DANCER'S LEGACY FOUNDATION
Fact Sheet:

Bits and Bitting

Tack stores and horse catalogues offer a wide range of bits for horses. It is very important to understand the type of bit which would best suit your horse and riding style.

Bits are usually made of metal or a synthetic material and placed in the mouth of a horse to assist a rider in communicating with the horse. A bit rests on the bars of the horse's mouth in an area where there are no teeth. It is held on a horse's head by means of a bridle and has reins attached for use by a rider. A bit consists of two basic pieces, the bit mouthpiece that goes inside the horse's mouth, and the bit rings of a snaffle bit or shanks of a curb bit, to which a bridle and reins attach.

Bits are designed to work by pressure, not pain. Depending on the style of bit, pressure can be brought to bear on the bars, tongue, and roof of the mouth, as well as the lips, chin groove and poll. Bits offer varying degrees of control and communication between rider and horse depending upon their design and on the skill of the rider. It is important that the style of bit is appropriate to the horse's needs and is fitted properly for it to function correctly and be as comfortable as possible for the horse.

All bits act with a combination of pressure and leverage, often with other pressure applied by parts of the bridle such as the curb chain on the chin, noseband on the jaw and face, or pressure on the poll from the headstall. While there are hundreds of variations available, bits/bridles are basically divided by the way they use or do not use leverage. There are three general types of bit/bridles used on horses, bit-less bridles, direct pressure bits and leverage bits.

Bit-less bridles do not have any piece that is actually in the horse's mouth. Bit-less bridles apply pressure to parts of the horse's face and head, such as the nose, jaw and poll, but not to the mouth. A hackamore is what is traditionally thought of when someone thinks of bit-less. However, a true hackamore has a heavy noseband where many newer bit-less bridles rely on smaller leather straps across the nose or under the chin of the horse to apply pressure. Traditional hackamores include the bosal and mechanical hackamores. Common bit-less bridles are the side-pull and the cross-under.

Direct pressure bits are bits that do not have any leverage. Basically, if the rider pulls with two pounds of force, the horse feels two pounds of pressure directly to his mouth. The most common direct pressure bit is a Snaffle bit. This bit uses a bit ring at the mouthpiece to apply direct pressure on the bars, tongue and corner of the mouth. The reins on a snaffle bit are fastened to the bit ring and have a free range of movement in the ring. A curb strap is sometimes seen on a snaffle, but it is not attached in a way as to add leverage when pressure is applied with the reins. The simple purpose of the curb strap on a snaffle bit is to keep the bit from sliding through the mouth of the horse.

Leverage bits are bits that allow the reins to be fastened to the mouthpiece so that the rider has some leverage when pulling on the reins. If the rider pulls with two pounds of force, the horse will feel more than two pounds of pressure—the amount varies based on the amount of leverage the particular bit provides. Leverage bits have the curb strap attached in a fixed manner so that the horse feels pressure at the poll and chin groove. There are many different types of leverage bits, but most fall into one of three categories—Curb, Pelham or Kimberwicke.

A Curb bit is a leverage bit that uses a type of lever called a shank top ut pressure not only on the mouth, but also on the poll and chin groove. The length and shape of the shank changes the amount pressure felt by the horse. In general, a longer shank exerts greater the pressure.

A Pelham bit is a single curb bit with two sets of reins attached to rings at both the mouthpiece and end of the shank. This partly combines snaffle and curb pressure, allowing the rider to vary the cues and pressure felt by the horse. This bit requires a skilled rider to use both sets of reins properly.

The Kimberwicke is a hybrid between a snaffle and curb that uses a slight amount of mild curb leverage on a bit ring by use of set rein placement on the ring. This bit resembles a snaffle, but has slots in the bit ring that the reins are fastened into. Once the reins are fastened into a slot, they apply pressure to the poll and chin groove in much the same manner as the curb bit when force is applied with the reins. The further the reins are attached down the ring, the greater the force felt by the horse.

Various bits have options for mouthpiece design. Bit mouthpieces may be single jointed, double-jointed, "mullen" (a straight bar), or have an arched port in the center of varying height, with or without joints. Bits with joints allow for tongue pressure relief or apply pressure to the roof of the mouth.

Some mouthpieces have rollers, rings or small "keys" that the horse can move with its tongue. These are designed to both give a nervous or “busy mouthed” horse something to play with as well as to encourage salivation. .

Various types of metal or synthetic substances are used for bit mouthpieces. Commonly used metals include stainless steel and nickel alloys, which generally do not rust; sweet iron, aurigan and copper are also used. Aluminum is considered drying and is discouraged as a mouthpiece metal. Synthetic mouthpieces may be made with or without internal metal cable or bar reinforcement. Rubber bits are generally thicker than metal bits. It is important to keep bits clean after use.

When it comes to choosing and fitting a bit, it may be necessary to enlist the help of a professional. Your trainer or local tack shop is a great place to start. Do keep in mind that each horse is an individual and what works well for one horse or rider, may not be preferred by another. Be prepared to experiment and listen to your horse!