

# ***Driving Bits – Their Selection and Use***

Version 2

When choosing a bit, consider the width and conformation of a horse's mouth. Horses' mouths come in as many different configurations as their legs or backs. How a mouth is formed will somewhat dictate what style bit they prefer, which is why there are so many bits and no bit is the "magic" bit for all horses.

For more on the determining the width and conformation of your horse's mouth, see our article "**I Need a New Bit**".

## How Mouth Conformations Affect Bit Performance

Certain conformations of mouths affect how particular bits perform in a horse's mouth. Horses with short mouths tend to like the bit a little lower in their mouth than other horses. With these horses, the "one to two wrinkle rule" of the bit placement usually does not apply.

Horses with low palates and fat, fleshy lips may not appreciate the "nutcracker" action of a single jointed snaffle, as it can pinch their lips against their teeth and bump the roof of the mouth. These horses tend to work better in solid or double-jointed mouthpieces.

Horses with fat tongues may not work well in simple snaffles as well, as the tongue can be pinched against the horse's teeth. These horses may appreciate a light leverage bit that works more off the horse's chin, although a stronger leverage bit can increase the pressure against the horse's tongue and bars.

## Pressure Points

Bits work by applying pressure to the horse's pressure points, which in turn, cues the properly trained horse to do something. Pressure points affected by individual bits are described below. An easy way to tell the "action" of a snaffle bit is to grasp the mouthpiece with your hand, knuckles up and thumb underneath, while pulling the reins with your other hand. Use your arm to feel the leverage of a shanked bit.

While there is such a thing as too big, a thicker mouthpiece is generally more kind than a thin one. A thicker mouthpiece disperses the pressure of the bit across more surface area. Of course, if the horse can't close its mouth around it, it is obviously too thick.

One last comment about bits...Bits do not stop horses. People do not stop horses. Horse's brains stop horses. The bit is a tool used to cue the horse to stop. If the horse has not been trained to stop or turn, no bit will be effective. Proper training is the key to effective driving.

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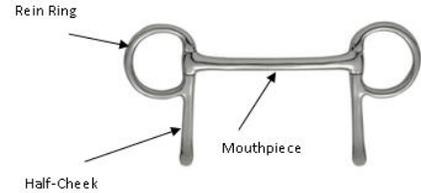
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## Snaffle Bits



Eggbutt Mullen  
Snaffle

Snaffle bits work directly on the corners of a horse's mouth. The rein ring is attached directly to the mouthpiece with no shanks.



Half-Cheek Mullen  
Snaffle

Driving snaffle bits include "half cheeks", which help keep the bit from being pulled through the horse's mouth sideways. The rein is still attached at the end of the mouthpiece.

Snaffles can come in a variety of mouthpieces which will determine which pressure points are affected. The pressure points that can be affected by snaffle bits are:

- lips
- bars (the "gums" where the bit lies)
- roof of the mouth
- tongue

Solid mouthpiece snaffle bits work exclusively on the lips and bars, with configurations that may or may not leave room for the tongue. Some common solid mouthpieces are:



Straight Bar



Mullen  
(slightly arched  
forward)

Depending on the configuration, jointed mouthpiece snaffle bits can affect the bars, lips, and roof of the mouth. Jointed mouthpieces are more numerous in design, but include:



Single Jointed



French Link  
(double jointed)

Double jointed bits seem to work better on horses that don't like as much compression on the sides of their mouths as single-jointed bits apply. Far from popular belief, jointed mouthpieces are not necessarily milder than solid mouthpieces, and do not conform to the horse's mouth any more than the bit would conform to your mouth. Again, hold the bit in your hand and pull on the reins to feel the action of the bit. The jointed bits will "squeeze" your hand, whereas the solid mouthpieces will create a steady, even pull. Jointed bits tend to be more effective for horses that may lean on a solid mouthpiece. Some trainers also like jointed bits to be able to work each side of the horse's mouth more independently.

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## Leverage Bits

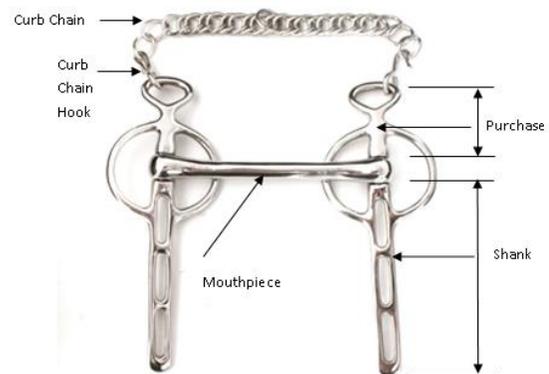
Leverage bits (with shanks) can affect other pressure points as well as those affected by snaffles (above):

- Chin - affected by the chin chain or strap
- Poll - mildly affected by the headstall through the “purchase”
- Nose - might be affected depending on how the bridle is made

Leverage bits can use any of the above mouthpieces. When the reins are attached to the shanks below the mouthpiece, the bit rotates when the reins are pulled. The lower the rein setting, the more leverage and more severe the action. The more slots or loops, the more options there are, but the shank becomes longer and can risk getting caught. Leverage bits should always be used with a chin chain or strap when the rein is lower on the shank, so as to not rotate all the way around.



Settings on a Liverpool Bit  
 1<sup>st</sup> – Plain cheek (no leverage)  
 2<sup>nd</sup> – Rough cheek  
 3<sup>rd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> slot  
 4<sup>th</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> slot  
 5<sup>th</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> slot



On wider cheeked horses, the “purchase” (see graphic above) of a leverage bit can be carefully widened to make more room for the horse’s face including the straps for the bridle. If that doesn’t work, a wider bit may have to be used. This is especially true with some ponies and minis whose faces widen quickly above the mouth.

Leverage bits are commonly known as more “advanced” bits, as the leverage produced by a shanked bit can be very damaging in inexperienced hands. However, there are some horses that really prefer the rotation of the solid mouthpiece bit vs. the pulling or squeezing of the lips produced by a snaffle. Again, these horses tend to have fat, fleshy mouths. The “rough cheek” setting tends to be acceptable for these horses, as there is a little bit of rotation and chin pressure from the chin chain or strap without the squeezing of the lips.

Some breed shows do not allow the use of leverage bits in driving classes, so be sure to check your rulebook before you buy.

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## Traditional Driving Bits

Many ADS driving judges like to see the use of a traditional driving bit in the show ring, even if the leverage is not needed for the horse, in which case the rein is placed in the top ring. Using a traditional driving bit tells the judge that you have “options” and are ready in case your horse decides to be a little stronger from one day to the next. As such, when using a traditional leverage driving bit, you should always have a chin chain or strap even if only using the “plain cheek” setting.

Common traditional driving leverage bits include:



Mullen mouth  
3-slot  
Liverpool w/  
swivel cheeks



Low port 3-slot  
Liverpool w/  
solid cheeks  
(useful for pairs)



Arch mouth 3-slot  
Liverpool w/  
swivel cheeks  
and bottom bar  
(for multiples)



Arch mouth 2-slot  
Liverpool w/  
swivel cheeks



Bean link 2-slot  
Liverpool w/  
swivel cheeks



Mullen mouth  
2-loop Butterfly  
(or Post)



French link  
2-loop Butterfly  
(or Post)



Medium port  
3-loop Butterfly  
(or Post)



Single-jointed  
3-loop Butterfly  
(or Post)



Straight mouth  
Buxton  
(coaching and  
draft bit)



Straight mouth  
Elbow (or Military)  
(Horse can't “lip”  
the shank)



Low port Elbow  
(or Military)

Finally, if horse goes well in a certain bit and it meets the criteria in the rulebook, but isn't necessarily considered *correct*, use it! I have shown driving horses in Kimberwicks (generally considered a riding bit) and bits that look too wide (because my horse didn't like the sides of the Liverpool bit touching his face). Don't mess it up for the sake of tradition. It is better to be “less correct” and have a happy horse than “more correct” and have a miserable drive. Of course, if you can have both a happy horse and a correct bit, great!

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