



**THE EXPERT**  
Vicki Jayne Maris

Vicki Jayne helps riders and horses at all levels overcome their issues. The trainer runs the National Horse and Pony Network and Inspirational Horsemanship.



**TIP from the TOP**

Walk your horse around an arena on both reins. Things can look different to them when approached from another direction.

# Achieving LIGHTNESS

Control is easily achieved over fences

**Find out how to attain self-carriage in a bitless bridle and discover why schooling in one can help your work in more traditional tack**

Using a bitless bridle can add another dimension to your riding. While they are widely employed on horses with contact issues, or who are unhappy with having a bit in their mouth, any horse can go well bitless.

What a lot of people don't realise is that although a bitless bridle can be an alternative, it can also be used to complement and improve the schooling or competition work that you do in a bitted bridle.

Once you've refined your technique, they can help with schooling issues.

For example, they are beneficial for encouraging a horse that backs off to go forward, and one that resists the contact to work in an outline.

To achieve these results in a bitted bridle, follow the same principles.

"Teaching people to help their horse relax physically and mentally is the key," says trainer Vicki Jayne Maris. "I find horses are often happier to stretch and go in self-carriage in a bitless bridle.

"Most horses go well in one. For the rider, it helps them break away from old, established patterns of riding.

"Then they can take this learning through to ride in a bit if required."

Vicki Jayne is quick to stress it's not just a case of reaching for another piece of kit for a quick fix.

"Training is the same regardless of what equipment you use," she says. "You have to understand your horse physically and emotionally, and you have to be familiar with the tack and what to do with it."

Outline is also about appreciating how a horse moves. "If he can't get his hindlegs under to push, nor lift through his core and back, you'll never get the weight off the front legs," Vicki Jayne adds.

The concept of pressure and release is also an important one.

Riders need to learn to time the release of any soft pressure they apply to reward the horse for doing the right thing.

Developing "feel" is vital when riding bitless, too.

Vicki Jayne teaches her pupils to read their horse and to use their "intent and energy" to influence him.

"Use your core breathing to lift your energy levels up and inspire him to go forward, and to take energy down when you want to slow or stop," she states.

"It is a subtle technique, but can be very effective."

● We talked to two riders who, with Vicki Jayne's help, are using bitless bridles to overcome schooling issues with their horses...



## RIDER FACT FILE

**Rider:** Clare Thompson, of Knowle, West Mids.

**Horse:** JJ (Phame) is a 17.2hh, 15-year-old Selle Français by Pouchka III. Clare

has owned him for four years, but has been riding him for six. The gelding has confidence issues and can be tricky and temperamental.

**The problem:** "JJ backs off and won't go forward," says Clare. "If not ridden tactfully, he has been known to rear and buck."

**The aim:** JJ loves jumping, so Clare is keen to do more and she would like to show him.

**How bitless can help:** Clare is schooling JJ bitless to encourage him to take bigger, freer paces in a longer outline.

Clare wants to stretch out JJ's "bunched up" frame and to encourage him to come round. Vicki Jayne says it is possible for a horse to go in an outline in a bitless bridle, but less is more in achieving this goal.

"Once the horse is going forwards using his hindquarters and lifting his core, you must teach him to relax his jaw and neck," she says. "When we have all the aspects of training in place, it should be as simple as quietly and softly shortening your reins and he should become round in his outline."

Vicki Jayne has suggested an Orbitless bridle for Clare to work with (see page 68).

It is based on a pressure and release system, but you can change where pressure is exerted to suit an individual horse.

"Not every bitless bridle releases pressure quickly enough, but this one does," says the trainer. "You need an instant release, otherwise you are sending out confusing signals to the horse."

*'JJ is in self-carriage and he's not been pulled into an outline'*

## Learn to relax

JJ carries a lot of tension in his head and neck, so Vicki Jayne tells Clare to help him relax by lowering her energy, slowing her breathing pattern and easing off with her fingers.

When she sighs, the horse lowers his ears down. He is starting to relax and his stride becomes longer.

"Conventional riding would be to put the leg on to send him forward," Vicki Jayne says. "But this horse would stop and threaten to go up if you did that, so we have to use energy and

rhythm to encourage him forward and let him be soft.

"Always reward the horse when he responds and stretches down – you need to let him know what behaviour you are seeking."

## Reaching down

With Clare allowing JJ to go forward in his own rhythm, he looks more settled. He stretches down his head and neck and his back lifts and becomes rounder.

"This horse is in self-carriage and he's done it by himself – he has not been pushed or pulled into an outline," says Vicki Jayne.

She says the horse is seeking a contact with the rider and tells Clare to close her fingers softly on the reins, exerting slight pressure.

"The softer Clare can be, the softer JJ will become," she says. "She can use gentle pressure with her leg to ask for more power."

To slow the horse down, energy and the body come into play. "Sit quietly, lower your energy and use your core," Vicki Jayne says.

Clare reports JJ is more forward than usual: "He is a powerful horse, but he's so light in the hand today.

"The bridle has achieved some good results in just a short space of time."

JJ relaxes and goes forward for his rider



**TIP from the TOP**

Softly flick the horse's shoulder with the end of the reins if he is reluctant to go forward. Give an instant reward for doing the right thing.





## RIDER FACT FILE

**Rider:** Simon McDonald is yard manager at Willow Farm Equestrian Centre, near Rugby, Warwickshire.

**Horse:** Foxboro Soldiers Spirit (Darcy), a 17hh, 10-year-old Hanoverian X Trakehner. Simon has owned him since 2009.

**The problem:** Darcy carries his head high and is resistant to working in an outline.

**The aim:** To resolve schooling issues.

**How bitless can help:** To teach the horse to relax and lower his head.

Simon is demonstrating how to make a transition from bit to bitless.

He's owned Darcy for four years but has been slowly bringing him on at home, with the aim of overcoming a number of issues.

Darcy doesn't like it when his rider tries to take a contact.

"He will bunny hop and rear – anything to get me off his front end," says Simon. "With a bit in it can take 45 minutes to get him to drop his head."

"I've had all the usual checks done and tried every bit. He is a talented jumper and, if we can crack the flatwork, he could go far."

Vicki Jayne recommends using a simple rope halter as the first step.

"Fit the halter under your usual bridle," she says. "If anything occurs that makes the rider uncertain, he can pick up his normal reins to regain control."

"We want to make sure the fundamentals are in place, and essentially that you can halt."

"This is the most indistinct of bitless bridles but if you can steer and stop a horse in it, he will be OK in a bitless bridle."

Vicki Jayne is keen to work on the rider as well as the horse.

"We want Darcy to relax and lower his head and, for this to happen, Simon needs to relax, too," she says. "He nags with his legs, which causes Darcy to raise his head. He needs to quit pushing."


Vicki Jayne tells Simon to drop his usual reins and ride off the halter, letting Darcy go forward in his own rhythm.

The rider finds he can turn left, right and stop.

As he allows Darcy to go forward, the horse stretches down – but Simon uses his legs and Darcy's head comes up. He's reminded not to nag and the horse becomes soft and relaxed in his body and starts to come round again.

"You've got to get him comfortable enough to put his head down," says Vicki Jayne. "Once he is looser in the jaw and neck, you can softly shorten your reins and he should follow you."

Simon says he is pleased with how Darcy is responding to the bridle.

"I have had a problem getting this horse to relax," he explains. "Riding in a bitless bridle is enabling me to try a different approach, and it is making me much more aware of what my horse is doing and how to ride him appropriately. At the same time, it has helped both of us to relax." 



Try riding off a halter underneath your usual tack

## Types of bitless bridle

### ► Orbitless

Suitable for most horses at any level of training, this attachment can be fitted to your existing bridle's cheek pieces to convert it into a bitless one. It exerts nose, poll and curb pressure, but the amount and where it's focused can be altered, depending on the position of the ellipses and how the reins are fastened to it. The Orbitless is beneficial in training as it offers an instant pressure release.



### ► Side pull

This noseband can be made of rope or leather, and reins attach to the noseband. It's an instant pressure-release bridle that is suitable for most horses. However, it only has one setting.



### ► Enduro

When you're established riding bitless you can move on to this bridle which offers more refinement. It features a knot that moves up and touches the horse under the chin when the reins are used, and provides instant pressure and release. The Enduro is great to ride in if you and your horse are looking for equipment that is lightweight, designed for finesse and riding using the lightest suggestion.



### ► Cross-under

The Dr Cook bitless bridle is part of this family. It incorporates the cross-under design and acts on the whole head, but some versions are slow to release pressure.



## TIP from the TOP

Listen to your horse. Some horses prefer short bursts of training – if so, ensure there is plenty of variety in his work.



Darcy becomes soft and relaxed

## To find out more

You can discover more about Vicki-Jayne Maris and going bitless by visiting: [www.inspirationalhorsemanship.co.uk](http://www.inspirationalhorsemanship.co.uk). For details of the Orbitless and other bitless bridles, visit: [www.thebitlesshorse.co.uk](http://www.thebitlesshorse.co.uk).

● Have you tried going bitless and, if so, did it transform your horse? Share your experiences by writing to the address on page three, emailing [horsemagazine@ipcmedia.com](mailto:horsemagazine@ipcmedia.com), or you can find us on Facebook and Twitter.