NEED TO KNOW

How to fit tack & bits

It is essential that any tack used should be suitable for the purpose intended and fitted correctly. Damaged and ill-fitting tack can affect the horse's comfort, cause behavioural problems when riding and result in serious injuries.

There are similarities and differences between English and Western riding. One of the main differences is in the tack and equipment used. For example, an English rider has more direct contact with the horse’s mouth through the reins and uses them with the seat and leg to control direction and speed. The Western rider does not use as much direct contact, instead using seat, weight and neck-reining to control the horse.

The Western saddle is heavier and larger than the English saddle to distribute the weight of the rider over more of the horse’s back. This compares to the English saddle that provides closer contact with the horse.

KNOW ABOUT THE BRIDLE

A bridles are a term used to describe the bridle, saddle and accessories worn by a horse. There are numerous types and makes of saddles and bridles.

• The headstall, which forms the main part of the bridle, should lie comfortably behind the horse’s poll. A headstall used in Western riding does not have a noseband.

• A bridle used for English riding includes a browband, cavesson or noseband, cheek pieces and reins. The browband should rest across the horse’s forehead (preventing the headpiece from slipping backwards), with a clearance of two finger widths to prevent the headpiece from pinching the ears.

• It should be possible to place two fingers under the cavesson noseband if this is correctly fastened. Cheek pieces should allow the bit to lie comfortably in the mouth.


What do these weblinks tell you about the range of equipment choices?
The size and shape of the mouth varies from horse to horse and, together with other factors, such as the rider’s age and experience, should be taken into consideration when selecting a suitable bit for a horse. The bit should be wide enough to accommodate the width of the horse’s muzzle without being too loose or too tight, which can cause discomfort. The bit should sit comfortably in the mouth, taking into account the horse tongue and palate.

Bits can be divided into two main groups — snaffle and leverage bits. Both English and Western riders use snaffles. Both riders also use leverage bits of various designs. Where the reins are attached determines whether the bit is being used as a snaffle or leverage. For example, when the reins are attached to the ring of the mouthpiece in a Pelham, it is a snaffle bit. If they are attached to the end of the shank, it is being used as a leverage.

The **snaffle bit** has a direct connection from the bit in the horse’s mouth through the rein to the rider’s hand. There are no shanks or leverage. Pressure that is applied through the reins applies the same pressure to the points of the mouth where it is affected by the snaffle bit. This is called a 1:1 ratio. The bars or the jaw, tongue and lips are the major pressure points. A chin strap or full cheek snaffle is used to prevent the bit from being pulled through the horse’s mouth.

The bit forms the mouthpiece of the bridle and is one of the means by which a rider, through the reins, communicates with and directs the horse.

KNOW ABOUT THE BIT

There are many different types of bit, which are grouped according to their mode of action (bitless bridles form a further group). Snaffle bits are commonly used in both English and Western riding. These are also the most commonly used bit when starting young horses.

The bit rests on the bars of the mouth in the interdental space, where there are no teeth. The bit must be of the correct size and fit to ensure it works correctly and is comfortable for the horse. Bits are available, in increments of .5 cm, in sizes that range from 9 cm to 15 cm. Bit sizes are measured along the length of the bar between the inner edges of each bit ring, when the bit is laid flat. They are also measured along the width.

Watch the Fitting tack & bits video to find out more about tack and bits.

**LINK**

Find out more about correctly fitting a bridle by watching How to Fit a Bridle on Your Horse at www.videojug.com/film/how-to-fit-a-bridle-on-your-horse.

Find out more in Adjusting the Curb Chain or Strap on a Western Bridle on the ehow website at www.ehow.com/video_2349973_adjusting-curb-chain-strap-western.html.
A **leverage bit** is any bit with a shank, no matter what type of mouthpiece it has. The shank puts more pressure on the mouth and less through the reins. The ratio of pressure is determined by the length of the bit. For example, if the ratio is 1:4, it means that the horse feels four times as much pressure as you exert. A chin strap is used as a pressure point.

A rider may choose not to use a bit for a variety of reasons, including teeth problems a horse may have. The pressure points of bitless bridles will vary with their design.

A bit should not be used to try to change a horse’s behaviour. Bits do not replace training.

**LINK**

Get more information on fitting a Western bit in the video *How to Fit a Western Bit* at [www.bayequest.info/2minvideo/142.htm](http://www.bayequest.info/2minvideo/142.htm).

Find a detailed overview of bits and bridles in the *English Tack and Equipment* video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxz-HdxmlcE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lxz-HdxmlcE).

What are the main differences between Western and English bits?
| **About** | Snaffles vary widely in design and material, but do have common features which include a mouthpiece that can be either jointed or solid, with a ring at each end to which the reins are attached. A snaffle bit is a direct pull bit. | The leverage bit is available in literally hundreds of shapes and numerous combinations of mouthpieces and shanks. |
| **Shape** | In general, snaffles are quite mild with severity determined by the smoothness and thickness of mouthpiece. The thicker the mouthpiece, the milder the bit. The different basic rings available include the loose or O-ring, the D-ring and the eggbutt. | Just as the snaffle can have a variety of shapes of mouthpieces, so can the leverage bit. They also can have either a jointed or solid mouthpiece. They must have a chin strap that can be made of leather or chain that attaches to the bit and is placed under the horse’s chin. It is usually attached to the same ring as the bottom of the crown piece on the headstall. Leverage bits can be broken in the middle, can be hinged, or can have swivel, which provides lateral and longitudinal control. |
| **Features** | Some common mouthpieces are ported, jointed and mullen mouth, which is a solid mouthpiece with slight upward curve to relieve tongue pressure. All riders need to use a leather chin strap with a snaffle to prevent it from pulling through the horse’s mouth. A full cheek snaffle can also be used to prevent this. | A solid mouthpiece is for a finished horse and works longitudinally and off a neck rein. It often has a “bump” in the middle, known as a port. The port relieves pressure on the tongue but can apply pressure to the roof of the mouth. The kimberwick is a leverage bit used in English riding. It has slots on the rings to attach the bridle and hooks to which a curb chain needs to be attached. A pull on the reins creates a short lever action through the rings themselves to the curb chain, applying pressure in the chin groove. |

KNOW ABOUT THE SADDLE

It is vitally important a saddle is both well-fitting and positioned correctly on the horse’s back. Fitting should be carried out by a qualified saddle fitter, although every rider should be able to position a saddle correctly for use and be able to identify signs that a saddle no longer fits and requires attention. If the horse’s shape alters, as a result of aging, weight gain or muscle development, the fit of the saddle should be checked.

DO YOU KNOW enough about horse anatomy to understand how to properly fit tack and bits on a horse’s body? If you think you need to find out more, revisit and review the information in the inquiry topic, Know your horse’s anatomy & conformation on the Virtual Apprentice 2070 website at www.ctsanimals.ca/va2070/anatomy.html.

KNOW ABOUT THE GIRTH OR CINCH

Girths and cinches are vital pieces of tack, because they attach the saddle to the horse and help maintain its position. Girths and cinches are available in many shapes, types and sizes to suit a range of different saddles. A girth, used with English saddles, should be broad and smooth, fitting comfortably around the horse’s barrel. A correctly fastened girth should rest approximately one hand’s width behind the horse’s elbows. A cinch, used on Western saddles, is connected to the saddle on the right and left sides and secures the saddle in place.

KNOW ABOUT SADDLE BLANKETS, NUMNAHS & PADS

Saddle blankets and numnahs are used to keep the underside of the saddle clean and to minimize saddle slip and provide padding. If they are too thick or allowed to crease up under the saddle, they can alter the fit of an otherwise well-fitting saddle. They should not be used in an attempt to improve the fit of an ill-fitting saddle. Undue pressure can be placed on the horse’s withers and spine if a blanket is not pulled up fully into the gullet.

Need To Know: How to fit tack & bits
KNOW THE INFLUENCE OF THE RIDER

A bit is only as kind as the manner in which it is applied. A rider with hard hands, who constantly pulls or jerks the reins, can cause soreness, bruising and a great deal of discomfort to the horse’s mouth. In the wrong hands, any bit, irrespective of its severity, can cause a great deal of pain and distress to a horse.

Placing a more severe bit in a horse’s mouth, to increase control and therefore enable a forward-going horse to be ridden by a less experienced rider, is a recipe for disaster. In such circumstances, the horse is being forcibly prevented from going forward, and instead may go sideways, backwards or even rear upright, with potentially serious consequences.

When mounted, the rider must sit centrally and correctly in the saddle, thereby distributing their weight evenly. A correctly fitting saddle will help the rider to adopt the optimum position, allowing for the correct application of leg and seat aids. However, a poor rider who sits badly (crookedly or tipping forwards or backwards) can have a detrimental effect on the horse’s balance and put pressure on the animal’s back.

An uncomfortable or poorly fitting saddle may be evident in the way a horse moves and reacts. For example, the horse may become reluctant to move forward, and may start hollowing or hunching its back or even buck. A rider should be observant of any changes in a horse’s physical appearance and behaviour that may indicate that a saddle no longer fits comfortably. The advice of a qualified saddle fitter should be sought.

Adapted with permission from Care: Correctly fitting tack: Blue Cross for Pets. www.bluecross.org.uk/2159-2834/correctly-fitting-tack-.html