

The Snaffle

PART 4 OF BITS AND BITTING

by Anita Marchesani
Photo by Carol Willcocks

The most commonly used bits for today's riders, the Snaffle is a single mouthpiece bit with direct action from the hand to the mouth.

In modern riding the snaffle is the largest of the four biting groups and is certainly the most common type of bit seen. Whereas in the past, training a horse in a snaffle was the precursor to introducing the double bridle, these days - for the large majority of modern riders- a snaffle bit is all they will use and need throughout their riding career.

There is a tremendous variety of bits that fall under the umbrella of being called a snaffle, and certainly a few more that are misnamed as snaffle as well! For the purpose of this article, and for most English style riding, the definition of a snaffle is a single mouthpiece bit, with a direct action from the hand to the mouth. There is no leverage action and no curb. However, the exact action of the snaffle is largely governed by two things: the position of the head in relation to the position of the hand, and the action and effect of any auxiliary aids to the bit such as nosebands, martingales etc.

As the horse begins work in a longer frame, with the head in front of the vertical, the action of the bit is largely on the corners of the lips, asking for lift. With the head just in front of the

vertical, the pressures are across the lower jaw and to some degree on the lips, encouraging flexion and some retraction of the nose. In the more advanced frame, with the head on or close to vertical, the pressure is almost entirely across the lower jaw, with a sympathetic raising of the hand playing on the lips to correct the outline and head carriage if necessary.

Variations can be seen in both the shapes and designs of the mouthpieces, and the cheek pieces. The various mouthpieces can be found with a variety of cheek pieces, depending on the needs of the horse and rider.

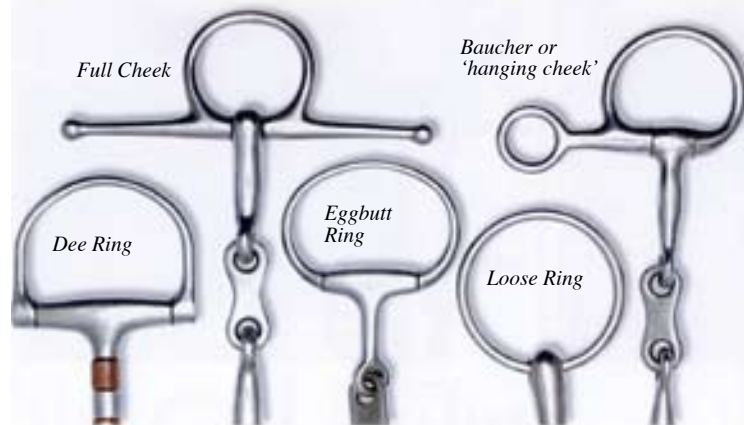
MOUTHPIECE VARIATIONS WITHIN THE GROUP

The jointed snaffle comes in many variations. The single joint with simple straight stainless steel arms is a very familiar bit to riders. While still commonly used, it has fallen out of favour somewhat in recent years. This is largely due to discussions regarding the so-called 'nutcracker effect' the bit can have in the mouth. As a contact is taken, the arms and rings come closer together, squeezing the lower jaw, while the lifting of the joint may impinge on the horse's palate, depending on the angle of bit to hand. However, a lot of horses go very well in a single joint bit- some prefer it as this style of bit does not rest primarily on the tongue.

Any bit with a double joint- Lozenge, French plate, roller centre etc- works to eliminate the 'nutcracker action' and to increase rider communication via the tongue. The inward squeezing is eliminated and there is a more even pressure across the tongue and jaw. The increased pressure across the tongue can lead to the horse coming behind the vertical if this bit is not ridden sympathetically.

The straight bar or Mullen mouth (slight curve) snaffle is the 3rd main type of snaffle mouth. This type of bit by its construction will never impact the palate and rests entirely on the tongue. There is pressure on the lower jaw in horses with thinner tongues, and the chance of pinching of the tongue between the bit and bars in a horse with a fatter tongue. The Mullen mouth style has the advantage of sitting very still in the mouth and can encourage a tentative horse to take more contact. The drawback is there is very little independent side action possible.

There are now ported snaffles available- the Sprenger Conrad Correction and Schooling snaffles being two examples. This bit is basically a straight bar (unjointed) snaffle with a raised port to allow more room for the tongue and increase the pressure of the bit on the lower jaw.



VARIATIONS IN CHEEK PIECES

The most common snaffle in modern riding is the jointed, loose ring snaffle. The loose rings give the bit some play in the mouth, and for a skilled rider the aids can be very refined and subtle due to this play. The loose ring can help to prevent a horse from leaning and fixing into the contact, but some horses dislike the movement- particularly with a rider with unsteady hands sending mixed messages.

Continued

Aids to the Bit



The Pessoa

There are various biting aids that once applied will alter the effect of a snaffle, or any bit. These include martingales, both running and standing, draw or running reins, side reins, the various training reins available (De Gougue, Pessoa, Chambon, Market Harborough etc) and of course nosebands.

Applying almost any noseband will support the lower jaw as a contact is taken, and to some degree transfer pressure to the nose. A well selected and well made noseband will assist with ensuring the bit acts 'correctly' within the mouth by preventing excessive opening of the jaw, either through resistance or fatigue. It is important to consider if the choice of noseband is helping or hindering the action of a chosen bit, whatever style. A martingale assists with keeping the horse's head at a low enough level to effectively communicate the rein aids. In the case of a running martingale, the reins are passed through rings that engage if the horse's head comes up high enough for a direct rein action from the hand to be ineffective. The rings then ask for head lowering through some poll pressure and downward pressure across the jaw. With the less common standing martingale, the head is restricted by an attachment direct to the noseband rather than the bit.

Running or draw reins are used somewhat controversially by riders, and in most circles a heated debate often rages when they are discussed. By applying pressure through the bit in a restraining way, a head lowering effect is achieved. The popular Pessoa system essentially uses these pressures without the rider on board.

Market Harborough



Chambon

Snaffle Bits continued...

The Eggbutt cheek is again very common. It is helpful for horses that are unsure about taking the contact, as the fixed cheeks hold the mouthpiece very still in the mouth. It is also useful for riders with unsteady hands for this same reason. Eggbutt cheeks are often slightly oval in shape, and a little larger than loose rings giving the bit more weight (again, preventing excess movement in the mouth) and can help in preventing the bit being pulled through the mouth.

The Full Cheek snaffle has bars extending from the mouthpiece. These bars can assist with flexions and turning aids by acting on the side of the head. The FM (also called a Fulmer, or Australian Full Cheek) features extending bars and a loose ring. Named after Franz Maringer, this snaffle combines the benefits of the play of the loose ring, and the assistance of the extended cheeks for flexions.

A well made Full Cheek or FM bit will have the upper cheek curving slightly away from the horse for safety and comfort, and many riders choose to ride in a FM with keepers to assist with keeping the mouthpiece on the correct angle within the mouth.

The Dee ring is another fixed cheek style of bit. It gives some pressure to the sides of the face, as with a full cheek.

The Baucher (pronounced boo-SHAY as French, but commonly BAU-chur), also called the "hanging cheek", is still classed as a snaffle. The extended cheek with loop to attach the cheek pieces of the bridle to, are said to apply poll pressure and create a more rounded head carriage. The Baucher does apply some poll pressure, but due to the position for the mouthpiece on the cheeks in relation to the length of the cheek below it, this pressure is very mild.

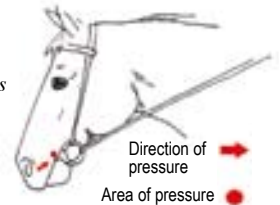
Compare the position of the mouthpiece on a Pelham, Kimblewick or curb to the rein placement on those bits and you will see the difference in leverage force applied. Leverage comes from extensions BELOW the mouthpiece, which the Baucher does not have, unless of course it is incorrectly put on the horse upside down. What the Baucher can do well, is offer a still mouthpiece, slightly lifted off the tongue by the extended cheeks, with a gentle reminder via the poll to retract the nose and lower the head. It is FEI legal as a snaffle.

VARIATIONS IN CONSTRUCTION

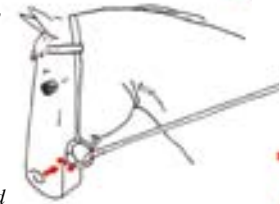
Snaffles can be made out of variety of materials, and each variation offers something different to the horse. The most common is stainless steel- strong, easy to manufacture and can be polished to a high sheen for appearances. It is however, a very cold metal which some horses dislike. Copper Alloy bits are those with a gold sheen. They are not coated, but solid and some common examples are Sprenger's Aurigan and Neue Schule's Salox Gold

HEAD ANGLES TO REIN PRESSURE

A 'long and low' or young horse outline with the bit acting primarily on the corners of the lips in a lifting action.



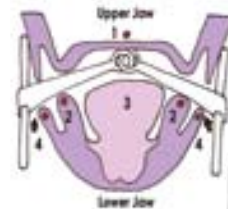
The training progresses and the outline changes to a higher head carriage and the head closer to the vertical. In this outline, the bit acts less on the corners of the lips and more across the lower jaw, encouraging flexion and retraction of the nose.



The more advanced outline with the head on or just in front of the vertical and the bit acting primarily across the lower jaw.



Below: Snaffle in the mouth. Red dots indicate areas of pressure, including possible interference with the upper palate.



- 1 Palate;
- 2 Bars;
- 3 Tongue;
- 4 lips

Right: Lozenge link snaffle in the mouth.



mouthpieces. Copper is a softer metal than steel, so it is combined with other metals to create an alloy of suitable tensile strength. Often the rings and cheeks are still manufactured from Stainless steel, as this metal is less likely to wear over time. The copper content promotes salivation as it oxidizes, and creates a pleasant taste for the horse.

Sweet Iron bits are made from solid iron with stainless steel rings. The iron oxidizes and rusts, giving a taste for the horse that most find very palatable and can assist with acceptance of the bit.

Rubber mouthpieces come in a few different versions. There is the soft, bendy rubber, the hard vulcanite rubber, and rubber coated jointed bits. Horses that dislike metal bits may be more accepting of a rubber mouth. Straight bar rubber bits should always still have a steel core through the centre for safety reasons.

A further development on the rubber mouth bits are the Nathe and Happy Mouth Bits. Having a steel core, these bits are made from a slightly flexible plastic that is warm, more palatable, with some give and softness, and are often readily accepted by the horse.



The Happy Mouth

Mullen snaffle

Dr Bristol

Lozenge Link

Single Link snaffle

The Happy Mouth: A plastic mouthpiece with a steel core- it has slight 'give' and bend.

Mullen snaffle: A single bar with a gentle curve through the mouthpiece. This bit will sit very still in the mouth, but you do therefore lose some of the more finessed aids.

Dr Bristol snaffle: Showing the wider central plate set on an angle to sit the narrow edge into the tongue rather than sit the plate flat across the mouth like a French snaffle.

Lozenge Link snaffle: Gives a more even pressure across tongue and jaw.

For example, there is the Dr Bristol snaffle, which appears to be a french link, but on close inspection the link is angled to press sharply into the tongue, and is a strong method of control for pullers. The Twisted Wire snaffle, depending on the sharpness of the angles is a very severe bit with a high potential for damage through careless riding. The Waterford snaffle again appears to be very severe but when used by a rider with good hands on a well-educated horse it can be a good solution for a strong puller. Roller snaffles can help a horse relax through the jaw by encouraging it to play with the rollers. All these bits have a direct action- from hand to mouth- but their construction makes the resulting forces applied very different to what most people think of when discussing snaffles. Then there are a number of bits that are simply incorrectly named as snaffle. A 'Spanish Snaffle' is not accurately named,

and should be called by the correct name of a Kimblewick. This bit has a curb chain and works on leverage, hence is not a direct action bit and cannot be included in the snaffle family. The '3 Ringed Snaffle' (Dutch gag) and 'Argentine Snaffle' (leverage bit) are other examples. Western bits are called a snaffle if the bit has a simple jointed mouthpiece, regardless of the cheek piece action.

In English riding disciplines, it is important to remember that a snaffle is a bit that acts on direct action- the pressure you apply through your hands is what is transferred to the horse's mouth.

WHEN IS A SNAFFLE NOT A SNAFFLE?

Riders have the idea that when they are buying a bit called a snaffle it is a kind bit. There are some variations that are technically defined as a snaffle, but should generally not be used for daily riding or bought under the misconception of buying a 'snaffle'.

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.bitbankaustralia.com.au



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