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Bitting the Horse: Shank or Curb Bits

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Shank or curb bits (Figure 1) are used on horses more advanced in their training rather than on the young horse. This bit is a leverage bit which means that when the rider applies 5 pounds of pressure on the reins, the horse will feel more than 5 pounds in its mouth. It may feel 10, 15, 20 or more pounds of pressure depending on the length and shape of shank. Unlike the snaffle, where the reins attach at the level of the mouth piece, the reins on a shank bit attach below the level of the mouth piece (Figure 2a). The shank bit affects four more areas of the horse's head than does the snaffle bit. Like the snaffle, the curb bit affects the corners of the mouth, tongue and bars but it additionally affects the roof of the mouth, the jaw, the chin groove, and the poll (Figure 2a,b). For more information on snaffles refer to AG/Equine/2007-02, "Bitting the Horse: Snaffles."

Figure 2a

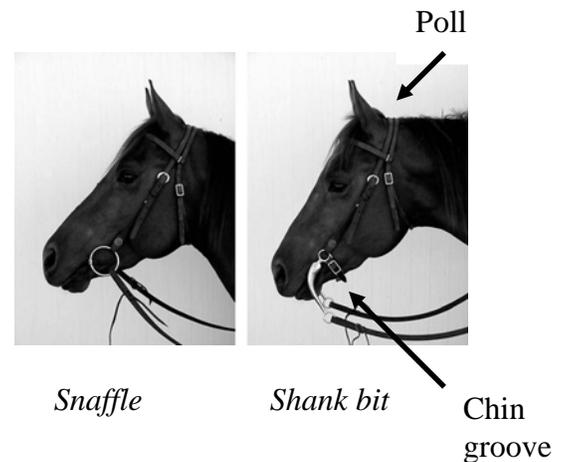
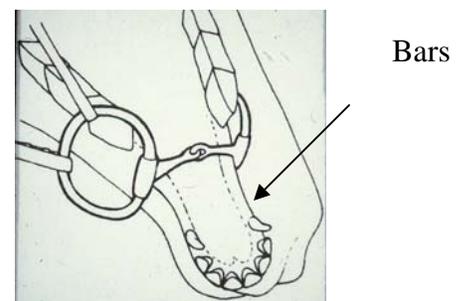
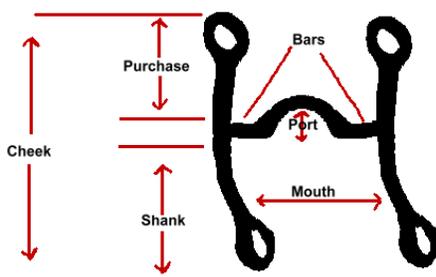


Figure 2b



When advancing a horse from a snaffle to a curb bit, the horse must be educated to the new areas of pressure so it does not over react and hurt itself or the rider. When used properly, this bit is used to assist with the restriction of forward motion and to help collect and set the horse on its haunches.

Figure 1



Shanks come in many different forms. They can be swivel/loose or fixed shanks (Figure 3a, 3b).

Figure 3a



Fixed shank bit

Figure 3b



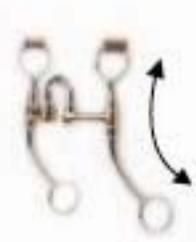
Loose or swivel shank bit

Swivel shank bits allow the shank portion to rotate and are a good choice for a young horse moving up from a snaffle. The swivel shank still allows use of two hands enhancing communication with each side of the horse's mouth. The movement of the shank also allows for a pre-signal as the rider lifts the rein. As the rider moves the rein, the shank rotates and signals the horse before actual contact is made. A fixed shank bit is a one-handed bit and is for the more advanced horse. This bit communicates to both sides of the horse's mouth whenever it is activated; therefore, riding two-handed serves no purpose. Shanks come in a variety of lengths and angles. The longer the shank, the more leverage is applied with rein contact. A longer shank bit should be used with lighter contact and only on a more advanced horse and by a more experienced rider. A straight or more vertical shank bit (Figure 4) encourages the horse to maintain a more vertical headset and gives less of a pre-signal before the rein engages. A more angled shank (Figure 5) allows for a pre-signal and permits the horse to more ideally carry its nose in front of vertical.

Figure 4



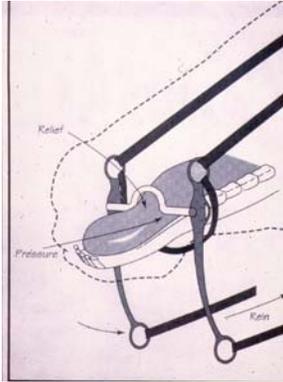
Figure 5



The mouth piece of the bit affects where the horse feels contact within the mouth. A mullen mouth piece places more equal pressure on the tongue and bars whereas a port allows for more tongue relief while placing greater pressure on the bars (Figure 5). A high port has the potential to come in contact with the roof of the mouth and may also commit the horse to a more vertical head carriage. A straight bar mouth piece is considered a harsher mouth piece as it allows for no tongue relief. Jointed-mouth piece shank bits increase the pressure on the bars due to the compression action of the mouthpiece. In addition, the joint angle is altered by the shank leverage to tip the bit downward and into the tongue. This bit can cause the horse to raise its head and become stiff at the poll. At the first sign of contact, the head goes up and often the horse becomes unquiet in the mouth, and begins chewing or head tossing as a sign of discomfort. These jointed bits are actually more severe than a solid mouthpiece. Jointed mouthpiece bits should always be ridden two-handed to help prevent the compression effect. **Remember that it is the rider's hands that makes a bit severe. Soft hands can ride in almost any type of bit, while rough hands make even the mildest bit severe and inhumane.**

The curb strap additionally affects the action of the bit. The strap should lie flat against the chin groove and comes into action when the shanks rotate back about 45 degrees. A loose chin strap will allow for more of a pre-signal while a tight curb strap causes immediate curb pressure and increased pressure on the bars with applied rein contact. Therefore, a tighter curb strap is harsher and provides less finesse in communicating with the horse. A leather curb strap is milder than a chain strap and typically the strap should be about 1/2 inch wide. It is incorrect to attach the strap to a ring at the level of the mouth piece. The curb strap should be attached on the ring where the head stall attaches (Figure 6).

Figure 6



Bits have a tremendous affect on communication with the horse. Knowing how bits affect the horse and how to use them is important. Using the mildest

bit that still allows for control should be your goal. Developing a soft, responsive horse that is comfortable with cues will create an enjoyable partnership between horse and rider.

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