



# BITS AND BITTING

Part 1

Development of the Modern Bit.

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*“It is not the bit, but its use that results in a horse showing it’s pleasure so that it yields to the hand; there is no need for harsh measure; he should rather be coaxed on so that he will go forward most cheerfully in his swift paces.”*

Xenophon

**I**t is a very common practise for riders to have their saddle fit checked on a regular basis, and there are pages and pages of online forums and magazine articles dedicated just to saddle fitting questions and queries. While addressing the saddle situation is a positive step towards creating comfortable, well fitting gear and a cooperative working partnership between horse and rider, the question needs to be asked if the same consideration and hours of research are being devoted by riders to thinking about their horse’s bit? Ultimately, the bit is the most invasive piece of tack used on an everyday basis, and any bit - including the simple snaffle - is capable of causing severe pain and discomfort to the horse.

Recent scientific research and welfare issues have turned many rider’s thoughts more towards the comfort of the horse in general and more specifically under saddle and in the mouth, which leads towards a more relaxed and willing partner across all disciplines. Recent biting developments have companies such as Myler, Sprenger, Nathe, PeeWee and Neue Schule – all well known brands on the market - now talking in terms of ergonomically designed and comfortable bits that enhance the rider’s communication through this important aid.

In modern riding the four main biting types include Snaffles, Leverage (curb) bits, Gags and Bittless or Nose Bridles. To better understand the use and various styles of the bit today, it is useful taking a brief look at the development of the bit through the ages.

## THE FIRST BIT

Prior to the domestication of the horse, reindeer were used to pull sleds and it is thought they were ridden as well- using leather halters and harness that would be the precursor to equestrian tack. The first ‘bitting’ arrangement for horses following their domestication was

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## Bits and Biting continued...

more than likely just a noseband, similar to the reindeer halters, but the emphasis on a mouthpiece was quick to evolve-about 3000 years before the use of saddles became commonplace.

It was a short step historically, from the leather or woven grass halters to including a leather thong tied around the lower jaw-across the bars- and was more than likely used with one rein. Riders then moved onto the thong with two reins, quickly giving way to the headpiece and hard bit - either of wood or bone - often supported by a low fitting noseband around 2300BC. Bronze bits became common place between 1300-1200BC, though they had been used by various horse tribes well before that date.

At this stage some experimentation began with the mouthpieces and shanks, with spikes, curves, serrated edges and very long shanks - particularly for chariot horses - where control at speed was vital.

The jointed snaffle appeared almost as soon as bits started being fashioned from metals, though the straight bar never became obsolete and is of course still used today. The Celts of Gaul were the first to introduce the curb bit in 4th century BC and really since then, there has been little significant advance in bit design!



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Photo of Jessica Robinson and Alpha Redeemer by Belinda Head



Importantly, the writings of Greek cavalry commander, Xenophon, represent the first serious study into biting the horse, within the full spectrum of horsemanship. Greek bits were very modern in appearance, with cheekpieces, jointed mouthpieces, rollers on bits for young horses to encourage “pursuing the bit with his tongue”, as well as some monstrous contraptions with spikes and studded rollers. Xenophon always promoted the selection of a softer bit, rather than a harsh one, and encouraged correct training of the horse and rider to improve control and finesse.

The Greek cavalry rode without saddle, (and usually without breeches!) hence Xenophon’s early dedicated interest in the bit as an aid to improving the communication between horse and rider. Xenophon wrote “It is not the bit, but its use that results in a horse showing it’s pleasure so that it yields to the hand; there is no need for harsh measure; he should rather be coaxed on so that he will go forward most cheerfully in his swift paces.”

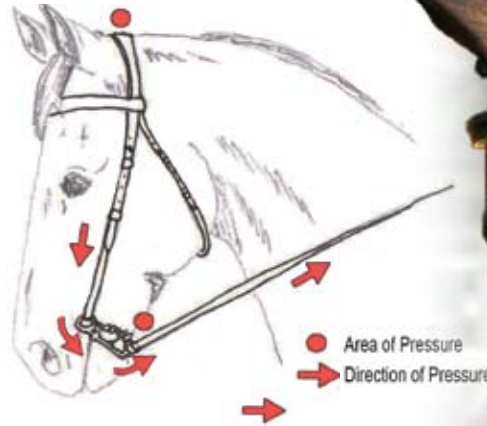
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***Though the snaffle is often still seen as the precursor to introducing the curb, most riders never take this step and remain in a snaffle for their entire riding lives.***

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The Romans and Celts then took up the use of the curb bit with great popularity, leading to its use in the middle ages by knights in England. In some instance, the shanks were up to 55cm long- the pressure to the poll and palate possible would have been incredibly severe. However, as the knights rode by leg, spur and with the reins in one hand, due to holding shield and sword in battle, it is thought they rode mainly by weight and neck reining rather than direct rein contact. By this stage the saddle was common place, as was the stirrup.

In the 17th century, the studded cavesson and ‘false rein’ became a part of training the horse, in fact the horse was ‘mouthed’ though this noseband, with control being passed gradually onto the curb rein as training progressed. The focus on the curb bit remained up to the 19th and 20th century, until Caprilli’s modern school of cavalry training developed the forward style of riding and insisted on riding in a snaffle - the bit of choice for the large majority of riders today. Though the snaffle is often still seen as the precursor to introducing the curb, most riders never take this step and remain in a snaffle for their entire riding lives.



Weymouth bit



Any bit with long shanks- Weymouth, Pelham, Dutch Gag, Elevator bits- employ a leverage effect - a tightened curb chain acts on a nerve that runs under the jaw and combined with the action of the mouthpiece, encourages relaxation and flexion of the jaw, and retraction of the nose.

a snaffle can be classified as a bit with no curb or poll pressure, and whose primary influence is as a ‘lifting’ bit. The bit acts firstly on the horse’s lips in an upward action, then as the horse flexes more at the poll as his education advances, the pressure on the bars is increased. By introducing nosebands and martingales, the action and pressures of the simple snaffle is altered and its effect strengthened.

The most obvious division within the group, is the jointed or mullen (straight bar) mouth mouthpieces. The jointed mouthpiece, particularly a lozenged or French link with curved arms lessens the common nutcracker effect of the single link, while also reducing the tongue pressure and possible pinching of the mullen mouth.

**THE LEVERAGE OR CURB BITS**

Again, these bits have wide variations within the group, from long shanked western styles to the Weymouth in a double bridle, the Pelham and the misnamed Dutch Gag. Leverage bits employ pressures to the poll, and if a curb chain or strap is fitted it also applies pressure to the curb groove. A tightened curb chain acts on a nerve that runs under the jaw and combined with the action of the mouthpiece, encourages relaxation and flexion of the jaw, and retraction of the nose. Any bit with long shanks- Weymouth, Pelham, Dutch Gag, Elevator bits- employ a leverage effect

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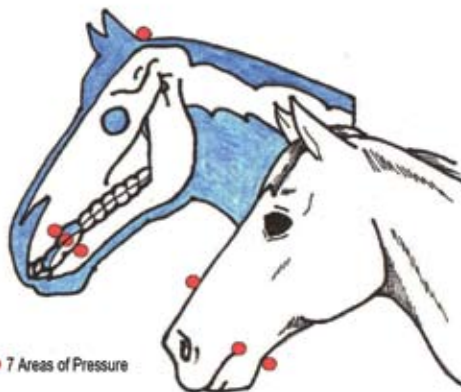


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● 7 Areas of Pressure

*All bits can affect the horse across any one or more of seven parts of the horse's head. They are the lips, the bars, the palate, the nose, the curb groove, the tongue and the poll.*

with pressure on the poll and across the lower jaw increasing with the length of the shanks.

### GAG BITS

Contrary to popular thought, the Dutch Gag is not a gag, but really works as a leverage bit, employing sometimes severe poll pressure and force across the lower jaw, thus creating a head lowering effect. Ideally, a Dutch gag of the 3 or 4 ring variety would be ridden with two reins (one of the snaffle, and one on the leverage rings) to prevent overbending and give relief to the horse from constant pressure.



Photo supplied by [www.nobitbridles.com](http://www.nobitbridles.com)

*Bitless bridles employ more subtle forces than bitted bridles and mimic the use of a snaffle bit. This NoBit bridle does not work like a hackamore, use nose pressure or inflict pain on a horse with normal use.*

A true Gag bit has a head lifting action. The cheekpieces of the bridle run through holes in the bit rings directly onto the reins. When rein pressure is applied, the bit runs

*Riviera Kieffer* *Prestige Vega* *HOY*

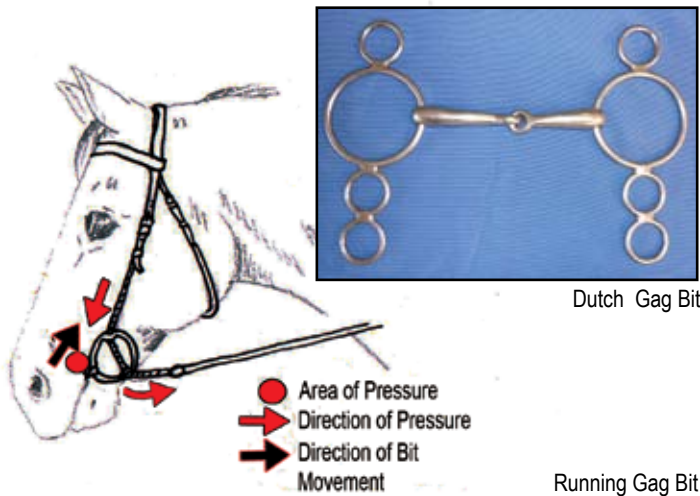
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Dutch Gag Bit



Running Gag Bit

The severity of this bit is governed by the nature of the rider's hand. A true Gag bit has a head lifting action, which works almost entirely on the horse's lips, though there is some poll pressure, with little or no tongue or bar pressure.

along these cheekpieces so as to draw the mouthpiece upwards in the horse's mouth. The action of the gag is almost entirely on the horse's lips, though there is some poll pressure, with little or no tongue or bar pressure. (Adding martingales, tight nosebands etc alter this action) It is simply a snaffle bit that further accentuates the lifting action. The severity of this bit is governed by the nature of the rider's hands and is in direct ratio to the competence of the rider. Ideally, the cheekpieces should have a stop fitted to limit the upwards action of the bit, and a second rein used on the bit rings so as to employ the gag action only when necessary. It is an example of mechanical means to produce a strong system of control, and has a place in competition riding when used by sympathetic hands.

### NOSE-BRIDLES OR BITLESS BRIDLES

This is definitely a field where there are many variations. From the hackamore, bosals, and now 'combination bridles' that employ both the nose action and the action of a bit, this is the subject area of an entire series of articles in itself! The traditional hackamore is not necessarily as kind an option as it first appears, as it applies pressure on the poll, the nose and the curb groove. The strength of this action depends again on the length of the shank, but either way, the hackamore is a powerful method of control. Recent developments of the bitless bridles employ more subtle forces and mimic the use of the snaffle bridle, as well as giving more directional control than the Hackamore.

As with all types of bit, the action and severity of its use depends on three main factors: the competence of the rider, the horse's mouth conformation and correct fitting of the bit.

Part 2 on biting will look at a logical pre-biting checklist and assessing the horse's mouth and suitability for a particular type of bit.

### About The Author

Anita Marchesani is the founder and operator of Bit Bank Australia and Bella Equestrian, and is an advocate for a holistic approach to biting the horse. Her equestrian experience is largely in the field of eventing. For more information visit the web site: [www.bellaequestrian.com.au](http://www.bellaequestrian.com.au)



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