

I Need a New Bit!

So you think you need a new bit. Maybe a friend or a trainer has told you that your current bit isn't working, or maybe your horse himself told you! Maybe you've learned more about your driving sport and found out that your simple bit that "came with the harness" isn't all it's cracked up to be. Regardless, you can do some "homework" before delving into the myriad of driving bits available to you, which will make your bit purchasing experience more pleasant.

The first thing to understand is that there is no *magic* bit. If there was, there would only be the need for that one bit. A *good* equestrian will ask you a few questions before recommending a certain bit to you. If you are ready for the questions, you will have a more successful and less time consuming experience choosing a bit. They may start with:

- What breed of horse do you drive?
- What type of driving do you do?
- What is his level of training?
- What is your level of training?
- What bit are you using now?
- What behaviors does he have?
- What size is your horse's mouth?
- Describe the shape of his mouth.

So let's break those questions down:

Breeds

We all know that there are many breeds of horses. We can more accurately help you if we know if you are driving a Morgan or a Mini. If you don't know his breed, being able to describe his type is helpful. Is he a draft-type, pony-type, Quarter Horse-type?

Types of Driving

Do you drive for pleasure around your farm or on a trail, or do you compete? If you compete, what kind of showing do you do or want to do? Carriage Pleasure Shows, Breed Shows, Combined Driving, Distance Driving, Driven Dressage? Each has its own "requirements" for biting. We want to be sure you have a bit that you will be able to use without being disqualified.

What is his level of training?

Is he just starting to wear the harness or has he been driving for years? What type of driving has he done for years? Is he used to rein contact, or do you drive him with "slack reins"? Are you looking to increase his level of training or just his comfort?

What is your level of training?

Are you just starting out, or have you been driving for years? What type of driving do you do? How many horses have you driven? Be honest. How much rein contact do you usually use? There are bits that are more "complicated" that may not be appropriate for beginner hands, but are perfectly suited to a specific need of an accomplished equestrian.

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What bit are you using right now?

You'd be surprised how many people just use the bit that came with a harness without making any other considerations. Invariably, that bit supplied is a single jointed half-cheek snaffle. They are readily available, inexpensive, and commonly known as *the* "driving horse bit". However, I know of few horses that actually *like* that bit. They tolerate it, but rarely perform wonderfully with it. It is a great bit to teach horses to "stay off" the bit, which is not what you want a driving horse to do. You want to be able to have contact with that horse's mouth so that you can communicate with him. You don't have any other form of physical bodily communication with the horse like you do when riding.



Single Jointed Half-Cheek Snaffle

What behaviors does he have now?

Tell me what he does with his current bit. If you are using the bit above, my guess is that he is fussy, maybe tosses his head, chomps, etc. Or is he pulling your hands off? You want him to be soft, accepting, and relaxed with his bit. If he is not, it's a good thing that you are looking for a new one (although be aware you may have a training issue as well).

Measuring the horse's mouth

Now that we know more about you and your horse, we need to pick the right size. Did you know that horses have different sized mouths? Not all minis have 3.5" mouths and not all Morgans have 5" mouths! Here is a *very* general chart of measurements:

Size in Inches	Breeds
3 ½ – 3 ¾	Refined <i>Class A</i> Miniature (34" and under)
4	Stocky <i>Class A</i> to Refined <i>Class B</i> Miniature and Shetland
4 ¼ – 4 ½	Stocky <i>Class B</i> Miniature, Larger Shetland, Refined Welsh Pony
4 ¾	Cob-Style Welsh Pony, Smaller Arabian, Smaller Haflinger
5	Ave. Arabian, Fjord, Haflinger, Morgan, Quarter Horse, Welsh Cob
5 ½	Thick Fjord, Thick Haflinger, Warmblood, Morgan, or Quarter Horse
6 – 6 ½	Draft, Draft Cross

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We can make an educated guess about what size bit your horse needs, but the best way to know what size is to measure it! We carry the Bit Sizer, an easy mouth measuring tool (my favorite way), but here is a simplistic way to measure:



1. Take a piece of string and hold one end.
2. Place it in the horse's mouth, holding the first end close to the side of the horse's mouth.
3. Place your fingers on the string close to the other side of the horse's mouth.
4. Slip the string out of the mouth forward without letting go of the string.
5. Measure the string's space in between your fingers. This is the size of the horse's mouth.

I have learned over the years not to discount the width of the horse's lips when measuring his mouth. This is especially important if your horse has fat lips. The mouth measuring tool can mimic that bit diameter to get a more accurate measurement of fat lips. You may also need to pay attention to the width of the horse's face. Some horse's faces widen dramatically above the mouth, which may affect the size of bit needed. This is especially common in pony breeds. The horse's mouth may be one size, but the cheeks may dictate using a wider bit, especially if you are using a leverage (Liverpool, Butterfly, etc.) bit. You can widen the purchase by bending it out, but if not careful, you could break it, too. Most good quality bits already have the purchase bent out.

So tell me about his mouth

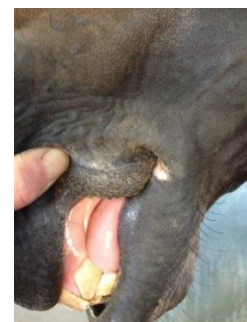
Horses' mouths come in as many different configurations as their legs or backs. How a mouth is formed will somewhat dictate what style bit they prefer, which is why there are so many bits and no "magic" bit. Does he have fat, fleshy lips, or thinner ones? Does his tongue spill out in between his teeth, or is is more contained within the teeth? I highly recommend putting the bit in your horse's mouth and looking and feeling how the bit operates in your horse's mouth. Just watch out for the teeth! Is there room between the bit and the roof of his mouth for your finger? Are his lips being pinched between the bit and his teeth? Remember, the communication you seek with your horse through the bit will be hampered by discomfort of the horse.



Thinner lips and tongue



Wide lips



Thicker lips and fleshy tongue with mouth sore in corner

For more on how bits work in your horse's mouth, see our article "**Driving Bits - Their Selection and Use**".

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