

The mouthpiece of any bit is the part that lies inside the horse's mouth. Mouthpieces are made from a wide variety of materials: rubber and vulcanite (both very easy and soft on the mouth); various types of metal (copper, stainless steel, sweet iron, etc.); a core wrapped with leather; or a combination of metals that are twisted together.

Mouthpieces may be solid or jointed. A mouthpiece that is solid may be straight, slightly curved, have a port (a curved piece in the center that is higher than the sides) or be made of twisted metal. A jointed mouthpiece consists of at least two pieces joined together with at least one joint. A mouthpiece with a port or a joint always applies pressure to the roof of the horse's mouth.

The diameter of the mouthpiece, varying from very thin to very thick, should always be a consideration when choosing a bit. It is often assumed that a thinner bit is lighter and therefore kinder or gentler. In fact the reverse is true - a thinner bit is always sharper and more severe or forceful. As a general rule, the thinner the diameter of the mouthpiece, the sharper the action of the bit. When choosing a bit, always select one with a reasonably thick mouthpiece.

Bits are divided into three types. The three groups of bits are snaffle, curb, and Pelham. To get the best out of a horse, the advantages and disadvantages of each group (and subgroups within a group) must be considered before finally determining the appropriate bit for a particular horse or situation. The foremost consideration should be the comfort of the horse. If the horse is not comfortable about his head, he will fret, ensuring that *both* horse and rider are not comfortable.

The End

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## In Memory of Helen B. Williamson



This series of brochures on various aspects of good horsemanship is dedicated to the memory of Helen B. Williamson, to help inform and educate people on the humane handling and proper care of horses. Helen had a deep love and respect for horses. She once said, "I can't imagine life without horses!" Helen was a founding member of CRTWH, and served as its first president and then as secretary until her death in 2000.



**Next in this series:**

**Bits: #2  
Snaffle Bits**

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Photo above by Jo Kingsland, 1988

# Canadian Registry of the Tennessee Walking Horse

*Helen B. Williamson  
Memorial  
Horsemanship Series*



**BITS: # 1**

**BITS & BITTING**

## BITS and BITTING by Dianne Little

No horse is born with a really bad mouth - bad mouths are seldom caused by heredity. Bad mouths are usually man-made through careless rough riding and handling, combined with thoughtless biting. Bits and biting are controversial subjects. Everyone has an opinion and a favorite bit. Often those opinions are not based on an understanding of the principles behind the bit being considered. In principle, continually switching to a stronger bit to control your horse is wrong without understanding the action exerted by the bit.

When choosing a bit, the ability of the rider, the conformation of the horse's mouth, and the placement of the horse's teeth, as well as the mechanics of the bit, are important. A bit must fit easily and snugly – not too small, not too large, and not too high in the mouth. No two horses are alike.

**FOR EXAMPLE:** Even when properly adjusted to rest lightly and snugly against the corners of the mouth, a curb bit will ride too high in the mouth if the horse has a long mouth. Consequently, the curb chain rides up out of its correct place, placing the action on the outer jaw-bones instead of the curb groove. A horse with a wider, shorter mouth, while suited to a snaffle, is unsuited to either a drop noseband or double bridle, but may go extremely well in a Pelham.

A bit is anything that passes through a horse's mouth, and is connected through the reins to the rider's hands. Because a horse's mouth is at least as sensitive as our own, care must be taken not to damage or injure the parts of the mouth and head that come in contact with the bit and bridle. With every bit and bridle, seven points of pressure and control come

into play: tongue, bars, lips and corner of the mouth, curb groove, poll, roof of the mouth and nose. Unless they have been damaged, these points of pressure and contact are extremely sensitive.

1. The **TONGUE** takes all or some of the pressure with every bit.

2. The **BARS** are the flesh-covered jawbones without teeth, dividing the front teeth from the back teeth. The layer of flesh that covers the bars varies in thickness, but is always very sensitive.

3. The **LIPS and CORNER OF THE MOUTH** are covered by skin that is extremely thin, tender and easily damaged or cut.

4. The **CURB GROOVE** is located under the horse's chin, back of the lower lip. The position and tightness of the curb chain or curb strap may apply pressure to the jawbones rather than the curb groove.

5. The **POLL** lies in close proximity to the brain at the junction of the skull and vertebrae of the neck. This renders it extremely vulnerable. When pressure of any kind is applied to the poll through the use of either a curb or an overhead check rein, there is a lowering effect on the horse's head. A sudden jerk on a curb rein or

overhead check applies pressure to the poll and can result in a lasting nerve injury. (Gentle pressure is quite harmless, rendering a curb bit **in experienced hands** a perfectly safe and sound bit.)

6. The **ROOF OF THE MOUTH** varies in height with the individual horse. The roof of the mouth may be greatly affected by the height of the port in the mouthpiece, or by the joint or joints in the mouthpiece.

7. The **NOSE** is extremely sensitive. Although the nose is not in direct contact with the bit, through the use of various types of nosebands the nose is important in biting.

When choosing a bit, the rider must understand the points of pressure affected by the type of bit chosen. Sometimes the bit being considered is more severe than is required. In general, the more points of pressure that are affected, the stronger or more severe the bit. Conversely, the fewer points of pressure that are affected, the milder or less severe the bit.

There are hundreds, if not thousands of bits, but all bits have two things in common – the mouthpiece and the area where the headstall and reins attach to the bit (bit rings)\*.

### POINTS OF PRESSURE \*Bit rings will be addressed when discussing specific categories of bits.

POINTS ▼	SNaffle	GAG	CURB	PELHAM
<b>TONGUE</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>BARS</b>	yes		yes	yes
<b>LIPS &amp; CORNER OF MOUTH</b>	yes	yes	yes	yes
<b>CURB GROOVE</b>			yes	yes
<b>POLL</b>		yes	yes	yes
<b>ROOF OF MOUTH</b>	Port height or joint in the bit		Port height or joint in the bit	Port height or joint in the bit
<b>NOSE</b>	<b>only when noseband used</b>		<b>only when noseband used</b>	<b>only when noseband used</b>