use a halter from the beginning and omit the bridle (with bit attachment) completely. This usually goes smoothly and the horse will happily accept the new aids. In this case, I definitely recommend taking the first steps in a fenced-in area.



**Barefoot  
Amber  
Neckring**

**3. Fear of Bolting**

Many riders are afraid of riding without a bit. There is a widespread belief that only a bit will stop a panicking horse. This is not true: You can't stop a bolting horse with brute force. On the contrary, causing the animal pain in a stressful situation, for example by violent pulling on the reins, will only increase its fear. The bit will tilt upward in the horse's mouth, pressing heavily against its palate and squeezing the tongue, only increasing the animal's instinct to flee. A bolting horse is AFRAID, so avoid any pressure! Keep calm, sit still and never shout! Try to distract the horse away from the situation, for example by riding in a wide circle.

**4. Can a bitless bridle harm my horse?**

Generally speaking, riders should be aware that bitless bridles can also have a strong impact on the horse and should be handled with care. There are also “instruments”, for example the serreta, frequently found in Southern Europe, which can be used to make horses compliant. Although these function without a bit, they can none the less cause great pain and suffering: we at Barefoot distance ourselves clearly from the use of such articles.

People who oppose bitless riding often claim that pressure on the horse's nose is just as damaging as pressure to its mouth. Please keep in mind that riding with a bit exerts direct pressure both on the tongue – basically a

**TRUST = SAFETY**

A clever horseman can eliminate dangerous situations as far as possible if he succeeds in winning the horse's trust on the ground. Then it will not bolt, even if it sees “little green monsters”. Horses are flight animals: if your horse does ever jump to one side, you won't react with panic but will remain calm because you know and trust your horse and there is no need to feel helpless and tug the reins in fear.

muscle with many nerve-endings, – and the lower jawbone which is covered only by a thin layer of sensitive mucous membrane.

In contrast, a bitless bridle acts on a bony structure (nose) which is covered with skin and hair. Now, any horse lover will realise where pressure will cause more pain; on the tongue or on the nose. And besides, pressure on the highly sensitive tongue is produced by a hard piece of metal, whereas pressure on the less sensitive nose is given by either a flexible leather strap or a rope.



All the covered bridles and many other horse-friendly Barefoot products can be found in our catalogue and on our website [www.barefoot-saddle.com](http://www.barefoot-saddle.com)

**5. What types of bitless bridles are there and how do they work?**

There is a large variety of bitless bridles with different functions.

Most of these function through pressure on the horse's nose, i.e. the rider controls the horse by applying tension to the reins which puts pressure on the nose.

This category includes:

**Sidepull** (Barefoot Syringa, Amber, Acorn....)

**Hackamores** (Barefoot S-Hackamore, Barefoot Bitless Bit, LG- Bridle, .....)

**Bosal**

**Halter with riding function** with rings on the side for clipping in reins or directly combined with reins (Barefoot Peony, Seneca, BeGentle Halter, Juniper.....)

**2-in-1 bridles** for use both with and without a bit. (Barefoot Contour Physio, Contour Wellington....)

Some bitless bridles signal the horse to turn away. They work on signal effect with the reins on the horse's neck or head.

**Mecate** a typical mecate is made of braided hair which pricks the horse's neck and teaches it to turn away.

**Bitless Bridle** with cross-over function. Acts on the side of the horse's head. (Barefoot bridle Walnut and Contour Jewels....)

Many bridles offer a combination of both, riding correctly with a hackamore means also giving aids with the reins on the horse's neck.

Classical hackamores with long shanks additionally use leverage action, exponentially increasing the pressure used (as for example with the Pelham or double bridle.) Bits or hackamores with shanks should therefore only be used by riders who have learned to ride with a light hand and can give delicate and precise signals to the horse.

*Syringa Bridle 2-in-1*



*Seneca 3-in-1 Riding Halter*



*Acorn Bridle 2-in-1*



*Contour Physio Bridle with Cavesson*



*Peony Bitless Knotted Bridle*



*Walnut Bitless Bridle*



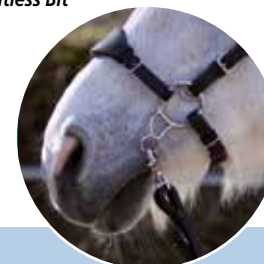
*Left:  
Oaklet Bridle  
with Bosal  
and Mecate*



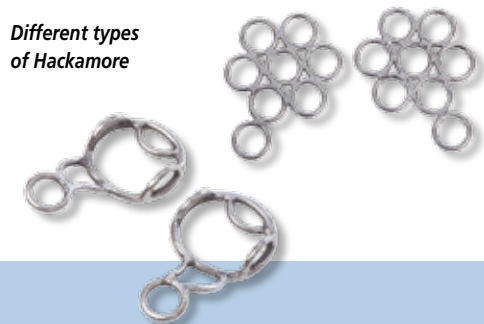
*Right:  
Juniper Knotted  
3-in-1 Halter*



*Bitless Bit*



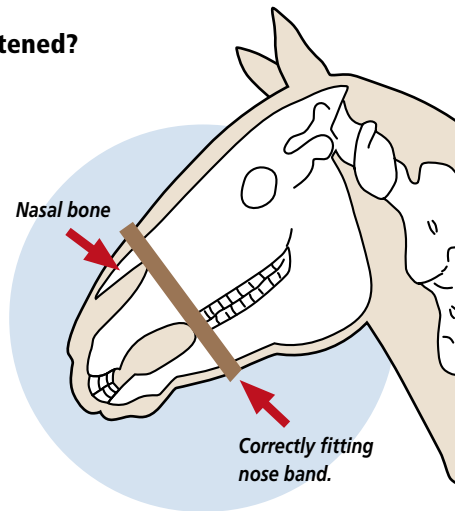
*Different types  
of Hackamore*



**Leaving the Dark Ages behind!**  
Now it's official! As from April 2014 riding without a bit is officially permitted in competitions in the Netherlands (source KNHS). We hope that other countries will soon follow this good example!

**6. How should a bitless bridle be fastened?**

It is important to ensure that the nose band is not placed too low down on the horse's nose. Every horse's nasal bone is narrower and pointed at the end. You can easily feel this with your hands. The nose band should lie on the base of the nasal bone and not on the narrower spur.



**7. Equestrian Federation approval for competitions.**

I sincerely hope that in the near future, bitless bridles will be permitted in Equestrian Federation competitions – however, that will require a lot of convincing. At present the only possible action is to avoid such competitions altogether, or decide to stick a bit of metal into the horse's mouth; alternatively you may try to find a vet who will certify an exception to the rules.

Bitless bridles are only permitted in show jumping competitions as from category L upwards. What is the reason for this? We made enquiries with the Equestrian Federation and received this answer from Mr. Daniel Stegmann in January 2012:

*“Bitless bridles are explicitly unacceptable in events over obstacles where there is not a*

*choice of bridle used (i.e. Class E to L) and also in dressage competitions. Riding without a bit does not conform to classical riding theory which is the basis of our entire system of training and competition. The system of aids given without a bit is entirely different; it is not possible to have the horse constantly collected as when on the bit – good transmission from active hindquarters through the swing of the horse's back to the rider's hand cannot be obtained in the same way as is possible if there is a connection between the rider's hand and the horse's mouth.”*

It is however, possible to obtain a dispensation on the basis of a veterinary assessment. (Comment from the author.)

**8. Is it possible to have a collected horse with a bitless bridle?**

The question then arises whether it is possible for a horse to be “collected” wearing a bitless bridle. The definition of “being on the bit” is “a constant, gentle and elastic connection between the rider's hands and the horse's mouth”.

Unfortunately, this definition is often misunderstood to mean constant contact with the horse's mouth – implemented as constant pressure.

“Being on the bit” originally meant a constantly realisable but very fine, hardly perceptible contact.

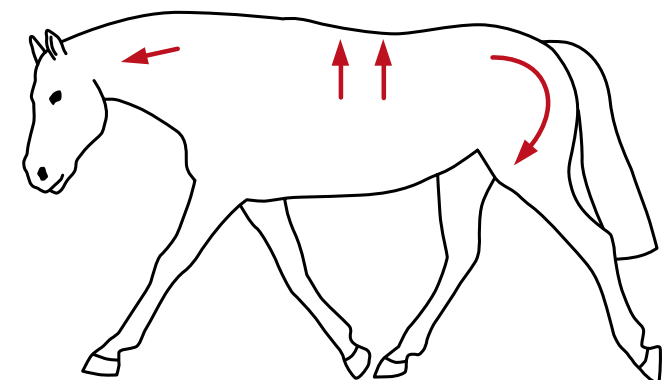
That is perhaps the reason that we hardly ever see a horse trainer with such gentle, elastic contact to the horse's mouth. Often people try to reach what think is the ideal position of the horse's neck by using draw reins or quickly and repeatedly pulling first the right and then the left rein. This means using pressure, which physically and psychologically harms your horse.

What we really want to achieve is an ideal posture for each individual horse i.e. moving freely forward and arching its back upward to carry the rider's weight.

From a horse-friendly point of view, being „collected” or “on the bit” would mean riding in an anatomically ideal position for the individual horse with correct, inwards bending of the neck, allowing the horse to arch its back upward and carry the rider's weight. In order for a horse to arch its back upward, it should initially be ridden uncollected, and with its head well down. The ideal neck-posture is obtained by guiding your horse gently into the desired position; with repeated, gentle correction, giving only the finest of aids thought the reins - not applying continual pressure and pulling, but yielding to the horse's movement. It is also possible to teach your horse the correct position using only your voice if you have previously done preparatory training on the ground. It will gradually

**Anatomically correct self-carriage**

**This position allowed the horse to arch his back upward and carry the rider's weight.**



Some insurance companies refuse liability for horses being ridden without a bit – at least in open country or outwith fenced-in areas. We advise you to check with your insurance company to make sure you are covered for accidents occurring when riding without a bit and get written confirmation on



*Amber Bridle 2-in-1*

learn, through positive reinforcement and without being pressurised, to move correctly under the rider.

So the answer is, if we define being “collected” as the horse adopting this balanced, anatomically correct self-carriage where there is always a possible connection through the reins then yes, we can ride without a bit and still have the horse collected.

When being “on the bit” is misunderstood as putting a horse often or permanently under pressure, the result is constant tension not only in the mouth and on its nose, but also in its sensitive neck muscles, a situation we want to avoid at all times, whether riding with or without a bit.

Contrary to popular belief, horses are not eager to feel pressure; they don’t “need” pressure either on their nose or in their mouth. Contact to the horse’s head (whether via its mouth or nose) should be acceptable from the horse’s point of view and only enough to be in communication with the rider through the finest of aids.

### 9. What are the origins of our present training system?

The German Federation (FN) guidelines, which are still used today to train most horses and riders, are largely based on Army Service Regulations and contain training methods and goals developed for military purposes. These Army Regulations are basically a collection of works on riding instruction put together in

1882 and revised in 1912, 1916 and again in 1937. Since then, they have undergone no further revision and describe training methods for horses and riders deployed in cavalry units; methods which were of course acceptable during the First and Second World Wars, when horses were regarded as “material” for military use and not as the beloved pet they are today. So training was functional; bits and spurs were used to ensure maximal submissiveness and the saddle had to be comfortable from the rider’s point of view as soldiers had to endure long hours in the saddle. After the Second World War, most of these regulations were adopted word-for-word into the German Federation’s (FN) training guidelines. That is why we still find so many military expressions in today’s training.



*Contour Physio Bridle with Cavesson*

*The bridle also works with Shape-it-Nose, Shape-it-Soft ore Hackemores.*

Comparing these historical views with our modern ideas we see that a lot has changed! Years ago, horses were “military material”; now they are our leisure partners. Riding is a hobby, something we do for relaxation and enjoyment – being with our horse allows us to forget our day-to-day life and its problems, as many horse therapists working with children or people with physical or psychical disabilities will tell you.

So there have been a lot of changes, except in one area which has remained largely the same: the nature of our training methods. And this is responsible for growing concern among riders, who have begun to question traditional methods, for today our objective is to train our horse as a safe leisure partner, a very different goal from producing “military material”.

“Old fashioned” methods do, of course, still produce efficient results but nevertheless, is it not high time we revised them? Dog training has long undergone such changes and in many other areas of animal welfare, we no longer endorse the use of dominance and violence.

We now realise that there are other choices: it is possible to produce the same results without being cruel to animals. In building up a real partnership with our horse we should



**Acorn Bridle 2-in-1, Barefoot Arizona horse friendly westernsaddle**

question any methods which condone pain or compulsion as is the case when using a bit. Behavioural scientists have shown us alternative paths; now it's up to us to take courage and follow them.



**Founder of Barefoot and Equine Physiotherapist Sabine Ullmann with Santiago**

Sabine Ullmann, born in 1968, can look back on more than 30 years' experience in handling horses. With this experience plus her training as a horse physiotherapist, she decided in 2002 to specialise in the field of riding equipment.

Her company – Barefoot: for riders who care – offers a complete range of horse-friendly saddles, bridles and other tried and tested articles, all designed to make day to day life as pleasant and enjoyable as possible for riders, trainers and of course, horses. That's why we purposely abstain from selling spurs, martingales, draw reins or other articles which cause pain or restrict the horse in any way.

The Barefoot Saddle System is the result of years of extensive research and development. Ms. Ullmann can proudly say that her company offers one of the world's most

horse-friendly saddle systems, a fact thousands of tests and testimonials from satisfied customers have verified.

Sabine Ullmann's mission has triggered off a growing trend with more and more people reconsidering how they treat their partner, the horse.

She is involved in many different horse-friendly projects and takes a special interest in handing on her knowledge to a wide audience and in teaching children to treat horses with due respect and care.

Barefoot Horse Relief, founded by Sabine Ullmann, also donates regularly to charitable organisations.

**Healthy horseback**  
with spine protecting system

**vps**<sup>®</sup>  
vertebrae protecting system

- spinal clearance
- no weight limit
- no pressure points under stirrup bar







**Acorn Bridle 2-in-1,  
Barefoot horse friendly  
westernsaddle  
Arizona**



*If one encourages the horse to adopt the same posture as it takes up itself when it wishes to appear attractive, it will then look splendid, proud and happy when being ridden.*

*Xenophon (426- 355 v. Chr.)*

**Tipp:**

We are always happy to hear from experts on any horse-friendly subject: Please contact us at [info@barefoot-saddle.de](mailto:info@barefoot-saddle.de) Frau Ullmann

**Brochure from our series  
„FOCUS Horse – changing toward a horse-friendly philosophy“**

Few hobbies are open to such controversy as riding. With the help of selected experts, we at the Barefoot Physiotherapy Team have acquired a profound and honest understanding of horses.

Essential changes can only be made on the basis of sound knowledge; however, serious misconceptions are often propagated throughout the world of equestrian sports. Why do so many people still stick to out-dated traditions? Why are horses still made to suffer under rigid saddles and other “training gear” which was in use centuries ago, only because certain lobbyists will not permit any changes?

We would like to share our knowledge with those who, contrary to common opinion, sense the possibility of a non-violent symbiosis between man and horse.

Friendly communication with a being who deserves to be respected and understood, a patient and unselfish animal who has set its footprint next to ours through the ages.

Understanding which will encourage and support you in taking the right, horse-friendly path and making both horse AND rider a lot more contented.

Our goal is a more horse-friendly world – and yours?

