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10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE IRON-FREE HORSE

In the year 2000, the horse industry first became aware of two welfare advances. Both freed the horse from metal accessories, bits and shoes. Since then, many thousands of equestrians, worldwide, have carried out what can be regarded as a natural experiment. Each horse has acted as its own control. The ‘demetalling’ experiments have confirmed that the crossunder bitless bridle provides a painless and safer alternative to the bit and that barefoot management vastly improves the horse’s quality of life. The removal of these metal artefacts has revealed that they are the cause of many accidents and diseases.

There is something about the inside of a horse’s mouth that dislikes the touch of a metal rod and something about the outside of a hoof that contracts and shrinks when shod. Sadly, there is something about the inside of our brains, as veterinarians, that prevents us from understanding this. Many life-long riders – all of whom love their horses - also find this difficult to accept. Yet, if one asks the man-in-the-street to consider the horse’s viewpoint, he understands immediately. Why is this?

Metal rods have been strapped into horses mouths for 5000 years. Late arrivals on the scene, veterinarians have been blind-sided by a Bronze Age invention. We have been traduced by tradition and have failed to question received ‘wisdom.’ Each succeeding generation of horsemen has also been brain-washed into believing that a bit is necessary for control and safety. Similarly, a thousand years of shoeing has deeply embedded the medieval idea that horses need metal clamps nailed to their hooves. Every equine veterinarian living today was infected by the metal-meme as a student. Few have recovered. Veterinary schools, riding schools, the FEI and racing administrations worldwide continue to promote and mandate the black arts of biting and shoeing. What hope is there for the horse?

Plenty! Ten years have passed since the crossunder bitless bridle was introduced and we can now look back and congratulate an army of bitless equestrians, all over the world, who have had the foresight and courage to free themselves and their horses from the generational mind-set. Similarly, a decade of barefoot pioneers have successfully liberated innumerable thousands of horses from stall and steel. Consequently, if you now consult a certain cohort of the very youngest group of riders - they understand immediately. Who are these mental giants?

They are equestrians with minds undamaged by false dogma. They are the children of the bitless and barefoot pioneers. Let’s call them the sons and daughters of the iron-free-horse revolution. Now that they are talking to their metal-minded friends, the future of the iron-free horse is assured. It is only a matter of time before administrators at the FEI, the national equestrian federations, and the Pony Club become as enlightened as the youngsters. But there is no excuse for delay. There is an urgent need to improve horse welfare, enhance rider safety, and reduce costs. This could be achieved if the organizers of horse shows (i.e., the FEI, etc.) and administrators of racing would update their rules to permit research which has been field tested for a decade to be applied. Riders and drivers should have the option to compete their horses bitless and barefoot, pain-free, happy and sure-footed.

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