The New Breed of Bridle

Could your horse benefit from one of the new “anatomical” designs?

BY SALLY SILVERMAN

COMFORT FIRST: Many dressage bridles have features designed to help horses feel and perform better. This snaffle bridle has crownpiece and noseband padding, and foam padding has been wrapped around the chin strap.
They are called, variously, “comfort” bridles. Anatomical bridles. Ergonomic bridles. They feature additional padding and ear cutouts, curved lines and extra-wide leather, novel nosebands and unconventional cheekpiece designs. The newest wave of tack innovations, these bridles and associated bridle parts purport to help the horse perform better by relieving pressure on sensitive areas of the face and head.

But do these trendy features really make a difference in the horse’s comfort—and if so, how do they work? Can an anatomical bridle revolutionize your dressage training and boost your show scores? Are they even competition-legal? We spoke with a veterinarian, a trainer, and a US Equestrian official to find out.

Anatomically Correct

International dressage trainer, coach, and US Equestrian “S” judge Kathy Connelly, Wellington, FL, is a believer in the new wave of bridle designs. After all, she says, “I think it is a given that every rider would like their horse to be comfortable.” But to sort out the options, she recommends that riders “educate themselves to understand the conformation of the horse’s mouth and head.”

Let’s take Connelly’s advice and start with an anatomical overview.

The horse’s poll contains a confluence of nerves and blood vessels and is the connection to the atlas vertebra, the first cervical vertebra. What the poll doesn’t contain is a lot of natural padding. The ears, with about a dozen muscles that enable them to swivel and move in many directions, are positioned on either side of the poll. Behind the ears is the pressure-sensitive nuchal ligament, which plays a role in supporting the horse’s head. (See “Horse-Health Connection” on page 26 for more on the nuchal ligament and the equine head-neck connection.)

The horse’s cheekbones are similarly bony and prominent, again with an abundance of sensitive nerves and minimal natural protection. The trigeminal nerve, which is the main sensory facial nerve, runs to the eyes and the upper and lower jaws and lips.

“The one thing we know,” says equine-biomechanics expert and USDF Connection contributing editor Hilary Clayton, BVMS, PhD, Diplomate ACVSMR, MRCVS, “is that if the horse is painful, he will be inconsistent and always try to find a way to be more comfortable.” Symptoms of head, poll, or facial pain might include head-tossing, rubbing the face, a head tilt, or other resistance during work, says Clayton, of Mason, MI, who is the professor and Mary Anne McPhail Dressage Chair emerita at Michigan State University.

Anatomical bridles are designed to reduce or eliminate pressure on the sensitive poll, cheekbones, and facial nerves. Sounds great—except that simple physics would suggest that if a design relieves pressure in one place, pressure must increase somewhere else. Take the poll, for instance. “If you take the [bridle] headpiece and move it back six inches,” explains Clayton, “then it is on the vertebrae and you get leverage on the vertebrae and the poll. What makes more sense is to distribute the pressure over a wider area—a shaped headpiece that is fairly wide across the top of the poll, for example, but shaped around the ears.”

Because of those prominent, unprotected cheekbones, bridle cheekpieces shaped to avoid exerting direct pressure on those sensitive areas make sense, says Clayton. “Any time the bridle crosses the edge of a bone, that is going to be a higher pressure point.”

Another innovation Clayton thinks is worth considering is the array of bridle designs that omit the need for a throatlash. The purpose of the throatlash is to prevent the bridle from slipping over the horse’s head, but many riders adjust a conventional throatlash too loosely to be of practical use, in an effort not to be too tight on the horse’s throat, she says.

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INNOVATIVE: This anatomical bridle features a widened, padded headpiece that curves around the ears; a “swooped” browband for ear and head comfort; noseband padding; and a removable throatlash.
As an alternative to a conventional bridle with throatlatch, “I do quite like some of the straps that fit right below the big cheek muscle,” Clayton says. “I think it is in a fairly comfortable place for the horse and can be tight enough to hold the bridle on without strangling the horse.”

**Better Mousetraps or the Latest Tack Gimmick?**

Anecdotal evidence of any given item’s effectiveness abounds in the horse world, but people like Clayton tend to remain skeptical until science backs it up.

“From my perspective, there has been very little research” on the newer bridle designs, she says. “The studies that have been done are very small, individual studies…. We need major research to look at the whole picture.”

That said, it’s still tough to argue with someone like Connelly, who has years of experience riding, training, and teaching.

“I have seen horses in uncomfortable bridles that change significantly when something comfortable is put on them,” she says. “In some cases, I have seen an instant difference.”

**There’s No Substitute for Proper Fit**

Just as you can’t transform an ill-fitting saddle into perfection with pads alone, no amount of padding will compensate for a bridle that fits poorly or that is adjusted incorrectly.

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**The “Cushy” Craze: Is More More?**

Seeing the modern dressage bridle, which is padded practically everywhere, it’s a wonder horses ever managed to go decently in the plain-strapgoods models of yesteryear. Many of today’s dressage crownpieces, browbands, nosebands, and cavessons are lined with padding of various softness and thickness. It’s a commendable idea, but our experts point out that padding doesn’t automatically equal comfort.

“If padding is very dense, it is not nice for the horse,” says equine-biomechanics expert Dr. Hilary Clayton. She does give a thumbs-up to soft padding as long as it’s “shaped to conform to the shape of the horse’s head.”

“Something that is being added for comfort should have padding that you can’t feel the bottom of when you squeeze,” says international dressage coach, trainer, and judge Kathy Connelly. “And cleansing is important. A fungus could make it really uncomfortable.”

Seeing a need for a way to add padding to existing bridles—for the ultra-sensitive horse, perhaps, or for the budget-conscious owner who can’t spring for a fancy new bridle—Connelly came up empty-handed, so she created her own collection of add-on pads for crownpieces, chin straps, and nosebands. Reflecting their inventor’s preferences, the pads are machine-washable and feature soft terry cloth against the horse’s skin, nonslip rubber on the bridle side, and hypoallergenic filling.
“How people adjust things is a huge variable,” says Clayton. “You can take a lot of equipment that can be perfectly fine if adjusted correctly, crank it down, and it becomes an instrument of torture.”

A bridle’s cheekpieces, for example, “are there to hold the bits in place.” Make them too short and they’ll pull up on the horse’s lips and down on his poll, says Clayton, who adds that even the noseband can exert poll pressure if it’s too tight.

“I don’t think the front of the nose gets considered enough,” says Connelly. “I have noticed over the years as a trainer, and all my life as a competitor, indentations in front of the nose and in back where the chin is when the bridle comes off.” She likens the feeling of a tight noseband to a severe pinch and reminds riders: “The purpose of the noseband is not to keep the mouth shut but to prevent it from opening too much.”

Connelly, for one, appreciates the increased number of options in bridle designs and the attention being paid to horses’ head comfort—attention that in the past was focused mainly on horses’ backs and saddle fit. Now she’d like to see retailers take it a step further: “It would be great if saddlers would allow people to borrow and try bridles like they do with saddles.”

Until that happens, Connelly recommends shopping for bridles at shows, where the vendor can help you choose an appropriate bridle for your horse and fit it properly.

And don’t forget the reason most of us use a bridle in the first place: the bit. “You can have the most perfectly-fitting comfort bridle in the world, but if the bit doesn’t fit right, it won’t work,” Connelly says.

**But Is It Legal?**

Design innovations, fashion trends, and the like keep our sport’s governing bodies busy assessing competition-worthiness and revising rule books accordingly to permit, ban, or otherwise regulate what’s allowed down center line. (That’s why rule books keep getting longer and longer.)

One person who’s no stranger to this cycle is USDF vice president Lisa Gorretta. A USDF silver medalist and a former tack-shop owner, Gorretta, of Chagrin Falls, OH, has to keep up to date on the dressage rules in her roles as a US Equestrian “R” dressage technical delegate (TD), an FEI Level 2 dressage steward, and co-chair (with Kathy Connelly) of the US Equestrian Dressage Sport Committee, which writes the rules for USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competition. She also conducts the equipment portions of continuing-education forums for TDs.

“Every few years,” Gorretta says, “something gets all crazed in the area of tack and equipment with how you are going to improve your riding to make your horse an Olympic star. There are new designs coming out monthly or less.” That’s why she recommends that national-level dressage competitors consult the US Equestrian Rule Book (online at usef.org) regularly: “Chapter 121.2 gives a clear definition of what is OK to be used in competition and what is not.”

“The excitement starts [for the Dressage Sport Committee] when a manufacturer changes the traditional definition of the parts of the bridle,” Gorretta says. “For example, some of the ‘comfort’ bridles have a removable throatlatch, or a throatlatch with a different position. In some cases the FEI [Fédération Equestre Internationale, which makes the rules for international competition] has determined that the function is the same, so it is OK. Bridles still have to conform to the traditional shape and appearance, but the lines are getting a little curvy.”

(The FEI usually leads the way in the writing and revising of rules, Gorretta explains. “While our [US Equestrian] rules may not be not exactly like the FEI’s, we try very hard to make what we do nationally simpatico with the FEI.”)

Gorretta and her Dressage Sport Committee colleagues have observed some extravagant changes in the positioning of some bridles, so they’ve added an illustration to the Rule Book showing what is acceptable. She explains: “The most sensitive area is the poll right between the ears. Padding
that goes forward from the ears is fine. Headpieces designed to go further back on the poll are not.”

Industry changes have made it somewhat more challenging for officials and competitors to keep abreast of the rules. The FEI has begun to publish what it calls “useful documents” on a regular basis in an effort to avoid continual formal rule changes, according to Gorretta. “Because we try to follow that philosophy, the Dressage Sport Committee passed a provision that added Annex A to the dressage chapter of the Rule Book.” There’s a link on the home page of the USDF website (scroll down and click the USEF Rule Changes button in the Quick Links section), “and we can keep up when the FEI makes these decisions.”

The takeaway for competitors: “The basis of the rules follows the FEI, with some modifications; and some things that are permitted by the FEI are not permitted nationally because they are specifically against other rules in our book. We cannot write a rule for every possible instance.”

Should You Buy a Comfort Bridle?

There is no one-size-fits-all bridle solution that will transform every horse into Valegro. Some horses seem to go well in most bridles and bits, while others show remarkable improvement when outfitted in something they really like.

For her part, Clayton splits the difference: She rides her own horse in “a plain old-fashioned bridle”—but one that has “a padded headpiece and a nicely padded crank noseband.” She repeats her advice that horse owners educate themselves about equine facial anatomy before making purchase decisions: “If people know the big principles of structure and fit, they can figure much of it out themselves.”

Although Gorretta, like Clayton, wants to see more re-

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search conducted on the subject, she says she believes that “a lot of the problems that we have with teeth, facial nerves, spinal issues, et cetera, are not totally unrelated to tack.”

That said, the old saw “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” may apply. If your horse seems perfectly content in his current bit and bridle, you may not see huge benefits with a different design. Get a bridle-fit expert to help you assess your current equipment and to help you navigate the choices if you want to try something new, Gorretta recommends.

Of course, some riders turn to anatomical bridles not on a whim but because they’re trying to solve a problem. If that’s the case with your horse, “Know what the problem is, and then do your research,” Gorretta advises.

“I do believe these bridles are here to stay,” says Connelly. “They are working. I have seen a lot more comfort.”

As an added benefit, Connelly has found that a well-fitted, appropriately padded ergonomic bridle helps to distribute bit pressure more evenly—a boon for all horses, of course, but especially those whose riders have less-educated hands, she says.

“I am grateful as a trainer,” Connelly says, “that so much is going into creating comfortable bridles for horses. Riders are much more conscious to see if their horse is more comfortable, and if a particular bridle helps in the connection and in the partnership.

“They do what they do for us, and we owe it to them to do everything we can for them back.”

Sally Silverman has had a lifelong love of and fascination with horses. A freelance writer, she enjoys delving into topics pertinent to equestrians and sharing what she learns with readers.