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Transitioning from a Bit to Bitless No Matter English or Western Riding

For many horse riders riding bitless is a scary idea. The common concerns are “I won’t have any control without a bit”, “I would never ride my horse without a bit, it’s too dangerous”, and “I’m scared that my horse will take off without a bit”. Transitioning your horse from riding with a bit to bitless is relatively easy when you learn a few safety techniques that put you in control. No matter whether you ride English or Western, just a simple rope halter is all you need to get started.

Culture and language are basic to any communication between peoples so if I want to ride my horse bitless I need to effectively communicate in a way my horse understands. The basic culture of horses is that of a prey animal whose instinctual survival depends on living in a herd. Since every horse is genetically wired to require a herd leader at all times whether in a herd of horses or in a herd of two, me and my horse, I need to start out by communicating that I’m the herd leader. If I don’t behave like a herd leader my horse will either push me around disrespectfully – maybe dangerously, or walk away disinterested. Turning her backside to me translates to “I’m out of here - you’re not worth my time”. So how do I become my horse’s herd leader? Understanding and properly invoking horse instinct.

I’m going to invoke my horse’s natural *instinct* to recognize me as her herd leader by moving her feet. Instinctually whoever is controlling a horse’s feet is the herd leader, that’s the herd culture. Using my body language and the instant release of pressure is how I’m going to demonstrate I am her herd leader. Keep in mind whenever you are with your horse *Horses learn from the release of pressure not the pressure itself*. I start out by teaching my horse to back-up with just a jiggle of the lead rope. It may take a few times moving my horse’s feet but being consistent will invoke her instinct that I am the herd leader. No matter if you are on the ground or under saddle, controlling your horse’s feet makes you the herd leader.

Communication with horses is done through body language, touch and sound. Be mindful of what your body is saying: your horse is watching closely. Be aware



what your eyes are saying too. When you look at your horse eye-to-eye don't be surprised if your horse steps back a bit as you approach. Eye contact is a message of "move", so drop your gaze and soften your body's countenance when you approach your horse. When you want your horse to back up look straight into her eyes, present your full chest and ask your horse to back up by jiggling the lead rope slightly and increase the jiggling as you walk towards your horse. The moment your horse takes a step back immediately stop jiggling the rope, drop your gaze and soften your body's countenance turning your shoulder to your horse and praise verbally "good girl" and stroke her neck. Stroking her neck releases a chemical response that relaxes her, which accelerates learning. These are just a few tips to give you a general idea of how communication using your body, touch and voice works with horses.

Now let's apply some simple techniques to ride bitless while keeping in mind the basic culture and language of your horse. You've taken the time to invoke your horse's instinct to recognize you as the herd leader by controlling her feet, i.e. backing up. Now you want to teach your horse to flex her head from side to side on the ground first and then we'll translate that under saddle. This is the first step to creating your horse's emergency handbrake in a crisis. I recommend making nose to girth the *safe and loving place* we go when we are in trouble. So, place your hand over your horse's nose and gently ask for her head bringing her nose to her girth. Your horse only has to give slightly and then you release her nose for "giving" to your pressure. The release of pressure is how the horse learns they are doing the right thing not the pressure itself – make your release instantaneous.

Once you've got your horse giving nicely to the *safe and loving place* you will now flex your horse's head using the lead rope. Grip the lead rope overhand about 12" from the knot under the chin and gently but consistently pull your horse's head to the side resting your hand on the saddle area until your horse "gives". You want to pull her head around about two thirds of the way leaving her to give the last third by dipping her nose to the girth area or creating slack in the lead rope – instantly release the rope from your hand at the moment your horse "gives". Stroke her neck and verbally appreciate. Do this on both sides until your horse is coming off the slightest pressure when you lift the lead rope to draw her nose to her girth. Remember, take your time. If your horse is nervous and moves in circles stay with her calmly until she stops moving her feet. Praise her when she's doing what you want and never reprimand for getting the wrong answer, simply help her to understand what you are asking by breaking it down into smaller steps if she needs that.



Next you want to teach your horse how to disengage her hindquarters which is getting her to cross her rear inside foot in front of her rear outside foot. This disables a buck, bolt or rear and when combined with nose to girth is equivalent to pulling your horse's emergency

handbrake. While standing next to your horse flex her nose with the lead rope and with your other hand place your thumb on her side where your heel would be if you were in the saddle, and apply pressure asking her to move her back feet. As soon as she moves, even the slightest direction away from your thumb pressure rub the spot, but keep holding her nose in place until her feet stop moving. Keep holding her nose even after her feet stop moving until she “gives”. As soon as she gives her nose instantly release the lead rope and stroke her neck praising her verbally. Be gentle, calm and praise her for every moment she is doing what you are asking her to do.

Once you’ve got your horse flexing with ease and disengaging her hindquarters on the ground you are ready to translate the emergency handbrake under saddle. You can convert your lead rope to reins or attach your reins to the side pull loops if you are using an All-In-One Training Halter Bitless Bridle. Mount your horse and gently flex her nose by reaching down the rein and drawing her nose to your boot. I like to put my hand on my thigh as a stable reference point – there is energy that seems to lend strength to my grip which is especially important in a crisis so I encourage you to make a habit of putting your closed hand with the rein on your thigh. When your horse gives her nose to her girth instantly release the rein by opening your hand. Stroke her neck and verbally praise her. Next as you draw her nose towards her girth place your heel against her side asking her to disengage her hindquarters. As soon as she moves her feet release your heel, but don’t let go of her nose until her feet stop moving and she “gives”. Work both sides of your horse until she is flexing and disengaging smoothly.

Next you want to move into a walk and apply your emergency handbrake making sure your horse responds with ease listening to you. Work both sides from a walk and then move into a trot and canter applying the emergency handbrake in all three gaits. Once you can shut your horse down in all three gaits calmly and rationally you are now riding safer bitless! All the same cues apply as if your horse had a bit in their mouth since most of your riding is done with your seat and legs; you now have added control of an emergency handbrake in a crisis. You want your horse to respond automatically as if a switch went off in her head as you reach down the rein to pull her nose and your heel simultaneously applies pressure. It becomes a habit for both you and your horse going to the *safe and loving place* when in trouble. Bitless riding is just as safe if not safer when you are your horses herd leader and both of you respond to the emergency handbrake simultaneously calmly and rationally. Have fun and keep me posted of your adventures.

For high res pictures email Info@MissyWryn.com or call 888-406-7689.

Nationally recognized horse trainer Missy Wryn developed **Training the Whole Horse®** on the foundation of **Do No Harm**. Specializing in **Iron Free (bitless-spurless)** riding for both English and Western trail riding, Missy teaches safer communication and control while maintaining an affectionate relationship between horse and rider. Missy Wryn is also the founder of IRON FREE Riding, HorseMAREship, Sisters of the Saddle, DO NO HARM Today plus inventor of the ALL-IN-ONE Rope Halter Bitless Bridle. Visit www.MissyWryn.com for more information.

