

# North Dakota 4-H Horse Shows

## Bit Rule Examples and Explanations

The following pages include the bit rules from the current North Dakota 4-H Horse Show Rules and Judges Guide (GBH092), some further explanations, and many examples of bits and mouthpieces.

Text written in this style are the rules taken directly from the rulebook.

Further explanations of the rules are in blue boxes written in text of this style.

Pictures show examples of bits that are labeled as:

- Acceptable
- Acceptable as long as measurements that cannot be judged by the picture meet allowances
- Not allowed

Please understand that this supplement gives only some *examples* of legal and unacceptable bits. **In no way does it try to include every bit that is allowed or not allowed.** The explanations should describe the intent/purpose of the rules to help draw a conclusion for bits not included. If any discrepancies occur between this and the printed rulebook text, the printed rulebook will have precedence.

The supplement is designed in the same approach as the rulebook. Each division has its own section with no cross-referencing to another. Some examples are repetitive when looking at it beginning to end. You should be able to pull out any one section and have what you need for the division. (Exceptions: As in the rulebook, a section applies to the western, ranch and speed events, then they each have separate additional sections.)

*Edited and revised with permission from the University of Florida for North Dakota 4-H Rules by the North Dakota 4-H Equine Advisory Committee.*



# The Snaffle Bit

1. **North Dakota 4-H GBH092 Page 10:** Reference to **snaffle bits** means the conventional O-ring, egg-butt or D-ring with the cheek piece ring no larger than 4 inches in diameter. The sign " refers to inches. The inside circumference of the ring must be free of rein, curb or headstall attachments that would provide leverage. The mouthpiece should be round, oval or egg-shaped, **smooth** and **unwrapped** metal. It may be inlaid but must be **smooth** or latex-wrapped. The bars must be a minimum of 5/16" in diameter, measured 1" in from the cheek with a gradual decrease to the center of the snaffle. The mouthpiece may be two or three pieces. A three-piece connecting ring of 1¼" or less in diameter, or a connecting flat bar of 3/8" to 3/4" (measured top to bottom) with a maximum length of 2", which lies **flat** in the horse's mouth, are acceptable. A loose chin strap (fit two fingers between the horse's jaw and the chin strap) of leather or nylon must be attached below the reins. Split reins must be used with two hands on the reins.

## What does it mean? Snaffle Rings

The shape of the snaffle ring (**cheek piece**) outside of the horse's mouth is **unrelated** to the style of **mouthpiece** on the inside of the bit. You cannot determine what is in the mouth by the shape of the cheek piece ring. The acceptable shapes are O-ring, egg-butt and D-ring. Regardless of which shape, the ring may not be more than 4" across at its widest point.



More on mouthpieces after the next rule.

Many different types of snaffle bits are available. The basic structure is the same for all, and the basic action in the horse's mouth is similar, with some subtle modifications. The snaffle bit is regarded as a relatively mild bit. The addition of wire wrapping (illegal in 4-H competition because the mouthpiece must be **smooth** and **unwrapped**) or different twists in the metal (also illegal in 4-H competition because a twist is **not** a smooth mouthpiece) make the snaffle much harsher. A snaffle bit has the single ring on each side, which applies direct pressure to the sides of the mouth. The snaffle is designed to slide across your horse's mouth without pitching. A snaffle bit often is used as a starting tool for young horses and training aged mounts in different riding programs.

**North Dakota 4-H GBH092 Pages 12 and 13** explain the age that a snaffle bit is appropriate for when showing your horse during competition. A **junior horse** is considered to be a horse that is 5 years or younger. Junior horses are allowed to be shown in a snaffle bit, bosal, curb bit, half-breed or spade bit (Page 12, No. 9a). A **senior horse** is considered to be a horse that is 6 years old or older. At the age of 6, the horse is to be out of a training aid (snaffle) and can no longer be shown in a snaffle bit during competition. A senior horse may be shown **only** in a curb bit (described below), half-breed or spade bit with one hand on the reins (Page 13, No. 9b).

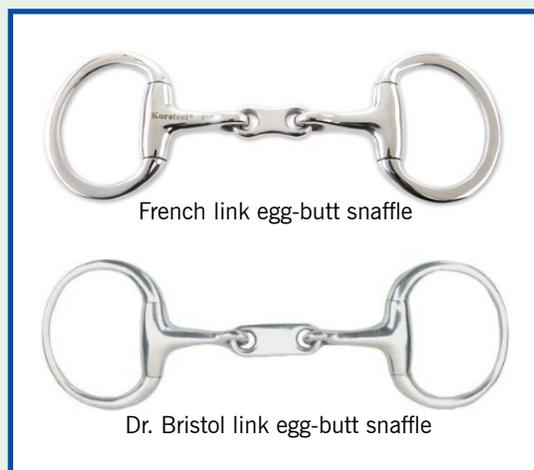
## What Happens When You ‘Pull’ the Rein on a Snaffle Bit?

When the reins are pulled using a snaffle, a pressure is applied to the area of the gums that have no teeth called the **bars** of the mouth. The bar is the gap between the front teeth and the back teeth on each side of the mouth. A properly fitting bit sits comfortably within the gap, just forward of the back teeth. Wolf teeth often get in the way of where the bit sits and should be pulled for the comfort of the horse.

Snaffle bits are lateral mechanisms made to be used laterally – side to side. As you pull straight back with the snaffle bit, the horse will understand that equal pressure on both sides of its mouth, which is an effective way to teach a horse to give and yield his head (and thus his feet) laterally. A pull to the right, which applies pressure on the right bar, means turn to the right, and a pull to the left means turn to the left. Combining rein aids with your seat and leg aids is critical. Ideally, ride from your seat and legs first before using your hands and rein pressure.

Bits with jointed mouthpieces will have a nutcracker effect, while straight mouthpieces spread the pressure evenly over the tongue and bars of the mouth. For example, the egg-butt snaffle will have oval rings, and the mouthpiece will get thicker as it approaches the rings. These bits are among the mildest because they distribute the pressure of the rein aid over a wider area of the bars due to the thicker circumference of the mouthpiece. A horse with a large tongue or low palate might be uncomfortable in a bit with a thick mouthpiece.

When you put a bit in your horse’s mouth, you might look at it and think, “Yeah, looks good to me,” but the position **you** see it from may not be the position in which it will sit once your bit is in the horse’s mouth. When contact is taken up on the reins, the mouthpiece will rotate in the mouth. This often is called the “working angle” and the position that really matters when choosing a bit. The French link is a joint making the snaffle more than one piece (a three-piece with a connecting ring in the mouthpiece) and is considered the mildest jointed snaffle. Although they look very similar, the Dr. Bristol link is more severe because of the way the jointed plate in the middle lies in constant contact with the horse’s tongue. The French link is designed to lie smoothly on the horse’s tongue. A correctly designed Dr. Bristol link is long, thin and at a slight angle. A proper Dr. Bristol is designed



to be used in two ways: It can lie flat in the mouth similar to the French link or it can be at a 45-degree angle. A three-piece snaffle allows the rider independent control over the two sides of the horse’s mouth. It also transfers rein pressure more evenly over the bars. A double-jointed bit is ideal for horses with a low palate as it lies flat over the horse’s tongue. This generalized pressure over the tongue can be much easier for a young horse to accept as opposed to a single-jointed snaffle. When pressure is applied in a single-jointed snaffle, a “nutcracker” effect can take place, driving up into the palate and possibly pinching the mouth.

**The value of a chin/curb strap** – Often the perception is that a chin strap, often called a curb strap, is used only with a leverage bit. On a snaffle, a chin strap will be very effective in keeping the bit from pulling all the way through the horse’s mouth when using one rein. It need not be adjusted tightly.

**Adjustments** – Riders have many perceptions on the adjustment of the snaffle bit of how tight or loose it is in your horse’s mouth. Personally, I prefer the snaffle to hang slightly lower than some riders are accustomed to seeing. I adjust it just below where it would cause a wrinkle in the corner of my horse’s mouth. I do not want a constant pressure against my horse’s mouth that he cannot get away from.

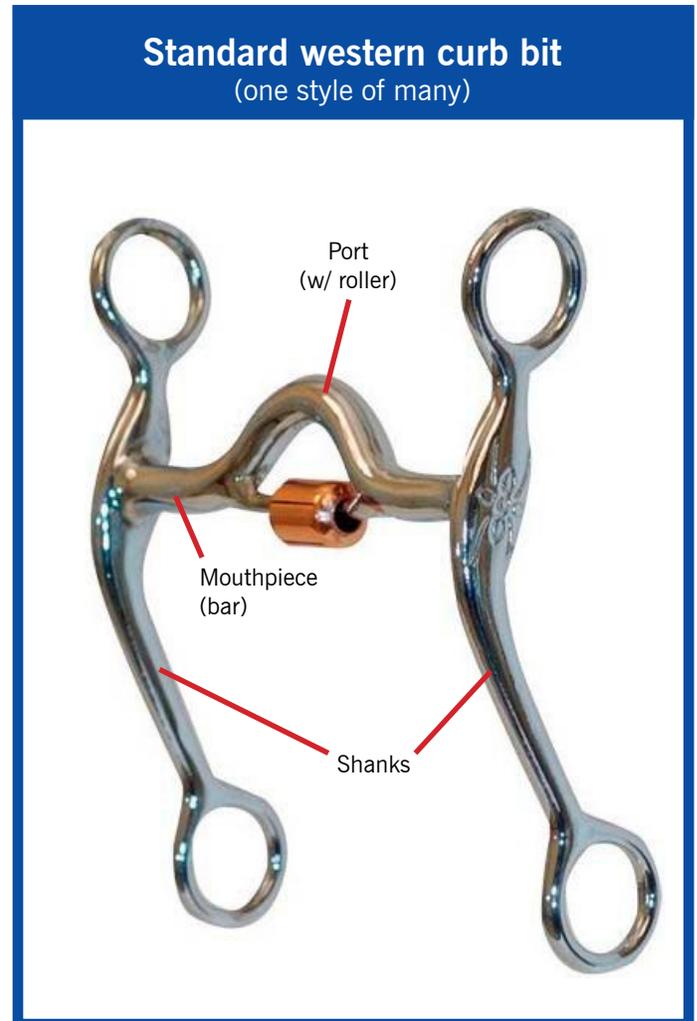
**\*\*IMPORTANT\*\* Mildness and severity of any bit is in our own hands and the feel we apply to the mechanism. Any bit can be abused by those who lack understanding and horsemanship skills. Do some research on the bits that you are choosing to utilize on your horse(s). Deciding which bit to use for your horse is an essential aspect of horsemanship that can be difficult for any equestrian.**

*For more types of legal and illegal snaffle mouth pieces for 4-H competition, please see below.*

# The Curb Bit

2. **North Dakota 4-H GBH092 Page 9:** References to a **curb bit** refer to a solid or broken mouthpiece that **has shanks** and acts with leverage. All curb bits must be free of mechanical devices and are considered a standard western bit. A description of a legal, standard western bit includes:

- A. Shanks, fixed or loose, 8½" maximum in length, shank to be measured as indicated in the diagram on **Page 10** of the rule book illustrating legal bit dimensions. (you also can find measurements below)
  - Shanks may **not** allow the mouthpiece to slide up and down. When the shanks allow for the mouthpiece to slide up and down, this is considered a gag bit. Gag bits are allowed only in speed events.
- B. Mouthpiece bars must be round, oval or egg-shaped, smooth and unwrapped metal of 5/16" to 3/4" in diameter, measured 1" in from the cheek.
- C. They may be inlaid, but must be **smooth or latex-wrapped**. Nothing may protrude below the mouthpiece (bar), such as extensions or prongs on solid mouthpieces.
- D. The mouthpiece may be two or three pieces. A three-piece, connecting ring of 1¼" or less in diameter, or a connecting flat bar of 3/8" to 3/4" (measured top to bottom) with a maximum length of 2", which lies flat in the horse's mouth.
- E. The port must be no higher than 3½" maximum.
- F. Rollers and covers are acceptable.
- G. Broken mouthpieces, half-breeds, grazing and spades are standard.
- H. When using a curb bit (regardless of the age of the horse), only one hand is permitted on the reins.
- I. A curb strap or chain is required and must be 1/2" wide and lie flat against the jaw. The curb strap may be leather, double-linked flat chain or extra-wide flat hunter-type single link chain. No other metal/wire is permitted under the jaw, regardless of how padded.



# Bit Anatomy and Terminology

Knowing your bit anatomy will help you identify the difference between a snaffle bit and a curb bit, and whether that bit is legal to ride with in a 4-H completion in North Dakota. When purchasing a bit, catalogue names and descriptions vary widely. Understanding the “action” of the bit, the anatomy of the bit and the proper terminology of a bit will be a powerful tool when selecting the right bit for your horse.

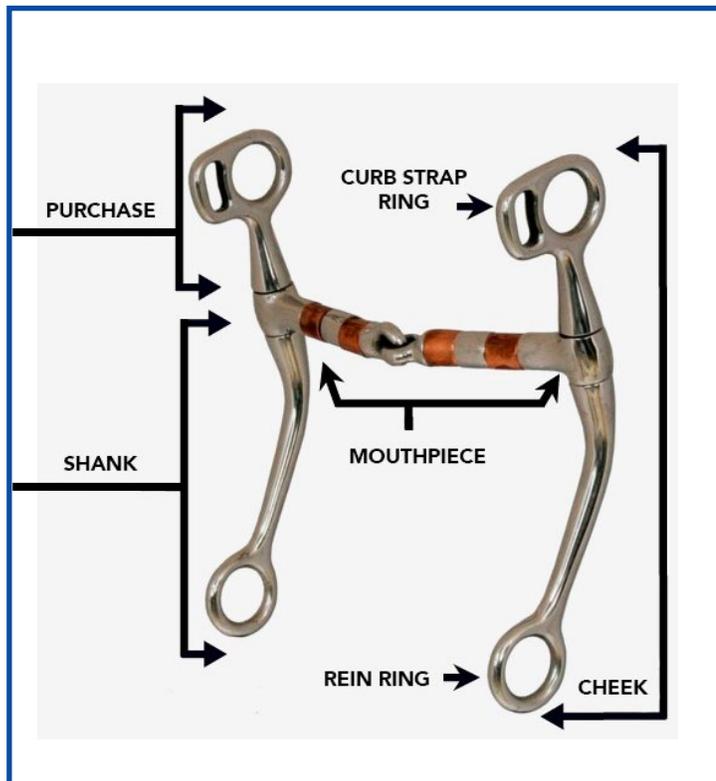


Illustration courtesy of [www.horsesaddleshop.com](http://www.horsesaddleshop.com)

**Purchase** – The part of the bit that is above the mouthpiece. This is where the headstall attaches. When the purchase is short, the bit will have a faster response to the rider’s hands when the rider pulls on the reins. When the purchase is longer, the bit will react to the rider’s hands more slowly.

**Shank** – The part of the bit below the mouthpiece. The shank is what gives you leverage on the mouthpiece when you pull on the reins. The shorter the shank, the less harsh. The longer the shank, the harsher the bit will be. For the purpose of measuring the shank in 4-H, you measure the total distance of the purchase plus the shank. Oftentimes, the purchase plus the shank equals the “Full Cheek” or “Cheek.”

**Full cheek or cheek** – The entire side of the curb bit combining the total measurement of the purchase and the shank (purchase plus shank equals cheek).

**Mouthpiece** – The part of the bit that goes into the horse’s mouth. The mouthpiece can be jointed/broken, double-jointed with a link, made up of many different materials and designed in many different ways.

**Port** – Ported mouthpieces have varying heights and widths. They also can swivel at the port.

## Points of control:

- Bridge of nose → hackamore, bosal, side pull, mechanical hackamore
- Chin area → curb chain or chin strap
- Corners of lips → ring snaffles, chain bits, gag bits
- Bars → any mouthpiece
- Roof of mouth (palate) → a port
- Poll → any bit that has a shank on it

**The feel of a bit** – Not only what the horse feels when the rider pulls on the reins, but also what the rider feels when pulling on the reins. For example, the rider may feel stiffness or suppleness.

**Timing** – The amount of time required from the point when the rider raises or pulls on the reins until the bit is engaged and performs as much as it can do.



**Ported Mouthpieces** have a curve to the mouthpiece, which may be low or high, narrow or wide. Ported bits put pressure on lips, tongue, roof of the mouth, and bars. Lower ports are similar to mullen mouthpieces; higher ports will press on the roof of the mouth. A wider port will offer more tongue relief.



**Swivel Mouthpieces** swivel on the shank. A swivel mouthpiece allows independent shank action. The swivel gives the mouthpiece a different action than a solid constructed bit.



**Jointed Mouthpieces**, also called **broken mouthpieces**, have a single joint in the center of the bit. Pressure is applied up and out to the top and front of the mouth. When the mouthpiece is pulled, it creates a V shape, applying pressure to the horse's tongue, lips and bars.

**Three-piece Snaffle Mouthpieces**, also called **double jointed bits**, create more of a U shape instead of a V, making it a more gentle mouthpiece than the single jointed. This mouthpiece applies pressure to the lips, tongue and bars of the mouth.

**Double Twisted Wire Snaffle Mouthpieces** are made up of two single jointed strands which are broken off-center of each other. Two strands amplify pressure on the bars of the horse. These bits are considered severe.

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**CHAIN**

**Chain Mouthpieces** do not work on the bars like a snaffle bit, but on the corners of the mouth. Chain mouthpieces should be made of high quality link chain, not bicycle chain, which is too severe.



**MULLEN**

**Mullen Mouthpieces** have a gentle outward curve to the mouthpiece, giving even pressure and allowing the tongue more room. They place pressure on the tongue, lips and bars. It does not have as much tongue relief as a ported bit, but is still considered a mild bit in experienced hands.



**TRIPLE MULLEN**

**Triple Barrel Mullen Mouthpieces** are flexible and forgiving when relaxed, solid with tongue pressure when engaged.

Illustration courtesy of [www.horsesaddleshop.com](http://www.horsesaddleshop.com)

## Types of Metal Bits

Does your horse have a particular bit “flavor” it likes? Bits come in different types of materials. Combinations of materials are not listed here. This is a list of the basic core materials of many bits.

- **Copper** – Copper warms quickly and is thought to promote the production of salivation. The salivation keeps the mouth wet, allowing for the ease of movement of the bit in the mouth and comfort of the bit in the horse’s mouth. Copper is a softer metal and can tend to wear more quickly and, thus, will not last as long as other metals. When the copper wears down, it can create sharp edges.
- **Sweet iron** – Sweet iron is not actually iron, but steel. This is a soft metal and does rust, creating a sweet taste in the horse’s mouth that can encourage salivation.
- **Rubber** – Rubber is a soft material similar to plastic but with more flexibility. Rubber can be destroyed easy by horses that tend to chew on the bit. Rubber often is used in younger horses. However, rubber bits are often too thick and, therefore, uncomfortable for most horses.
- **Stainless steel** – It is durable, moderate in price and neutral in taste. Stainless steel does not rust and is fairly lightweight, and can create a high-quality bit. It’s usually easy to keep clean.
- **Plastic** – Like rubber bits, plastics are often softer but can be bigger in diameter than a metal bit. Some plastic bits are scented and flavored.

**Finding the right bit for your horse can be a daunting task. The first thing to figure out is where you need to influence your horse and start there.**

# What does 'mouthpieces' mean?

The mouthpiece is what lays across your horse's tongue. Many of the parameters for mouthpieces are the same regardless if it is a snaffle or a curb bit. They need to be the same minimum diameter (5/16"), be smooth, may be broken into two or three pieces, and if they have a connecting flat bar or ring, those connectors must meet the same respective measurements. This does not mean the connecting piece has to be a ring or flat bar. The connecting piece also could be a roller or hinged port. Much of the determination of whether a mouthpiece is acceptable comes down to if it is smooth.

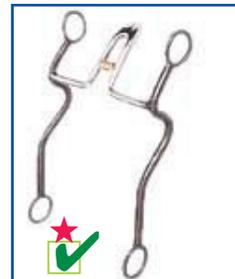
## What is "smooth"?

Smooth simply means that the mouthpiece has no bumps or ridges that will press into the bars of the horse's mouth or the pressure points on the tongue when pressure is applied. Things that make a mouthpiece not smooth may include (but are not limited to) any kind of twist, a wire wrap, carvings into the metal that create ridges, chain, anything that is inlaid into the metal, etc.

## Mouthpiece examples (applies to snaffle and curb bits):

|                                                                                     |                                                       |                                                                                                          |                                        |                                                                                       |                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
|    | ✓ Simple jointed, smooth                              |                                                                                                          |                                        |                                                                                       |                                                         |
|    | ★ If connecting bar is 3/8"-3/4" top to bottom        | ← Rollers on connector bar is acceptable.                                                                |                                        |                                                                                       |                                                         |
|   | ⊘ Not smooth                                          | ← Top is a fast twist or "corkscrew." Below is a slow twist. Both create numerous sharp pressure points. |                                        |                                                                                       |                                                         |
|  | ⊘ Not smooth                                          |                                                                                                          | ← Twists and loose links = not smooth. |                                                                                       |                                                         |
|  | ⊘ Not smooth                                          |                                                                                                          |                                        |                                                                                       |                                                         |
|  | ★ If connecting bar is 3/8"-3/4" top to bottom        | ← If the center link is a connecting flat bar, it must be 3/8"-3/4" top to bottom.                       |                                        |                                                                                       |                                                         |
|  | ⊘ Wire wrapped; "must be unwrapped metal," not smooth | ← Rule states "must be unwrapped metal." This includes wire-wrapped.                                     |                                        |                                                                                       |                                                         |
|                                                                                     |                                                       |                                                                                                          |                                        |    | ★ Connecting ring acceptable if less than 1 1/4" across |
|                                                                                     |                                                       |                                                                                                          |                                        |    | ⊘ Mouthpiece not smooth                                 |
|                                                                                     |                                                       |                                                                                                          |                                        |  | ⊘ Mouthpiece not smooth                                 |
|                                                                                     |                                                       |                                                                                                          |                                        |  | ✓ Metal inlay is smooth                                 |
|                                                                                     |                                                       |                                                                                                          |                                        |  | ✓ Copper inlay with roller                              |
|                                                                                     |                                                       |                                                                                                          |                                        |  | ⊘ Metal inlay is not smooth                             |

## Curb mouthpiece examples:

|                                                                                     |                                                                                     |                                                                                     |                                                                                      |                                                                                       |                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Half-breed                                                                          | Prong bit<br>Metal protruding below the bar causes sharp pressure points            | Port should measure 3 1/2" or less high and shanks 8 1/2" or less long              | All three of these examples have acceptable three-piece mouthpieces.                 |                                                                                       |                                                                                       |

## What Happens When You ‘Pull’ the Rein on a Curb Bit?

Bits provide one of the major points of control when riding horses. Knowledge of horse behavior and training principles used to modify behavior must be considered when selecting bits. The biting process is a continual process of training, which through repetitive and step-wise training, teaches horses to accept bits and properly respond to bit pressure.

Curb bits are a standard piece of equipment for any western rider, English and the driving world. The curb bit is a leverage bit usually used in the more finished horse. The curb bit works by increasing the amount of pressure applied by the rider. Five pounds of pressure might feel like 15 pounds of pressure to the horse. Unlike snaffle bits, which operate by direct pressure on the bars of the horse’s mouth, curb bits affect the lower jaw, tongue, poll, palate if the bit has a port, and the chin groove.

### Shanks

The length of the shank determines how much leverage the bit has. The longer the shank, the greater the leverage. This is why using long-shanked curb bits with light contact and use by more experienced riders with light hands is critical. The angle of the shank determines the promptness of a cue. A straight shank provides an almost instant cue when the reins are raised, while a swept-back shank allows for more time before the bit is engaged by your hand. Swivel shanks often are used for horses that are transitioning from a snaffle bit to a curb bit, working to improve the communication with the sides of a horse’s mouth.

### Port

The port is used for horses with advanced training. The port of a curb bit provides tongue relief to the horse and comes in a variety of shapes. The higher the port, the greater tongue relief. However, if the port is greater than 2 inches, it now adds an additional function of applying pressure to the roof (palate) of the horse’s mouth. The palate pressure encourages the horse to lower its head and flex at the poll. Cathedral, spade and correction bits generally feature high ports. Some curb bits have copper rollers to promote salivation.

### Curb Strap

The curb strap is engaged when the reins are lifted, simultaneously applying pressure to the chin groove and pulling the bit down against the bars of the horse’s mouth. A looser curb strap allows for a more gradual cue.

You should be able to fit two fingers between the jaw and the curb strap when the bit is at rest.

**\*\*IMPORTANT\*\*** Regardless of the bit selected, the rider’s hands are the most important factor in influencing the severity and effectiveness of the bit. Correct use of hands is critical in determining bit performance. In most instances, the problems perceived as resulting from not having the correct bit are in reality training problems. In many instances, using the appropriate bit can enhance the training process. However, using an inappropriate bit may produce undesired responses such as resistance to pressure, head shaking, excessive mouthing of the bit, excessive reaction to the bit (such as rearing) or overflexing at the poll. Finding a bit that works well for both horse and rider based on the level of experience is important to avoid damaging the horse’s mouth.

# The Chin Strap

3. A curb bit must be used with a curb strap or curb chain properly attached so as to make contact with horse's chin. Chain curb straps must be at least 1/2" in width and **lie flat** against the jaw of the horse. No wire curbs, regardless of how taped or padded. Absolutely no rigid material will be permitted under the jaws, regardless of how padded or covered. No rawhide or round leather is permitted.

**A BIT OF ADVICE:** Your horse's chin is sensitive. The curb strap provides another point of pressure when the reins are pulled. Check to see that you can fit two fingers between your curb strap and your horse's jaw. This allows the curb strap to relax, releasing the pressure off the sensitive "chin groove" area.



## Examples: Curb Straps



✓ All of the above curb straps are acceptable

## The curb straps below are NOT acceptable



✗ Chain altered to create lumps; does not lie flat against the jaw



✗ Rigid bar added to chain



✗ Chain less than 1/2" wide



✗ Braided leather does not lie flat

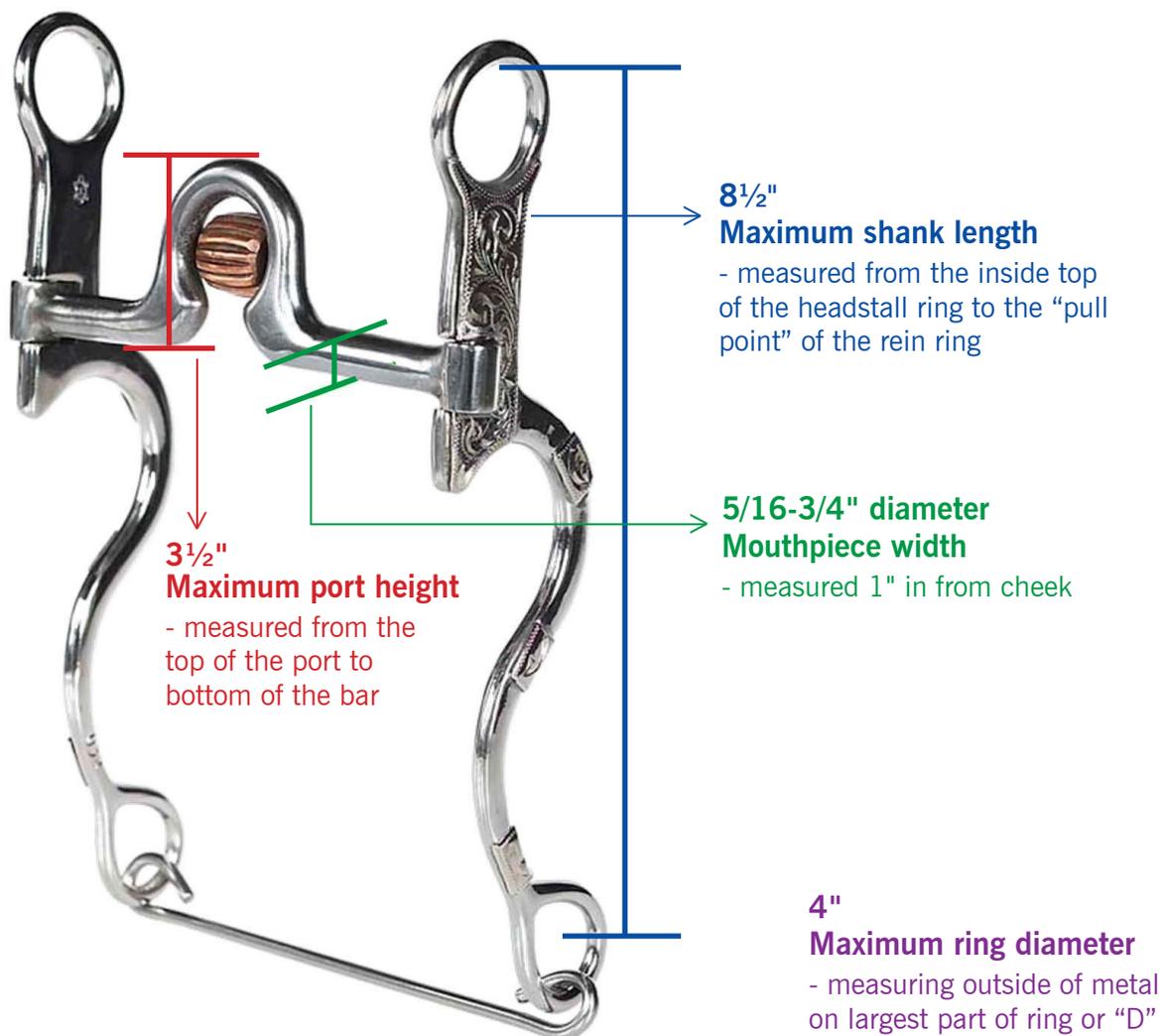


✗ Braided nylon less than 1/2" wide; does not lie flat against the jaw



✗ Chain is less than 1/2" wide; nylon does not lie flat against the jaw

# Bit Measurement



## Connecting ring or flat bar on either curb or snaffle:

Connecting ring, 1 1/4" maximum diameter



Connecting flat bar, 3/8-3/4" maximum, measured top to bottom

# The Hackamore and Bosal

1. **North Dakota GBH092 – Pages 11 and 12 – hackamore and bosal.** References to a hackamore mean the use of a non-mechanical flexible, braided rawhide or leather, or rope bosal, the core of which may be either rawhide or flexible cable. Absolutely no rigid material will be permitted under the jaws, regardless of how padded or covered. A hackamore/bosal in the western and ranch division must use a complete mecate rein, which must include a tie-rein. A mecate rein is ridden with two hands. Only junior horses (5 years old and younger) may be ridden in a bosal.

## What does it mean? Western Division Hackamores

Bosals are the only type of hackamore allowed in the western division. These are simple, flexible hackamores with no metal or working parts. A mechanical hackamore works off of leverage utilizing a shank of some length, whereas a bosal does not. Nothing over the nose or under the jaw may be rigid.

A mechanical hackamore can **only** be used in the speed event division.



Rawhide bosal



Horsehair bosal



Easy/Fast stop  
Rigid material under jaw



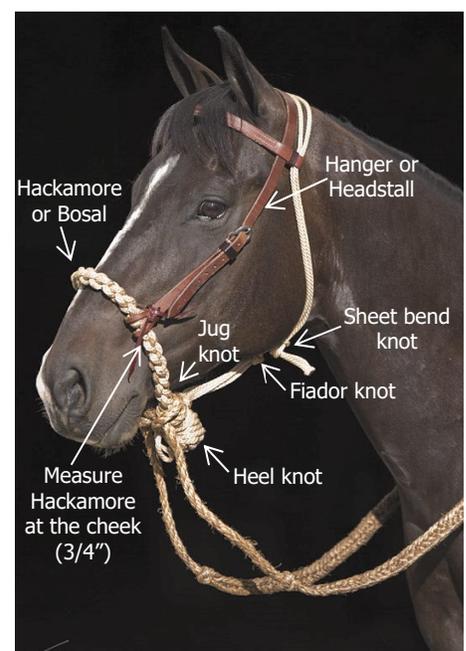
Mechanical hackamore



Fast stop  
Rigid material over nose;  
and mechanical

## The Bosal

Bosals, also called a hackamore, have a large knot (heel knot) at the back, behind the horse's chin. This knot on the bosal provides weight so that when a rider touches the mecate the shift in weight is noticeable to the horse putting pressure on the bridge of the nose. If measuring your hackamore for the National Snaffle Bit Association, the diameter of your bosal should be no more than  $\frac{3}{4}$ " diameter at the cheek. The hackamore needs to fit well to function correctly. It should sit half way between the eye and the nostril, with about 3" under the chin to give room for the hackamore to release at the heel. The mecate makes up the loop rein and the tie rope. It is adjusted to the pommel or the horn (using a clove hitch knot) so the tie rein is loose enough that the horse can move their head freely, but not so loose he could step on it.



Bosal illustration on this page is courtesy of [www.dmtack.com](http://www.dmtack.com)

# The Mechanical Hackamore

## Where's the Bit?

The mechanical hackamore is a piece of horse tack that is a type of bitless headgear for horses. The reins connect to a shank attached to the noseband. Most mechanical hackamores need a curb strap to be effective. Other names for the mechanical hackamore include “hackamore bit”, “brockamore”, “English hackamore”, “nose bridle”, and “German hackamore”.

The mechanical hackamore is **only acceptable for use during the speed events**.

## What does the mechanical hackamore do?

The shanks on a mechanical hackamore provide leverage. Rather than pressure being applied to the mouth, the mechanical hackamore has a noseband that communicates to pressure points on the tender bridge of the nose and a curb strap that communicates pressure to the sensitive parts of the chin. When pressure is applied to the shanks (pulling on the reins), the crown of the bridle is also pulled down on the horse's ears adding poll pressure.

The noseband and curb strap can be of a variety of different materials and widths designed to acquire different results. The nose of a horse is very sensitive. The wider and softer the noseband the more gentle it will be. In contrast, the metal or small braided rawhide or leather nosebands have a smaller surface area and can be more abrasive to the skin and nose. Often times these are covered with a fleece lining or padded with multiple layers of vet wrap. The lower the mechanical hackamore sits on the horse's nose, the more harm and possible scar tissue development can occur with heavy hands (heavy pulling on reins). The noseband of the mechanical hackamore is intended to rest on the facial bones, not the nasal cartilage, with the curb chain or strap fitting comfortably in the chin groove. As with the bosal, incorrect placement on the face either reduces the mechanical hackamore's effectiveness or positions its considerable leverage on the vulnerable nasal cartilage. Some designs include a bar or chain (known as a hobble) that connects the ends of the two shanks, stabilizing the unit for consistent leverage and preventing independent wobbling and swiveling of the shanks. The longer the shank the more severe the mechanical hackamore becomes.

Mechanical hackamores are not good for direct reining, leaving all effective directional signals to be sent by seat, legs and neck reining. Ideally, the lightest touch-and-release contact on the reins is all that is needed to slow, collect or halt a horse who is wearing a mechanical hackamore. As with any kind of bridle, riding with your seat and legs before relying on your hands is critical to insure you do not harm or damage your horse's nose. A hackamore can be very harsh if not used with soft hands. A mechanical hackamore can be a great tool if your horse's mouth is injured and cannot utilize a bit.



Fleece lined



“S” hackamore  
With cable hobble



Mullen hackamore  
combo  
Gag bit, hobble,  
curb strap



Leather braided  
With bar hobble



Flower shank  
Multi-ring position

# The Gag Bit

2. **North Dakota GBH092 – Page 13.** In horsemanship, western pleasure, ranch riding, reining or trail classes, gag bits, unorthodox or severe mouthpieces or pressure headstalls are not permitted

Gag bits, draw bits, slip bits, donut and flat polo mouthpieces are not acceptable in horsemanship, western pleasure, ranch riding or trail classes. These bits are only acceptable in timed events only.

North Dakota 4-H requires all mouthpieces of bits to be smooth, regardless of the type of bit for western events, this includes speed events.

## What does it mean? Slip/gag, Donut and Polo Mouthpieces

Slip bits, also known as a draw bit, will have rounded harness cheeks to allow the headstall to slide up the shank of the bit when pressure is applied (reins pulled), thereby increasing the leverage action in the mouth and putting additional pressure on the poll. The bit to the right is a gag and draw bit combination.

With gag bits, the sliding action of the bit applies most of the pressure to the horse's lips and corners of the mouth. Gag bits are often used to encourage elevation in the front end and to re-balance a horse before a jump or into the pocket on a barrel. Neither type of "gag action" is allowed in any event **except** for timed events only. A gag bit is too severe for a heavy-handed rider or a rider who does not have very good balance or a very good seat.

Flat polo mouthpieces are functionally the same as a Rutledge Roper. Neither are allowed in the western division.



Slip mouthpiece  
*Twisted = not smooth*



Short gag bit



Gag bit and slip bit  
*Gag/slip action not allowed*



Tender Touch Lifesaver  
*Ribbed = okay; no twist*



Gag bit  
*Sweet iron smooth mouth with copper roller*

## Take the bit challenge!

### Is this legal for 4-H western events?



**I bought this bit online:**

*Classic Equine Performance Series Smooth Snaffle Shank Bit*

Is this bit a curb or a snaffle?

**Description of bit:**

1. Shank is  $3\frac{3}{4}$ "
2. Mouth is 5"
3. Purchase is  $2\frac{1}{2}$ "
4. Full cheek is  $5\frac{1}{2}$ "

Can this bit be ridden with two hands?

Is this bit used for a junior or senior horse?

***\*\*answers are on following page\*\****

# The Romal

4. **North Dakota GBH092 – Page 13 – romal.** References to a romal mean an extension of braided material attached to closed reins. This extension may be carried in the free hand with an approximate 16" spacing between the reining hand and the free hand holding the romal. The rider's hand shall be around the reins with the fingers closed, thumb on top, and no fingers between the reins (similar to a fist, but the thumb is on top of your fist). Absolutely NO fingers may be between the reins of a romal or you will be disqualified.
5. The romal shall not be used forward of the cinch or to signal or cue the horse in any way. Any infraction of this rule shall be penalized severely by the judge.

## Examples: Romal Reins



Romal reins



✓ Correct romal hold



✗ Incorrect romal hold

## Is this bit legal answers:

### I bought this bit and the name of it is:

*Classic Equine Performance Series Smooth Snaffle Shank Bit*

Is this bit a curb or snaffle? – This is a **curb** bit because it has shanks.

1. Shank is 3¾" (4-H max shank is 8½")
  - a. **Be careful!** In this bit description from the seller, the seller considers the “shank” as only accounting for the length of the shank **below** the mouthpiece, **not** the entire length of the shank (purchase plus shank).
2. Mouth is 5" (4-H length of bit from one cheek to the next – no rule)
3. Purchase is 2½" (4-H – no rule, only when combined to equal full shank length)
4. Full cheek is 5½" (4-H max is 8½"; the “full cheek” is the same as a “full shank. In this case, this number is the shank plus the purchase)
  - a. This is the actual “**shank**” length. Therefore, this seller is using the term “full cheek” to describe the entire shank.

Can this bit be ridden with two hands? No it cannot. This bit can only be ridden one-handed.

Is this bit used for a junior or senior horse? This bit is used for a senior horse.

**\*\*YES! This is 4-H legal\*\***

# How to Hold Your Split Reins and Mecate Rein

3. Horses 5 years old and younger may be shown in a snaffle bit, hackamore, curb bit, half-breed or spade bit.

A. When using a snaffle bit, a loose hobble strap is optional (leather or nylon only, no chain). Reins to be attached above the hobble strap, if used.

B. Leather or woven split reins or mecate reins are acceptable with a snaffle bit.

C. Junior horses (5 years old and under) that are shown with a hackamore or snaffle bit may be ridden with two hands on the reins. The rider's hands should be carried near the pommel and not further than 4" out on either side of the saddle horn. Rider's hands must be steady with very limited movement. Rider's hands should be visible to the judge(s) at all times.

4. Horses 6 years old and older may only be shown in a curb bit, half-breed or spade bit.

A. Only one hand may be used on the reins, and hand must not be changed at any time. How you come in the arena is how you should remain. When using split reins, the hand is to be around the reins, and if desired only the **one** index finger may be between the reins. Violation of this rule is an automatic disqualification.

## Examples: holding snaffle/bosal reins



✓ Mecate rein – one-piece continuous rein; separate rope attached to saddle or belt



✓ Correct hold



✓ Correct hold



✗ Incorrect hold



✗ Incorrect hold



✗ Incorrect hold

## Examples: holding curb reins



✓ Correct hold



✓ Correct hold



✓ Correct hold



✗ Incorrect hold



✗ Incorrect hold

# Speed Event Division

1. **North Dakota GBH092 – Page 13 – timed events.** References to hackamore mean the use of either a mechanical or nonmechanical hackamore.
  - A. Non-mechanical: Flexible, braided rawhide or leather, or rope bosal, the core of which may be either rawhide or flexible cable.
  - B. Mechanical: The core may be any flexible cable, rawhide or metal material, and must be covered with leather, soft plastic tubing, or similar material for padding.
  - C. For either type of hackamore, absolutely no rigid material will be permitted over the nose or under the jaws, regardless of how padded or covered.

## What does it mean? Speed Events Hackamores

Bosals and mechanical hackamores are allowed in the speed event division. The materials over and under the nose must be flexible (North Dakota GBH092 Page 11, No. 8). No ridged material (such as metal) is permitted under the jaw regardless of how padded or covered.



Rawhide bosal



Mechanical hackamore  
OK in speed events



Easy/Fast stop  
Rigid material under jaw



Stop and Turn  
Rigid material under jaw



Fast stop  
Rigid material over nose

**Slip or gag bits** will be allowed provided the mouthpiece and shank requirements/limitations are met as described in the western and speed events section. “Rutledge Roper” bits will also be allowed.

Horses of any age may be shown with a snaffle bit in speed events. Riders may use two hands on the reins regardless of type of bit and age of horse. Any type or kind of rein is acceptable (roping or split rein; any kind of material). Judge may prohibit the use of bits or equipment deemed too severe.

## What does it mean? Slip/gag bits and Rutledge Roper

Gag bits allow the mouthpiece to slide up the shank when pressure is applied (reins pulled), thereby increasing the leverage action in the mouth. With slip bits, the reins (attached directly to the headstall) slide through the bit rings and pull the mouthpiece up in a similar fashion. Bits with this kind of “gag action” are allowed in speed events.

In **speed events**, flat mouthpiece Rutledge Roper bits are also acceptable. The mouthpiece should rotate freely on the shanks so it remains flat on the tongue when pressure is applied.



Rutledge Roper  
Speed events only



Wonder Bit  
Gag action OK



Gag action OK, but  
mouthpiece not smooth



Slip/  
draw  
bit  
Speed  
events  
only

# English Division

1. **North Dakota GBH092 – Page 15 – English Performance Tack.** An English snaffle (no shank), kimberwick, pelham or full bridle (Weymouth) must be used. If a bit is used that requires two reins, it may not be used with a converter. Snaffle bit rings may be no larger than 4" in diameter.

## What does it mean? Bit Types

Snaffles: The shape of the snaffle ring outside of the horse's mouth is unrelated to the style of mouthpiece on the inside. That is, you cannot determine what is in the mouth by the shape of the ring. The acceptable shapes are O-ring, egg-butt, D-ring and full cheek.



O-ring/Loose ring



Egg-butt



Offset D-ring



D-ring



Full cheek

**Pelhams and Kimberwicks** use a snaffle and/or curb action. A pelham has a shank and requires reins to be attached to the snaffle ring and curb ring.

Kimberwicks have "cut-outs" where a rein can be attached to either location – one resulting in more snaffle action and one with more curb action. Full bridles have separate curb and snaffle (bridoon) bits and require two reins.



Kimberwick  
two location options to  
attach one rein



Either rein attachment  
location is acceptable



Pelham with two reins  
Correct use of pelham



Pelham with converter  
Bit requires two reins, so cannot  
be used with converter

2. In reference to mouthpieces, nothing may protrude below the mouthpiece (bar) of the bit. Solid and broken mouthpieces must be between 5/16" to 3/4" in diameter, measured 1" from the cheek and may have a port no higher than 1 1/2".
  - A. Smooth round, oval or egg-shaped, and straight bar or solid mouthpieces are allowed. They may be smooth inlaid, synthetic wrapped (including rubber or plastic), or encased. Waterford bits are allowed. Snaffle bits with slow twist, corkscrew or single twisted wire mouthpieces are allowed.
  - B. On broken mouthpieces, connecting rings of 1 1/4" or less in diameter or connecting flat bar of 3/8" to 3/4" (measured top to bottom), which lie flat in the horse's mouth, or rollers are acceptable.
3. Any bit having a fixed rein requires use of a curb chain. Curb chain must be at least 1/2" wide and lie flat against the jaw of the horse.
4. Double-twisted wire, triangle (knife edge), true gag action and elevator bits are not allowed.

## What does it mean? Mouthpieces

Regardless of the type of bit (snaffle, pelham, kimberwick, etc.), mouthpieces must meet the same requirements – have a diameter of 5/16" to 3/4", may be solid (one piece) or broken (two or three pieces), and if they have a connecting ring or flat bar, those connectors must meet the same respective measurements. This does not mean the connecting piece has to be a ring or flat bar.

**English Division Only:** Because snaffle bits are the “norm” for hunters, mouthpieces with more and/or smaller contact points are allowed. So please keep in mind that many mouthpieces that are acceptable here are not allowed in the other divisions.

|                                                                                     |                                 |   |                                                                                                |   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
|    | ✓ Simple jointed, round, smooth |   |                                                                                                |   |
|    | ✓ Three-piece mouthpiece        | ← | Three-piece with connecting flat bar or roller. Smooth and within rules.                       |   |
|    | ✓ Roller in joint is acceptable |   |                                                                                                |   |
|    | ✓ Single twist                  | ← | Single twisted wire is acceptable in English division as long as minimum diameter is met.      |   |
|    | ✓ Single twist                  |   |                                                                                                |   |
|   | ✗ Wire wrapped                  |   |                                                                                                |   |
|  | ✗ Multiple links                | ← | Double twists and lose links not allowed.                                                      |   |
|  | ✗ Specifically disallowed       |   |                                                                                                |   |
|  | ✓ Port is less than 1½"         | ← | Three-piece with port as connector – within rules.                                             |   |
|  | ✓ Port is less than 1½"         | ← | One piece with wide port – within rules.                                                       |   |
|                                                                                     |                                 |   | Mouthpiece made of a series of rollers.                                                        | → |
|                                                                                     |                                 |   | Waterford bit is specifically listed as acceptable. Three smooth, round balls linked together. | → |
|                                                                                     |                                 |   | A fast twist or “corkscrew.”                                                                   | → |
|                                                                                     |                                 |   | A slow twist acceptable snaffles.                                                              | → |
|                                                                                     |                                 |   | Triangle or knife-edge bit. Sharp edge is very sharp on the bars and tongue not smooth.        | → |
|                                                                                     |                                 |   | Multiple rollers set in the mouthpiece result in many pressure points.                         | → |



✓ Waterford bit



✓ Specifically allowed



✓ Specifically allowed



✗ Shape specifically disallowed



✗ Mouthpiece not permitted, not smooth



✓ Mouthpiece permitted; smooth

## What does it mean? Gag vs. Elevator Bits



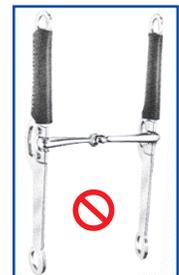
Gag bit, *True gag action*

With gag bits, straps connect the reins directly to the headstall, sliding through the bit rings. When pressure is applied, it pulls the mouthpiece up higher in the mouth.

Elevator bits have an exaggerated height attachment, and/or mouthpieces that slide up and down on the cheek rings that create a mouthpiece-lifting gag action when pressure is applied to rein.

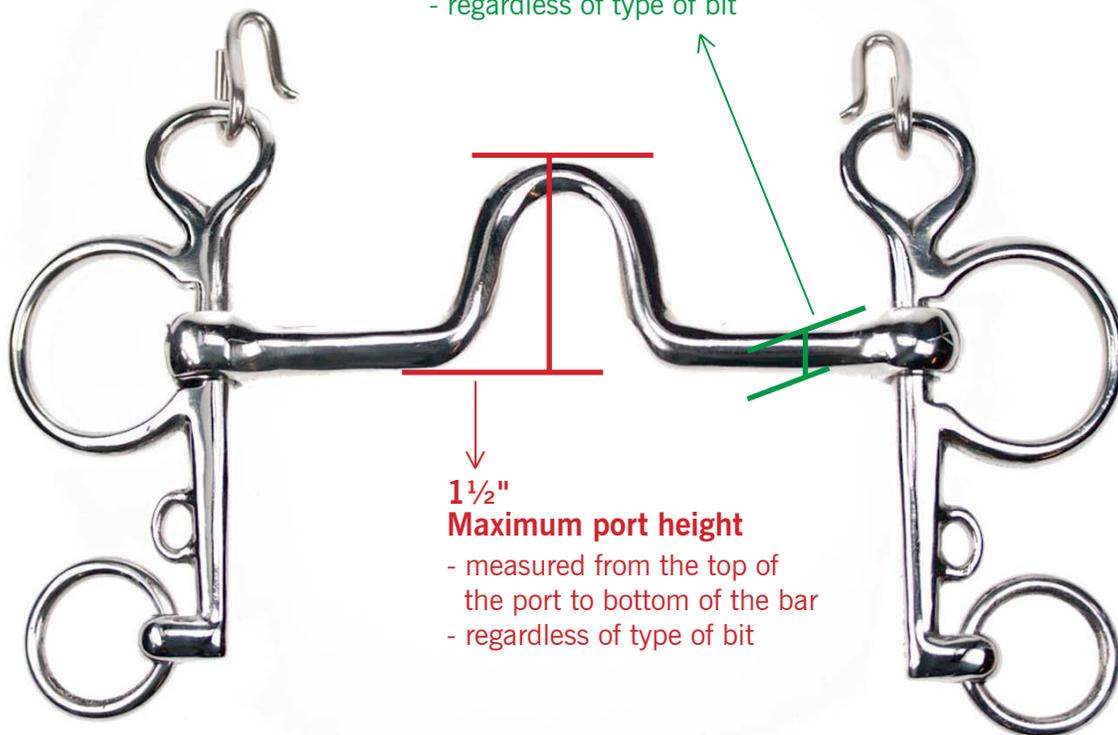
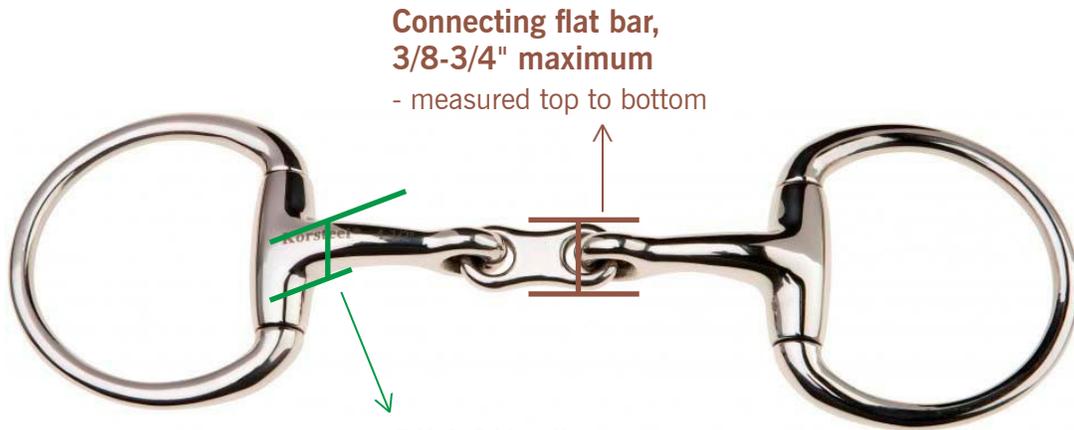


European or 3-ring elevator bit



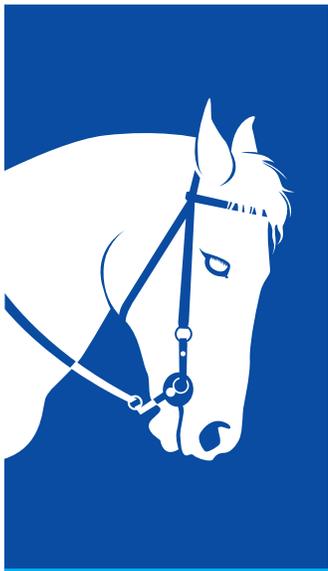
Cheek elevator bit

# English Bit Measurement









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