

Training a Bitless, Voice-Only Fjord Part One

by Nahman Korem



Even in a lush, green pasture, Nahman's horses will follow wherever he goes, no matter what the temptation. Crown Jewel photos.

Why Bitless?

Before we start any discussion about bitless horse handling, I would like to make clear that there is nothing wrong with bits and bridles. I am not going to try to convince you to get rid of all of your current tack. Bits are – historically, currently and will continue to be – used by many horse people. Bits continue to serve an important role in many horse activities.

The bitless movement, if I am allowed to name this trend, claims one major advantage over the bit system. The horse's mouth is always clean of injuries and wounds.

If you are the only one working with your horse and you are sure not to accidentally pull too hard on the reins, a bitless solution may not be of any merit to you. However, if you have experienced mouth wounds related to bits, you may want to consider an alternative.

The objective of this two article series is to explain how we train a bitless, Voice-Only Fjord. Part One explains how we establish our control over the horse, regardless of the temptation or distraction level to which the horse is exposed. Part Two will explain how we train Voice-Only riding and driving.

The Bit Myth

I was told more than once, by other horse people, that bitless horse handling is dangerous. It is a common belief by many that humans use bits in order to control the horse. Well, this is where I disagree. A bit in the horse's mouth does not really control the horse. The bit is an excellent



After receiving training in the Join-Up method, Crown Jewel Fjord horses are taught to be driven via voice command and halter only, no bits are used in the horses' mouths while being driven or ridden. Crown Jewel photo.



Above and below: Guests of Crown Jewel Ranch also ride and drive the horses without bits in their mouths. Crown Jewel photos

communication device but it is a cruel (therefore poor) control device. A badly spooked horse will run forever even with a bit in his mouth. Pulling hard on the reins will never stop a horse that is running away from a perceived life threatening danger. At the same time, pulling hard on the reins will surely hurt his mouth.

The risk of unintentional damage to the horse's mouth has led many horse trainers to develop bitless training methods. These methods prove, for the majority of tasks we use horses for, bitless configuration is sufficient. It is only in ultra precision jobs (e.g. dressage) that a bit will better deliver subtle physical cues to the horse thus improving the precision of the horse's performance.

Control vs. Communication

Control and communication are the two challenges that we face when we want to work with horses. Let's look deeper into the meaning of these terms.

True control over any horse is only achieved after establishing ourselves in a dominant (alpha) position over the horse. In other words, we make the horse believe that we are stronger, faster, braver and smarter. The horse respects us, follows our leadership and obeys our instructions. There could be several ways to establish control over the horse but by the end of the day the result is the same. The horse treats us - the human handlers - as the alpha member of its herd.

Communication is used to exchange information between us and the horse. Over the years, we have developed many

languages, which we use to tell the horse what and how to do things. Each language, basically, is a set of cues - physical, vocal and others. English and the Western disciplines are just two examples of different languages. Communication is what creates our control over the horse and makes it beneficial to us.

I assume that we all have a certain level of control over our horses and all of us have established communication with them. But here comes a tough question. Do you have full control over your horse? In order to help you with the right answer we will use a simple scenario. Imagine you bring a bucket full of grain (or any other treat) to your horse and place it in front of the horse. Then, use Voice-Only (no physical restraint) and ask the horse to leave the grain and follow you while you walk away from the bucket. If your answer is "No, my horse will not leave the

grain and will not follow me," then you do not have the alpha position and you do not have full control over your horse.

The rationale is very simple. In a herd situation, horses compete constantly to establish, maintain and improve their position on their hierarchy ladder. Once their hierarchy is established, the alpha horse has the first right to whatever "goodie" is available. All that is required is the right look (communication) by the alpha horse and the other horses clear the way. Therefore, if the alpha horse can use a look to deliver a dominant message, you should be able to use voice to achieve the same affect.

Do you think it is impossible to achieve such a level of control over your Fjord? We have nine Fjords here and they all follow us without lead lines regardless of the temptation level.

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Bitless, Voice-Only Fjord ...

Join-Up

The key to achieving this result is by implementing Monty Roberts's Join-Up and Follow-Up, in a slightly modified way that brings better results with Fjords.

Join-Up was developed by Monty Roberts after he watched and learned the social behavior of wild horse herds. Monty observed how the alpha mares were sending away young horses as a punishment for bad behavior. The punished horse was kept away from the herd till he got a signal from the alpha mare allowing him back into the herd.

Join-Up is a translation of wild behavior in a round pen environment. The trainer is positioned in the center of the round pen and sends the horse away. Obviously, the horse can only run in a circle, which means that the horse cannot outrun the trainer. When the time is right, the trainer invites the horse to join him or her. The horse stops running and joins the trainer with the mental state that the trainer is now the alpha.

It is not the purpose of this article to provide formal Join-Up training. We highly recommend that you watch Monty's videos and read his literature about Join-Up. In his videos, Monty demonstrates how, in a very short time (less than 30 minutes), even a wild horse accepts a saddle and a rider. Using Join-Up, Monty was successful with many cases of problem horses, which won him worldwide recognition.

It is our experience that, although Join-Up works very well with Fjords, none of our Fjords followed the process exactly as described in Monty Roberts's literature. Here are the main differences:

- The process is much longer, many times exceeding 2 hours. We believe this is a result of the Fjord being a stubborn breed that does not give up easily.
- The Fjords do not lower their heads when they want to join the trainer. We could not observe any chewing and licking during Join-Up.
- The Fjord head does give a good

indication about the horse's intention. When the head is turned away from the circle center, the horse does not wish to join. When the head turns into the center, the horse is asking the permission to join.

Quite often it is hard to notice a clear indication that the horse wants to join. Therefore, it is useful to invite the horse to join every ten to fifteen minutes. If the horse does not wish to join, he will either keep running the circle or stop and look away from the trainer.

A true Join-Up is an emotional moment. Having the horse joining you with its head down, completely submissive, ready to take your orders, makes you feel that you have a new horse and a foundation for a new relationship with your horse. Now that you achieved Join-Up, you are ready to test whether the horse follows you anywhere you go, i.e. Follow-Up.

Follow-Up

The Follow-Up process with Fjords is as described in Monty's videos, there are no

Below and next page; Horse-drawn chores around the resort are also done bitless. Crown Jewel photo.



special exceptions. However, what we learned at Crown Jewel is that, given the right temptation, the Fjords will quit following us and go to satisfy their own agenda. Ask any Fjord owner what the ultimate temptation is for a Fjord horse and I am sure you will have just one answer – good sweet food. Now assume that you have just finished Join-Up and you start Follow-Up. The horse follows you while you walk slowly in the round pen with no lead line. At some point, a bowl with grain is placed somewhere in the pen. Sure enough, your horse leaves you and goes for the grain.

This is the time that you should send the horse away and start Join-Up again. Next time you invite the horse to come you, the horse may look at both you and the grain, unsure where to go. If the horse does not clearly prefer to join you over going to the grain, send the horse away again.

By the end of the process, the horse joins you and follows you even when you pass next to the grain. To further extend the Follow-Up process, we take the horse out of the pen to complete liberty. The horse follows us anywhere we go and even if there is some hesitation, a voice correction brings the horse back in line. During the whole process, the horse is very calm, the head is down, the body expression is very submissive and no lead line is used throughout the entire process.

We have tried many types of temptations and were always able to maintain Follow-Up. There is only one temptation we have not yet tried, which is due to a logistic limitation in our operation. We do not keep a stallion at Crown Jewel, so have not been able to check whether he would follow us in the presence of a mare in heat. I would still bet that Follow-Up is possible, even in this condition.

Summary

We described a training process that establishes us as the alpha over the Fjord horse. In our opinion, this is the foundation to any other training method that you may want to use. The next step is to find a communication method that takes advantage of this foundation and build a safe and enjoyable working Fjord. In Part Two we will explain how to use Pat Parelli's system, combined with a voice cue, to build a Voice-Only Fjord. 🐾



Our Experience Training a Bitless Fjord

By Alexandra and Ben Adriance

IT ALL BEGAN for us with the Spring 2007 Issue of the *Fjord Herald*, when we read the article Nahman Korem had written about riding and driving his nine Fjords bitless. We have two Fjords and had been working with one of our Fjords, Krisi, retraining her to drive. We were wondering about what kind of training to use when we saw Nahman's article, so the timing for the article was perfect for us.

We visited Crown Jewel Resort Ranch for five nights, at the end of June, and came back with far more than we had anticipated. The first day we were there, Nahman sat us down and explained in great detail why and how the system works with Fjords. He told us how he was going to train us and debriefed us at every step.

We spent a full two and a half days in the indoor arena doing Join-Up with three of his Fjords. Each had a different personality and reacted differently. All nine Fjords on the ranch had been trained and we had not. We were quite sure the Fjords knew this! We then spent a morning or so doing some ground driving with the horses in full harness, prior to hitching them.

During the afternoon of day three, we were both driving on our own using only voice commands. It was a very rewarding moment and we had not expected to be doing so in such a short time. The last day was spent going around obstacles and doing sharp turns at a trot. In the afternoon, we drove an amazing trail with the Fjords, through the woods and enjoying Nahman's beautiful property.

We have now taken this training back home and have done Join-Up with both of our horses. It took us nine and one half hours to get Kristi, and six and one half hours to get Attie, fully joined. This might seem like a long time, but our arena is outside with many distractions. The Join-Up method was very inspiring and humbling at the same time. It was truly a special moment to see when our first horse came up and Joined-Up.

We are now at the point where the horses are beginning to listen to our voice commands without the use of a bridle. They are different horses than prior to Join-Up. This is an ongoing process and, as Nahman has explained, we will continue to train them using Parelli. We are grateful that we have been able to call Nahman with our questions and we appreciate his availability as we have brainstormed ideas with him and he has helped us with our concerns.

We certainly recommend the experience we had at Crown Jewel Resort Ranch and if you are at all intrigued with the bitless method, we'd endorse this experience to anyone. We are thrilled to be at the point we are now and how quickly we have moved forward in this process. 🐾