UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
FACULTY OF LIFE SCIENCES

The International Society for Equitation Science
The Presidential Council

Att.: Dr. Andrew McLean
730 Clonbinane Road
Clonbinane, Victoria, 3658
Australia

Re.: The use of crossunder bitless bridles for dressage

Dear collegues

In a letter to the United States Equestrian Federation you support the proposal to allow bitless bridles in dressage. You argue that the mouth of a horse is highly sensitive and vulnerable and that incorrect bit use can be the cause for development of behavioural conflict. You further state that there is adequate scientific evidence to support the use of bitless bridles in horse sports.

I wholeheartedly agree with your decision to support such a proposal, but I want to bring to your attention two concerns in connection with a transition from bitted to bitless bridles.

Although scientific evidence may be adequate to support the use of bitless bridles, I doubt that there is sufficient evidence that the alternative, riding without a bit, will solve all problems. Do we know what happens when riders attempt hyperflexion (which some undoubtedly will do) with a bitless bridle? After all, the nose of a horse may not be as sensitive and vulnerable as the mouth, but it is not completely insensitive. In other words, putting too much emphasis on the bit, and too little on a corresponding problem, i.e. the “rein pulling”, may not relieve the discomfort for the horse that much. Knowing how people (including riders) look for easy solutions, riding bitless may just become an excuse without improving the welfare of the horses that much.

A second aspect of concern is the safety of the rider. Undoubtedly, if bitless bridles result in less conflict behaviour of the horse, riding safety is greatly improved. However, because of incorrect training (i.e. lack of pressure release), many riders control their horses by using bits that cause pain rather than just pressure. Using a bitless bridle on a horse that has not learned to respond correctly to the signal (pressure on the nose) may make the horse even less controllable. In other words, without much more emphasis on correct training, advocating the use of bitless bridles could reduce rider safety.

Best regards,

Jan Ladewig

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PLEASE SPECIFY UPON REQUEST