

JUNE 2012

FREE ONLINE MONTHLY

LOCAL HORSE

Magazine

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PRESENTS THE 2012
NATIONAL FINALS
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GOLD COAST - AUSTRALIA
14th - 17th June



The Magazine on the Scene

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The only bit a horse needs is a bit of understanding.™

A Bit more on going Bitless - Cont'd...

It's great to be back after nearly a month in Ireland and the opportunity to work with a great number of different horses, as well as old - and new - friends, and launch the UK/Ireland's first Bitless Riding Club. The fact that this is happening just eight months after my first step, when there was a high level of interest in bitless, but very few who had actually started to ride that way is encouraging. This trip, we had several fully bitless clinics and more than a few people willing to give it a go for the first time.



In the case of the very forward-going horse (right), you can see the rider trying to use her seat, as well as leaning back and feet forward, in conjunction with a very light rein and tie down, to manage the horse's tendency to run off. The rider mentioned that it often took 10 miles before the horse settled down enough for her to comfortably manage him.



For those of you who remember the lovely, but troubled thoroughbred mare from the March issue, have a look at her now.

She has been coming onto a work for about six weeks and, while we've come a long way from the explosive and dangerous behaviour she exhibited, she still has the potential to react in that way. She's another example of a horse who easily transitioned to bitless (a halter, in this case), but who requires a substantial amount of training to undo what humans had done to her. When asked to do something, she expects a fight. Pain. Confusion.



But by showing her a better way, we are gradually working through that. But it requires confidence to ask her forward when she wants to rear or bulge, consistency in the riding aids and the lightness with which they are applied, as well as calm and good leadership at all times.



But look at what this mare has done - and how much more she is willing to give. In the photo above, it's a few steps of leg yield. And in the picture below, it's the ease with which she steps up on the block even though it feels unlike anything else she has ever experienced beneath her hooves.



These are just a few examples of why I am so passionate about putting the wellbeing of the horse first. It's why I work to spread this message as widely as possible - I have met a few people who have disagreed with me, but never a horse who has and I can say that will all honesty and straight from the heart.

I would like to commend the efforts of the Diamond's Land Bitless Riding Club in Northern Ireland to provide a hands-on environment in which people can experience going bitless in a supportive and safe environment, as well as the Victorian Bendigo Bitless Club and Bitless Riders and Drivers Australia group, which offers an open online forum for those interested in going bitless, as well as the many people around the world who are working towards a better deal for the horse. There are more and more groups and forums and that can only benefit the horse in the long term.

To that I think the horses would say, 'It's about time.'

In the next article, I will discuss how, from a traditional point of view, I stepped at the blackmore stage and did not continue with the tradition of the bitted horse.

Till then - safe riding and Good Work. Corinna Tabernashurst

What both of these horses demonstrate, so clearly, is that they lack that 'bit of understanding' that is so important, for clear, pain-free communication, understanding and cooperation between horse and rider. It simply cannot be achieved where pain is involved. Because they are each being forced through the use of a bit, neither horse is able to use his body correctly, let alone develop the softness and responsiveness through 'understanding' that comes with the proper use of the legs, seat and hands as riding aids. With this horse, the transition to bitless was virtually seamless.



Although he had been worked for many years without true self carriage (that is, he was used to being 'held' while to do and held in a frame via a bit), getting him to work in this soft, balanced manner required a bit of understanding. The only 'bit' he needed. From the working moment, helping the horse to learn not to lean on the reins and to carry himself rather than being held or supported by my hands.



After 10 minutes of work, he engages his back legs, steps under himself and is in self carriage at the trot and is off the fencehand. All in a halter - and his first time bitless.

The endurance horse is an example of a horse that will need a substantial amount of training - not to adapt to the bitless bridle, which as you can see at left he is moving well in, but to undo the behaviours he has developed as the result of the way he has been ridden.



So when someone asks me how long does it take for a horse to transition to bitless, there is no easy answer. But the answer I can give you is that in any horse training, excuses and short cuts will lead nowhere.

But some of the most common questions I faced while in Ireland, were 'can any horse go bitless' and 'how long does it take to transition a horse to being bitless?'

The easy answers 'yes' and 'how long is a piece of string?'

Yes, because any horse is capable of going bitless. They were ridden bitless and barefoot for thousands of years before metal was introduced in the form of bits and shoes. 'How long is a piece of string,' because there are so many variables involved - the horse's previous experiences, level of training, physical and emotional issues (if any), the rider's skill - the list goes on.

That said, some horses can make the transition almost instantaneously. Let me show you two really good examples involving two horses of a similar age - 12-year-old who has competed in high-level eventing, but whose owner was having difficulties with him going forward and thought she needed a bit with a dropped noseband and whip, and a similarly aged endurance horse, whose owner had the opposite difficulty of him being too forward, despite use of a bit and martingale.



In the first case, in the picture at left, you can see how the horse is working with a high head, which causes him to hollow his back. As a result, he can't properly come under himself and so doesn't have the impulsion that he needs to have his hindquarters come under his body. In addition, the rider is not in balance over the horse's centre of gravity, which also affects the horse's movement.



In the second photo, I have asked the rider to post the corner, which loosens the horse's back. However, you can see from the high head position and open mouth that the horse is still hollow and not working so well as he might. It's like trying to drive a car with the handbrake on - you can step on the accelerator (or in this case try a riding whip), but you're not going to go any faster.