



Open Letter

21st February 2014

Dear Horse lover

**Update on Norfolk Horse Training & Equitation Club request to UK Equestrian Associations for RIDING REFORM.  
To Allow universal acceptance of Bitless bridles in ALL UK horse sport and removal of mandatory rules for nosebands on bitted bridles.**

**Introduction**

The official BHS (BD) statement AGAINST inclusion of bitless bridles in ALL horse sport:

*"1) A fundamental requirement in the education of the horse is the concept of submission and this includes the willing acceptance of the indications of the rider. 2) This also means the acceptance by the horse of the bit in its mouth, just as much as the acceptance of the riders weight on its back. 3) Dressage training is all about producing the equine athlete, which means developing balance and suppleness. A major 'key' in this development is creating suppleness at the poll, both laterally and vertically, and this helps the musculature of the neck to help development of the paces. 4) The most important muscles being the splenius and brachiocephalic and this allows the power to come through from behind. 5) By a mellow acceptance of the bit in the horse's mouth the rider is able to induce a relaxation of the lower jaw and from this to develop a more supple poll. 6) The bitless bridle acts by leverage on the neck of the horse, but not the jaw, 7) so is not really regarded as the best way to produce submission that is the 'hallmark' of a dressage horse. 8) With regard to juniors, who are under 18, BRC do not allow bitless bridles in junior competitions. This is primarily due to safety but also training as a bitless bridle can be very severe and not always appropriate to be used by a younger rider."*

NHTEC considered this statement to be a paradox in regards to modern understanding of equine behaviour and equitation science, the statement is factually incorrect and lacking in scientific credibility. On the 14<sup>th</sup> October 2013 NHTEC (a BHS riding club) wrote to the BHS/BRC with detailed supporting evidence requesting a rule amendment to allow 'CHOICE' for all riders based on the preference of the horse, to ride in either a bitless or bitted bridle, in all UK horse sport. The Correspondence were copied to the BEF, BD and BE requesting they too amend their rules. The sticking point it seems is the dressage terminology '*dans le main*' translated as 'on the bit'. NHTEC believes that the phrase '*dans le main*,' so poorly translated in 1920 from the original French FEI rules, as '*on the bit*,' – should now be replaced by '*on the bridle*' or '*in the hand*'. The correct use of negative reinforcement applies whether the bridle has or doesn't have a bit – it's not about the 'gadget' but about appropriate and acceptable pressure and correct training, it is time in modern equestrianism to recognise the legality to impose an 'archaic' rule whereby a horse must ride in a bit, especially when it creates unnecessary suffering or is likely to cause pain to an individual horse based on clearly defined scientific conflict behaviours. NHTEC believes that to persist in riding in such a manner would be in breach of at least two of the five freedoms and in breach of the Animal Welfare Act of 2006.

Subsequent evidence and correspondence was further submitted over the coming months to BHS and all associations as more detailed information was supplied to NHTEC including the important change in the Netherlands with the Dutch governing body KNHS, announcing in October 2013 that following a SUCCEFULL three year pilot with bitless bridle competitors, they would allow bitless bridles in open dressage competition from 2014.

## The Evidence

The Dutch are already doing it! Bitless riders have proven that they can be judged in Dressage alongside bitted horses – successfully and without prejudice to other riders, horses or the sport of Dressage.

**NHTEC can see no reason why the UK equestrian associations could not follow the Dutch lead.**

**ISES Presidential committee** Dr Andrew McLean BSc, PhD (President, ISES, Prof. Natalie Waran BSc, (Hons) PhD (Acting Senior Vice-president, ISES) Prof. Paul McGreevy BVSc, PhD, MRCVS, MACVSc (Junior Vice-President, ISES) ) Stated in 2009 and verified 30<sup>th</sup> September 2013 *From an excerpt of a letter to USEF that:*

*‘As the only scientific organization in the world in the sphere of equitation, the International Society for Equitation Science exercises great caution in voicing its collective opinion regarding matters of equine welfare. Our aim is to hold the scientific process at the highest level, so that only robust and evidence-based information is supported.*

*There is adequate science now to support the use of bitless bridles in horse sports’ .*

**NHTEC: recognises this statement is now five years old – many more studies and riders continue to support the safe use of bitless bridles in horse riding. This statement is even stronger today.**

**Fluoroscopy studies by Dr Hilary Clayton** from [2003 radiographic study of the position of four snaffle bits (jointed)], Dr Clayton noted that several horses bulged and lifted their tongue in several bits trialed, and concluded *“On several occasions and in several horses, however, the body of the tongue bulged over the mouthpiece, forming a cushion between the mouthpiece and the palate. This behavior was observed quite frequently and may have been a way for the horses to protect their palates from painful bit pressure”*. Some horses retracted their tongues and Dr Clayton suggested *“Not surprisingly, tongue retraction may be associated with tension in the muscles on the underside of the neck”*. *Dr Clayton concluded Biting is not a “one size fits all” proposition. Even after measuring the size and assessing the shape of a horse’s oral cavity, there is still an element of trial and error in finding the most comfortable and appropriate bit for an individual horse.*

**NHTEC: In the UK very few horses have the benefit of a fluoroscopy examination to measure their oral cavity, whilst the ‘trial and error to find the ‘appropriate bit’ takes place (evidence shows that some horses cannot tolerate a bit at all – ever) the horse will very likely be suffering ‘painful bit pressure’ and ‘tension’. Owners and organisations responsible for animals displaying conflict behaviours in bitted bridles may be in breach of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and/or in breach of two if not three of the Five Freedoms. The studies by Dr Clayton were paid for by bit manufacturers, an independent reviewer might conclude that some horses cannot be bitted at all after measuring the oral cavity – or witnessing the conflict behaviours displayed by the animal.**

**In an excerpt of a letter to USEF Dr DG Bennett DVM** said, *‘I believe strongly that with biting systems, “less is more.” In my opinion, rules in nearly all disciplines requiring particular bits and biting systems, such as the double bridle, are archaic and outmoded. If a horse can perform optimally in a milder bit than the current rules require, in a bitless bridle, or with no headgear at all, why require a more severe biting system? The horse and rider that can perform without any bit at all receive my highest accolades’.*

*Dwight G. Bennett, DVM, PhD  
Professor Emeritus of Equine Medicine  
Colorado State University*

*22 November 2009*

**NHTEC: Agrees with Dr Bennett and wonders why after five years the equestrian associations persist in ignoring the evidence of veterinary experts.**

**NHTEC** also wrote to **World Horse Welfare** copying them into the correspondence with the Equestrian associations: Roly Owers CEO of WHW said in correspondence

*"From a welfare perspective we can see no reason why bitless bridles should not be accepted into competition.*

*AND*

*We believe that whether a bridle is bitless or bitted, the most important consideration for horse welfare is that it is the right tack for that horse.*

**NHTEC: We welcome the comments by WHW and hope they will assist us in generating fresh discussion on the matter of 'welfare in riding'. We are currently awaiting further response from WHW who are discussing the riding reform amendment with BEF and the FEI on behalf of NHTEC.**

**THE OFFICIAL RESPONSE from the UK EQUESTRIAN ASSOCIATIONS BEF, BD, BHS/BRC**

**BEF** said 18 November (following several communications)

*'I have discussed these issues with Andrew Finding on his return from the FEI General Assembly and summarise his comments below.*

*Please be reassured that it is not our intention to "shunt" you from one association to another. In such matters the national discipline, which as part of the Federation leads the work of the Federation in its particular field, must take the lead at national level and it will in its turn be lead by the FEI. As Paul correctly states the FEI do not permit bitless bridles in competition and accordingly national rules must replicate this requirement. I am not aware currently of any global movement to alter this requirement. In the light of the above we cannot provide any further comment.*

*Regards  
Janice Shardlow  
BEF*

**NHTEC is concerned by this dismissive response, NHTEC'S own MP Norman Lamb, having been briefed by NHTEC's concerns wrote on NHTEC's behalf to central Government. The BEF's response is at odds with the views of the Minister for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), who advised Norman Lamb MP that:**

**'Changing the rules and regulations of a sport is a matter for the national and international governing bodies of that sport. The national governing body for equestrianism in Britain is the BEF. If you (and NHTEC) have concerns about the welfare of horses, including in relation to the use of existing bridles in equestrian sports, then you should continue to raise these with the appropriate governing bodies and if necessary raise those welfare concerns with the appropriate animal welfare bodies. It is important that those with an interest in horse welfare work together to promote safety in equestrian sports'.**

Based on Governments advice NHTEC will continue to call for action on this matter.

## **British Horse Society /BRC and British Dressage**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> December within three hours of each other NHTEC received emails from BD and BRC

**Sarah Phillips for the BRC said:**

*'To clarify the decision of the competitions committee will not change for the 2014 competition year, however if you wish the committee to make a further consideration for 2015 you will need to submit new evidence for the next meeting on 4 March when this will be reviewed'.*

And

*'Juniors are not permitted to compete in bitless bridles in BRC classes'.*

*'Our position on the use of bitless bridles for dressage competitions has not changed and I refer you to the following statement which we have previously sent';*

*"A fundamental requirement in the education of the horse is the concept of submission and this includes the willing acceptance of the indications of the rider. This also means the acceptance by the horse of the bit in its mouth, just as much as the acceptance of the rider's weight on its back. Dressage training is all about producing the equine athlete, which means developing balance and suppleness. A major 'key' in this development is creating suppleness at the poll, both laterally and vertically, and this helps the musculature of the neck to help development of the paces. The most important muscles being the splenius and brachiocephalic and this allows the power to come through from behind. By a mellow acceptance of the bit in the horse's mouth the rider is able to induce a relaxation of the lower jaw and from this to develop a more supple poll. The bitless bridle acts by leverage on the neck of the horse, but not the jaw, so is not really regarded as the best way to produce submission that is the 'hallmark' of a dressage horse. "*

*We to believe that the welfare of the horse is paramount and that through correct training of both horse and rider welfare will not be compromised.*

NB: All spelling mistakes are BRC.

**NHTEC: Despite the evidence and the practical proof of thousands of riders around the world, including one of its own BHS clubs and the success experienced by the Royal Dutch Equestrian Federation it seems from this statement that the BHS/BRC are indifferent to modern veterinary/equitation science. The statement seems to indicate that 'through correct training of both horse and rider' the 'bit' will be acceptable to ALL horses.**

**This is a very serious welfare anomaly.**

**We ask the BHS again to reflect on those horses unable to tolerate a bit perhaps through previous surgery or trauma (or 2006 Clayton Fluoroscopy study mouth too small) – no amount of 'correct training' can help a deformed or evidently sensitive mouth. Our concern is that those horses are eventually abandoned and wasted (labelled as problem horses) when they are no longer able to perform under current unfair, welfare unfriendly rules.**

**NHTEC would like to understand in scientific terms what the BRC mean by 'correct training' and how easy it is to access 'BRC correct training' for horses showing conflict behaviours.**

**Our experience of learning theory and ethology suggests that BHS training is not embedded in learning theory and does not always adhere to modern ethical behavioural science principles.**

**Amanda Bond of BD said (excerpt of 20/12 email):**

*'The Board of British Dressage have discussed at length your request to change the rules to allow horses wearing bitless bridles to compete in affiliated competition. At this point in time, the Board has refused the request to change the rules. Their decision is based on one of the fundamental principles of dressage being built on the acceptance of the bit (whilst much of the terminology of this relates to acceptance of the bridle, it is widely understood that this is the acceptance of the bit). To change this*

*principle would have far reaching consequences, not least that we have to have a competition structure that progresses in to international sport. For that reason, we align closely with the FEI'.*

*'Whilst we do allow the use of a snaffle bridle up to grand prix level (should a rider chose this option), this does not go against the fundamental of acceptance of the bit.*

*We have consulted the FEI and they are clear in their approach that they will not consider bitless bridles at this stage'.*

And further

*'Therefore, the Board have taken the decision to not change the rules at this stage.*

*We will watch carefully the introduction of mixed classes in Holland during 2014, as well as the growth in bitless dressage here in the UK. I will ask the Board to regularly review this decision not to change the rules to ensure that we keep abreast of developments. If you would like to be in touch with me again once the KNHS have run a complete year of combined competition, I would be happy to raise the matter again with our Board.'*

**NHTEC is concerned that BD quoted the FEI, saying:**

**"The FEI are clear in their approach that they will not consider bitless bridles at this stage".**

**If not at 'this stage' when evidence on welfare is clear and bitless dressage is already taking place in Holland – then at what stage will FEI consider bitless bridles in Dressage? How much more evidence or proof do the FEI/BD need? When questioned by EPONA TV - FEI stated that they had not received a request from any National federation to include bitless bridles (suggesting that there may not be a demand for 'softer options') in Dressage. BD imply they are waiting for the lead from the FEI. We hope that BD will reconsider the evidence put forward by NHTEC this year as a matter of urgency, based on UK welfare concerns.**

By return email, NHTEC asked the BRC and BD for comments on the quote from **WHW**

1. *'From a welfare perspective we can see **no reason** why bitless bridles should not be **accepted into competition**'*

2. *'We believe that whether **a bridle is bitless or bitted**, the most important consideration for horse welfare is that it is the right Tack for that horse'.*

We asked BRC/BD to advise us if they agree or disagree with the WHW statement – this is fundamental to our understanding of their position.

**On the 24<sup>th</sup> December Sarah Phillips of BRC replied:** *'As an organisation we work closely with other welfare groups and the sporting disciplines and as such we discuss the issues of bitted and bitless bridles. Subsequently I will respond once the context in which the two quotes were made is more fully understood'.*

**NHTEC are still waiting for a response from both BRC and BD concerning the WHW welfare comment.**

## **Conclusion**

NHTEC has very real concerns that the Associations in the UK are flouting the legal protection afforded horses under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and are in potential breach of at least two of the 'Five Freedoms' with their persistence to continue to ban 'CHOICE' for bitless bridles in sport, when horses are displaying recognised 'behavioural' conflict behaviours – which demonstrates they have conflict with the bit in the mouth.

Judges and officials must be conversant with conflict and aversive behaviours.

The flash noseband restricts the horse's ability to perform stress/conflict behaviours by preventing him from opening his mouth, yet it is allowed in dressage. 'Acceptance of the bit' is supposed to be proven in the test, in fact 'acceptance' cannot be proven when it is hidden or restrained by the flash strap – the flash noseband is not welfare friendly as it prevents a horse from being able to 'express natural behaviour' when discontented in the mouth. The Flash noseband needs urgent review and reform.

NHTEC is concerned that equine behaviour considerations and equitation science evaluations of the trained horse are being ignored in favour of traditional rules and dogma. There is obvious evidence that the Associations do not understand or do not have experience with the functions of modern bitless bridles. For example the associations accept and endorse the Micklem bridle (which is exactly the same bridle when a bit is removed) in Dressage competition. There is a general disregard for the 'evidence' that the mouth of the horse is able to feel pain, that non-relenting pressure is counter-productive and indeed an issue of welfare and thus safety for horse and rider. The lack of enthusiasm for further investigation and open dialogue by the Associations does nothing to allay the fears of many riders that - Sport for all is not a reality in the UK and that many horses do indeed suffer unrelenting pain when ridden bitted.

There is demand and support for universal inclusion of the Bitless Bridle in horse sport, during the process of communication with the equestrian associations in 2013 the call for 'CHOICE' attracted substantial cover by the equine media including EPONA TV who wrote a blog called "SCARED BITLESS" which has been widely shared across the world. A social media petition called Out of the Horses Mouth – Allow Choice with over 3,500 signatures social media groups totalling 4,000 members. NHTEC's UK petition inspired Petitions around the world including Australia, Ireland, USA and South Africa. NHTEC is grateful to the eminent individuals and organisations that supported our call for Choice.

#### **Quotes:**

**Bob Baskerville eminent veterinary surgeon and FEI London 2012 OLYMPIC team vet** said *"the bitless bridles work very well on horses that don't accept conventional bridles. They are very humane and horses tolerate and like them. The problem is a lot of modern competition is based on Horses reactions to the bit and the relationship between the horse and the rider as conveyed by the bit. It is much better to use the phrase in the hand."*

**Professor Paul McGreevy Sydney University** *"Allowing bitless bridles will widen and sustain the spectrum of horses fit to work, and will have a positive effect on public perceptions of good welfare allowing the sport to move in a more enlightened direction. These are important considerations at a time when there are public concerns about various training regimes in dressage. As one of very few veterinarians with an animal welfare track record and scholarly publications in the world in the sphere of equitation, I exercise great caution in voicing my opinion on matters of equine welfare. My aim is to hold the scientific process at the highest level, so that only robust and evidence based information is supported. I am convinced that here is adequate science to support the use of bitless bridles in horse sports."*

**Jimmy Frost Grand National WINNING JOCKEY** said, *"horses do go better with bitless bridles. They are safe and agile. I cannot see why people say they are not safe to use."*

**Carl Hester, Olympic Dressage Rider said on Social Media** *"I wouldn't mind in the slightest if I competed against a bitless competitor, it's a personal choice"*

#### **Recommendation**

NHTEC will continue to raise the welfare concerns at the highest level, we want to do as Central Government (DCMS) suggests and work together, for the welfare of the horse. Therefore, it is our recommendation that with the help of Norman Lamb MP we will seek to address the current situation with BEF, BHS, BD, WHW, RSPCA, NHTEC and other interested parties, with the aim

to form an **independent working group** to properly investigate and evaluate the evidence that has been submitted by NHTEC and its professional experts and witnesses.

**NHTEC urges all riders to write to their own MP's and to the governing bodies** BEF, BD, BRC, BHS, BE, and let them know your views as a matter of urgency.

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NHTEC is currently forming an alliance in which Equestrian experts from all fields including equitation scientists, body workers, veterinary surgeons, behaviourists, ethologists and other equine professionals, etc., may express their opinions on the very important comment by **World Horse Welfare** 'that whatever the sport whether a bridle is bitless or bitted, the most important consideration for horse welfare is that it is the right Tack for that horse'.

WHW comments support NHTEC's call for CHOICE - finding the most suitable tack for the horse based on the individual responses defined by ethical scientific principles.

The alliance will give opinion that force cannot be an acceptable factor in modern equestrianism and submit their considerations on riding reforms to the governing bodies, government and welfare agencies.

\*References:

Mammals as a class do not behave 'normally' (exhibit healthy behaviour patterns) when a metal foreign body is inserted in their oral cavity. Horses are no different. In a group of 56 horses, the mean number of behaviours that disappeared following removal of the bit was 32 with a range from 5 to 60 (Cook 2014). The myth that horses tolerate the bit has arisen because behavioural signs of intolerance are largely unrecognized. There are, nevertheless, a group of bitted horses whose objections are unmistakable. Unless transitioned to bitless bridles, these are retired, sold or destroyed.

Equine Behaviour A Guide for Veterinarians and Equine Scientists Paul McGreevy

[www.elsevierhealth.com](http://www.elsevierhealth.com)

<http://www.sustainabledressage.net/tack/bridle.php>

Epona TV Blog 'Scared Bitless' Dec 2013

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[www.horsetrainingclub.org](http://www.horsetrainingclub.org)

Five Freedoms RSPCA