Driving Bits - Their Selection and Use
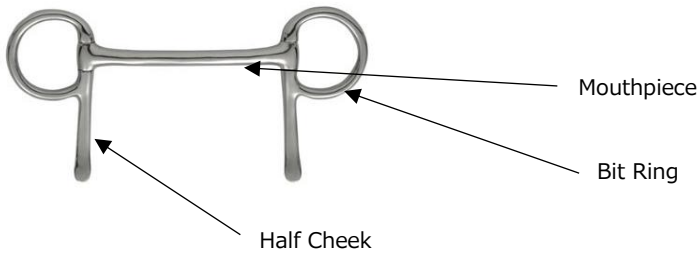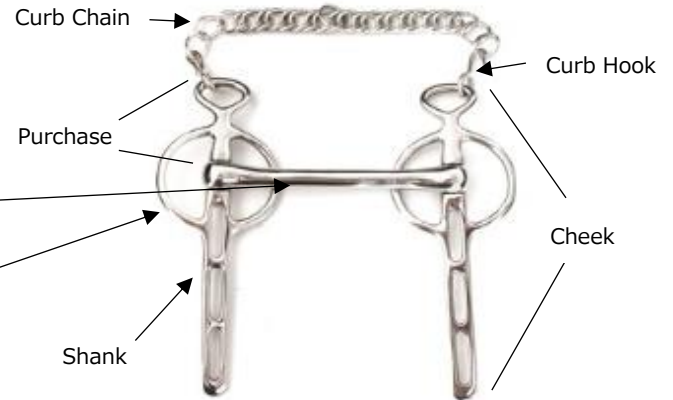
We can basically break down driving bits into two "styles", snaffle and curb.

Parts of a Snaffle Bit:

Parts of a Curb Bit:

Curb Chain

Curb Hook

Purchase

Mouthpiece

Cheek

Bit Ring

Half Cheek

Shank

Snaffle Bits

Far from popular belief, a snaffle is not any jointed bit. A snaffle is a direct-action bit, meaning that the rein attaches on the ring directly connected to the mouthpiece. There is no shank and no purchase. It can come in a variety of mouthpieces, both solid and jointed. Snaffles work off the lips, tongue, and bars, and may affect the palate depending on the mouthpiece.

Mullen Half Cheek Snaffle   *Jointed Half Cheek Snaffle*   *Waterford Half Cheek Snaffle*

Curb Bits

Curb bits have shanks, metal bars below the mouthpiece to which the rein is attached. Driving curb bits have multiple places to attach the rein depending on how much leverage the driver chooses to use. The Butterfly has two rein settings, while the Liverpool has 4-5 (see rein settings below on the Liverpool page). The mouthpiece can also vary. Curbs work off of various pressure points (see next page for pressure points) depending on how the bit is configured.

Medium Port Butterfly   *Arch Liverpool*

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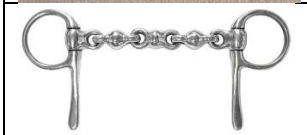© IVC Carriage

Bit Pressure Points

Poll
Palate
Bars (Gums)
Lips
Chin
Tongue
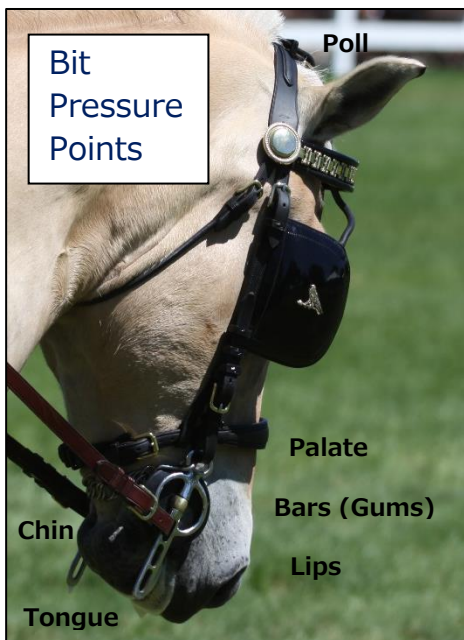
To test the action any bit, grasp the mouthpiece with one hand, and use the other to simulate the action of the rein.

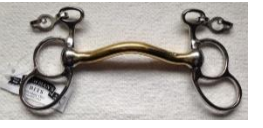Snaffle Bits – all apply pressure to lips. Various mouthpieces create other actions.

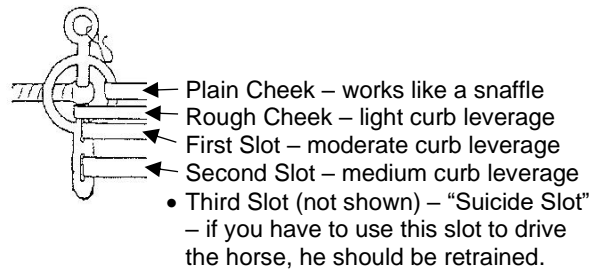|			
	Mullen Half Cheek Snaffle	Arches forward; applies pressure to lips, tongue, and bars if used hard enough.	Very mild bit; good first bit to teach horse to hold the bit as there are no joints to play with.
	Single Jointed Half Cheek Snaffle	Squeezes lips, tongue, and bars; can poke horse in the palate and pinch lips between teeth and bit.	Good bit to teach the horse to stay off the bit: not what you want a driving horse to do.
	French Link Half Cheek Snaffle	Squeezes lips and tongue; does not collapse as hard on jaw as the Single Jointed Snaffle, therefore more comfortable.	Softer action than above bit; thick mouthed horses don't seem to do as well in this bit; our next step after a mullen.
	Bowman Bean Link Half Cheek Snaffle	Squeezes lips and tongue; smoother joint than the French Link Snaffle, therefore more comfortable.	Very mild bit with a similar action as the above bit. See graphic on last page.
	Waterford Half Cheek Snaffle	Lays across tongue to distribute pressure.	Currently only available in a few sizes.
	Rubber Half Cheek Snaffle	Primarily applies pressure to lips and tongue.	Very mild bit; can be too thick for some horse's mouths; few sizes.

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Butterfly (or Post) Bits –

Have both snaffle and curb settings for the rein. Applies a bit of poll pressure through the purchase, and chin pressure through the curb chain when used on the curb setting. Two loop style Butterfly doesn't generally hang down past the horse's mouth as the Liverpool may.

	Mullen Butterfly	Mouthpiece arches forward; Snaffle setting - pressure to lips; Curb setting – mouthpiece rotates into tongue.	Mild in snaffle setting; Curb setting not as good for horses who don't like tongue pressure.
	Arch Butterfly	Mouthpiece arches up; Allows more room for the tongue in both the snaffle and curb settings.	Doesn't rotate into the horse's tongue on the curb setting.
	Bowman Victory Butterfly	Hybrid of Mullen and Arch mouthpieces that arches forward and up. Creates a lot of room for the tongue.	Thick mouthed horses seem to like this bit. See graphic on last page.
	Port Butterfly	Allows the tongue to fill the port; can make it harder for the horse to lift it off the bars; can bump a low palate.	A higher port may act on the palate, encouraging the horse to drop his head.
	Conrad Butterfly	Allows much room for the tongue; can bump a low palate.	Thick mouthed horses seem to like this bit. See note about port above.
	Single Jointed Butterfly	Snaffle – works off corners of mouth, squeezes tongue Curb – can affect every pressure point on horse's head.	Very strong bit in the curb setting.
	French Link Butterfly	Snaffle – does not squeeze tongue as much as the Single Jointed Butterfly Curb – can affect every pressure point, but less likely to affect palate.	Strong action in curb setting. Good bit for those drivers who want a traditional driving cheek, but only use the snaffle rein.

Liverpool Bits –

Multiple rein settings from snaffle to severe leverage on the third slot (on a Three-Slot Liverpool). Applies a bit of poll pressure through the purchase, and chin pressure through the curb chain when used any of the curb settings. The lower the rein setting, the more the curb chain will create squeezing action on the jaw and tongue. Loose cheek bits have a more independent action than fixed cheek bits (see below).


← Plain Cheek – works like a snaffle
← Rough Cheek – light curb leverage
← First Slot – moderate curb leverage
← Second Slot – medium curb leverage
• Third Slot (not shown) – "Suicide Slot" – if you have to use this slot to drive the horse, he should be retrained.

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	Mullen Liverpool	Mouthpiece arches forward; Snaffle setting - pressure to lips Curb setting – mouthpiece rotates into tongue	Mild in snaffle setting; Mouthpiece will rotate more with a lower rein setting.
	Arch Liverpool	Mouthpiece arches up; Allows more room for the tongue in both the snaffle and curb settings.	Doesn't rotate into the horse's tongue on the curb setting.
	Bowman Victory Liverpool	Hybrid of Mullen and Arch mouthpieces that arches forward and up, creating much room for the tongue.	Thick mouthed horses seem to like this bit. See graphic on last page.
	Port Liverpool	Allows the tongue to fill the port; can make it harder for the horse to lift it off the bars; can bump a low palate.	A higher port may act on the palate, encouraging the horse to drop his head.
	Conrad Liverpool	Allows much room for the tongue; can bump a low palate	Thick mouthed horses seem to like this bit. See note about port above.
	Single Jointed Liverpool	Snaffle – works off corners of mouth, squeezes tongue Curb – can affect every pressure point on horse's head.	Very strong bit in the curb setting.
	French Link Liverpool	Snaffle – does not squeeze tongue as much as the Single Jointed Liverpool Curb – can affect every pressure point, but less likely to affect palate.	Strong action in curb setting. Good bit for those drivers who want a traditional driving cheek, but only use the snaffle rein.

Selecting a Driving Horse Bit

If you haven't already, see our article **"I Need a New Bit"** for considerations about your horse before selecting a bit.

First of all, bits do not stop horses, horse's brains stop horses. The bit is a *communication device* which can be effective or ineffective in transmitting information to the horse depending on the driver's hands (see our article **"Let Go!"**). The best bitting techniques involve selecting the most comfortable bit to enhance the communication with the horse. If the horse is comfortable, the communication will not be hampered by pain.


THREE-PIECE SNAFFLE
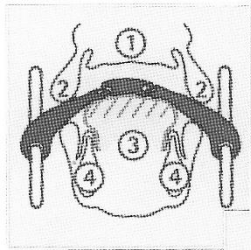
Regular Snaffle
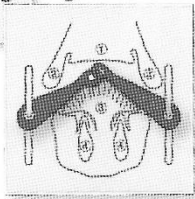
❶ palate
❷ flews (flesh)
❸ tongue
❹ lower jaw-bones

Generally, thick mouthed horses seem to prefer solid mouthpieces with room for the tongue. Thinner lipped horses don't seem to mind multi-jointed bits as much. Very few horses prefer the Single Jointed Snaffle, as it pinches the lips and tongue between the bit and teeth, and can also bump the horse in the palate. A three-piece snaffle distributes tongue pressure and lays across the horse's tongue more smoothly. The Bowman Bean Link Snaffle also includes a comfortable arch not common in most imported bits (left).

THE VICTORY

THE VICTORY

Straight Bar

❶ palate
❷ flews (flesh)
❸ tongue
❹ lower jaw-bones

The Bowman Victory bit (right) arches forward and up, creating a lot of room for the tongue and conforming better to the horse's mouth. Many horses really seem to like this bit. Because of the tongue room, the horse cannot lift the mouthpiece off the bars of the mouth as easily, so the bars may be affected more. As with any bit, care should be taken not to use the bit harshly.
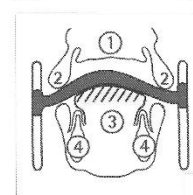
Fixed Cheek Liverpool bits

Although fixed cheek Liverpool bits can be used on a single horse, they are generally used on horses in a multiple configuration, such as a pair or four-in-hand, as the coupling rein can't rotate the cheek into the horse's face. The bottom bar on the bit shown helps keep the bit from catching the rein of a neighboring horse in the hitch.