Source: Fliss Gillott and Westgate of Canterbury

BITS & BITTING

Selecting the most suitable bit is one of the most important decisions you can make for your horse-and yourself ! The mouth is the most sensitive part of the horse's body, so that a mistake in the choice of bit can cause untold damage to his confidence and willingness to work for his rider, and undo a great deal of patient effort.

WHERE THE BIT WORKS ?

There are seven points on the horse's head which are affected, either directly or indirectly, by the rein action-they are shown on the diagram above right.

*Bars of the mouth. These are the gums, between the incisors and the molars, where there are no teeth present. Care must always be taken to ensure that the bit does not hang against the tushes, but remains resting on the bars.

*The tongue. A horse's tongue fills the space between the bars, so that the bit will always rest against the tongue. A tongue groove on some bits allows the tongue more space and so reduces the pressure.

*Roof of the mouth. This part is most affected when a bit with a port is used, although contact between the bit and the roof of the mouth, when the mouth is closed, is normal.

*Corners of the mouth. This is the most obvious point of action to the eye of the beholder-however inexperienced! Pressure applied to any bit will affect the corners of the mouth to some degree.

*Nose. Pressure on the nose comes from the noseband, not directly from the bit. It is the action of the rein, causing the horse to yield to the pressure by opening his mouth-'relaxing' the lower jaw-that then puts pressure on the nose.

*Chin or curb groove. This is where curb chain acts, if one is used.

*Poll. As with the nose, the pressure here is indirect, but effective nonetheless. The effect of pressure on the poll can be quite dramatic and is an important factor in the use of curbs, peihams and gags.

SNAFFLES

These bits are used singly and do not have a curb chain The variety of mouthpieces and cheek pieces is extensive and ever-increasing as new designs are brought onto the market, so this one family encompasses a wide range, from the very mild to quite severe.

A few simple guidelines help ascertain the action and severity of any particular snaffle bit and how it works.

*Thickness of the mouthpiece. A thin mouthpiece concentrates the pressure and is therefore more severe.

*Mullen mouth. This is a smooth mouthpiece without a joint. It puts more pressure on the tongue and eases pressure on the bars.

*Jointed mouthpiece. This produces a nutcracker action-the bars of the mouth being the 'nut'. It also acts on the corners of the mouth, the tongue and the roof of the mouth.

*Bit material. Metal is the hardest and so most severe; then in order of severity there is vulcanised rubber, nathe and soft rubber, which cushions the mouth against bruising.

*Rings. Eggbutt rings concentrate the effect of the bit, whilst loose rings allow more play and encourage mouthing. Eggbutt rings also reduce the risk of pinching the lips.
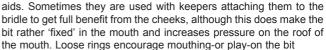
*Rollers. On the mouthpiece, these help prevent the horse grabbing hold of the bit, and encourage play and salivation-particularly if they're made of copper.

~JOINTED eggbutt

The most commonly used bit and a good one. Flat eggbutt rings allow the bit to lie flat to the horse's cheek. The larger the rings, the less risk of the bit being pulled through the horse's mouth by a novice. This produces the nutcracker action described left.

~Fulmer

Another mild snaffle, this has full cheeks which prevent the bit from going through the mouth: they also add clarity to left/right rein aids. Sometimes they are used with keepers attaching them to the bridle to get full benefit from the cheeks, although this does make the bit rather 'fixed' in the mouth and increases pressure on the roof of the mouth. Loose rings encourage mouthing-or play-on the bit

~Continental fourring snaffle, Club or Belgian snaffle

Becoming increasingly popular, this bit is nevertheless quite severe when the rein is attached to the lower ring, which provides leverage and therefore poll pressure as well as the nutcracker action. However, by using two reins-one attached to the main "snafle" ring and one to either of the lower rings,the rider has the option of a less severe acti(rn or a quick response' should it be needed.