

The Impact of Bitted Bridles vs Bitless Bridles on the Therapeutic Riding Horse

Introduction

Despite the widespread use of bits, research shows how they can be a potential source of significant discomfort and pain (Clayton, 2005; McLean et al, 2005), dental damage (Cook, 2011), injury (Jahiel, 2001) and numerous behavioural difficulties (Cook et al, 2003). Cook (2008) suggests that bitted bridles may be a potential source of accidents for riders. The wearing of bitted bridles for Therapeutic Horses is commonplace. This study examined the impact of bitted vs bitless bridles on two Therapeutic Riding (TR) horses.

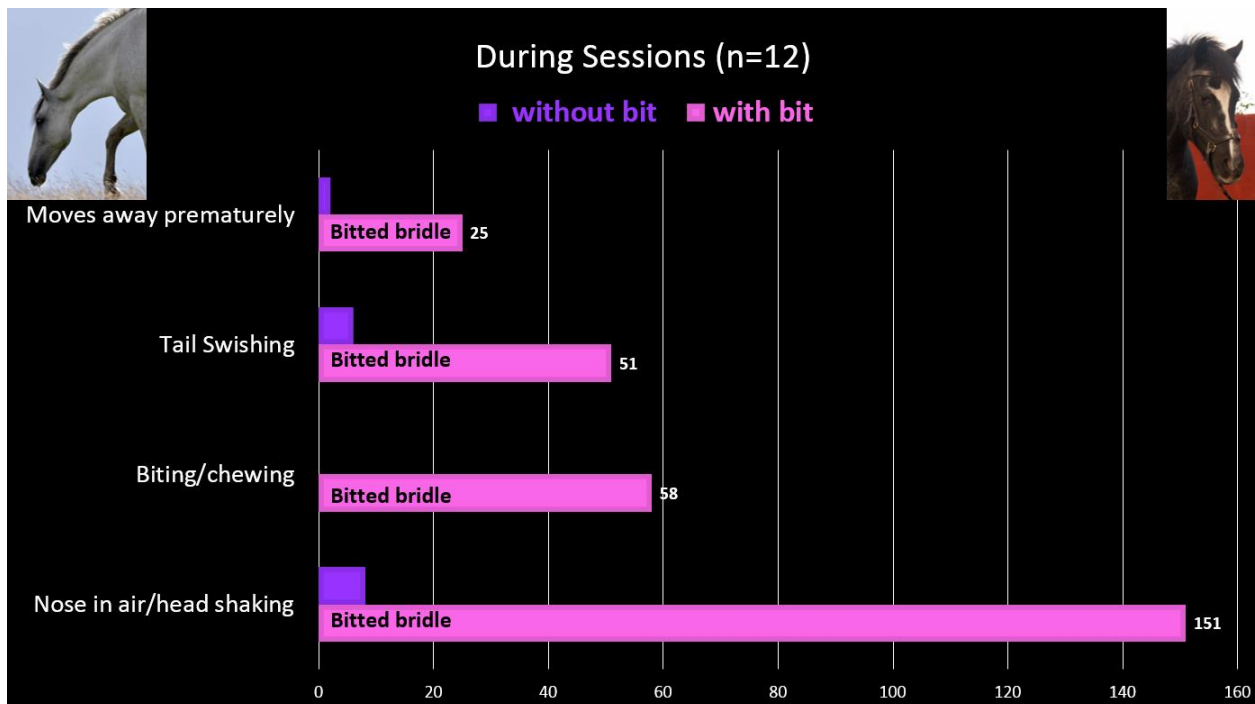
Methodology

Each horse was videoed for 6 TR sessions (n=12) -30 minutes each session – 3 with a bit and 3 without a bit. TR sessions were conducted in the same venue with the same rider, coach, leader, side walker, TR lesson plan and schedule. As such, the only known variable was the use of the bitted or bitless bridle. Videos were analysed using Cooks Behaviour Profiling Questionnaire recording behaviours during tacking up (n=9), during TR session (n=17) and untacking (n=7).

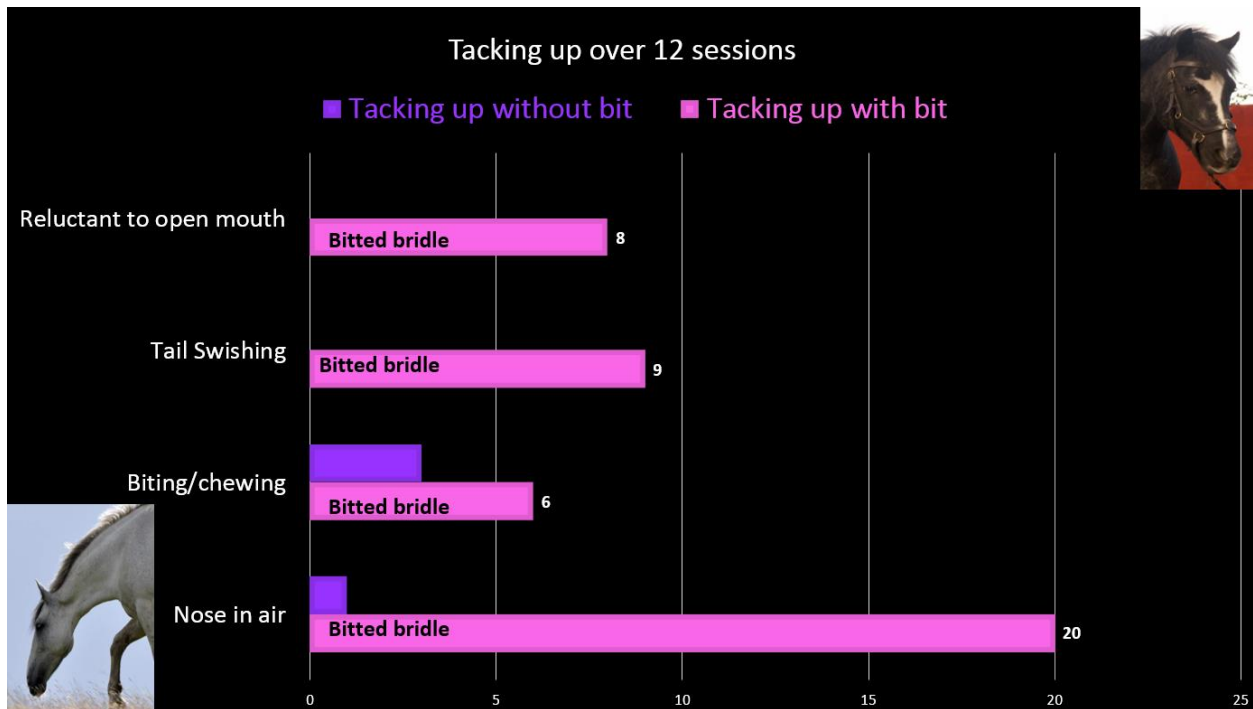
Results

Findings illustrate how individual horse’s behaviours escalated with a bitted bridle - most notably during the TR sessions.

Table 1 below shows the increase in biting, rubbing of face on foreleg and moving away prematurely from halt.



Whilst a lesser number of behaviours were observed during the tacking up stage, illustrated in Table 2 below, head tossing, stepping back and tail swishing was greater with bitted bridles for both horses.



Both horses were observed to have greater consistency in behavioural changes with bitted brides in bracing their backs, holding their head high, head shaking and tail swishing.

Conclusion

Though this study involved just two horses, the findings suggest that bitted bridles may be associated with varying levels of discomfort as reported by Clayton, 2005 and McLean et al, 2005. That there were significantly less behaviours observed in bitless bridled horses raises the question as to the necessity of bits, particularly when most TR horses are carefully matched for this type of work, are conducted in walk, with a leader and possibly a side walker. Finally, inverted horses may compromise the quality of the TR session for the rider