

New England 4-H Horse Show Bit Rules and Guidelines



Basic guide to local, county, and state/regional 4-H Horse shows as well as for those classes in open shows limited to 4-H membership entry. This rules manual is for organizers, officials, exhibitors, parents and judges.

Revised March 2018

These guidelines should be used in conjunction with the current *New England 4-H Horse Show Rulebook*. See rulebook for additional details involving bits and equipment for respective classes.

Because the New England 4-H Horse Program is diverse in both its divisions and in the breeds that compete, it is difficult to generate a complete list of acceptable bits. Bits that are permitted by respective breed associations may be acceptable at the judge's discretion. A judge at his/her discretion can penalize a horse with non-conventional types of bits. Please understand that this supplement gives only examples of legal and acceptable bits. In no way does it try to include every bit that is allowed or not allowed.

If exhibitors have questions concerning a bit they wish to use, and that specific bit is not mentioned in the current rules or these guidelines, then exhibitors should ask the show stewards and/or the judge if the bit is acceptable for that show. Exhibitors should have alternative bits available so that they can make a change if it is determined by show officials that their preferred bit is unacceptable for that show.

Each county, district or regional, and state show is officiated by different stewards and judges. Therefore, exhibitors must seek approval from show officials at each show before using the questionable bit. Members should consult with professionals in their riding discipline or contact the appropriate breed association for guidance in selecting a bit in order to find one that is both appropriate and acceptable for use in New England 4-H shows.

We would like to acknowledge the Florida 4-H State Horse Program for the creation of the content in this guide. It is the most comprehensive guide of bits available to the 4-H community and has been adopted for our use, with their permission. Credit is given to developers Wendy DeVito, Sandra TenBroeck, Joel McQuagge. It has been slightly modified for use in New England.

Pictures show examples of bits that are labeled as either:



-Acceptable



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



-Not allowed

Western, Ranch, and Speed Events Divisions

- Reference to snaffle bits mean the conventional O-ring, egg-butt, or D-ring with ring no larger than 4". The mouthpiece should be round, oval, or egg-shaped, smooth and unwrapped metal. It may be inlaid, but must be smooth. The bars must be a minimum of 5/16" in diameter, measured one inch in from the cheek with a gradual decrease to center of the snaffle. The mouthpiece may be two or three pieces. A three-piece connecting ring of 1 1/4" or less in diameter, or a connecting flat bar of 3/8" to 3/4" (measured top to bottom), which lies flat in the horse's mouth, or rollers are acceptable.

What does it mean? ... Snaffle Rings

The shape of the snaffle ring outside of the horse's mouth is unrelated to the style of mouthpiece on the inside. I.e., you cannot determine what is in the mouth by the shape of the ring. The acceptable shapes are O-ring, egg-butt, and D-ring. And regardless of which shape, the ring may not be more than 4 inches across at it's widest point.



O-ring



Egg-butt



Offset D-ring

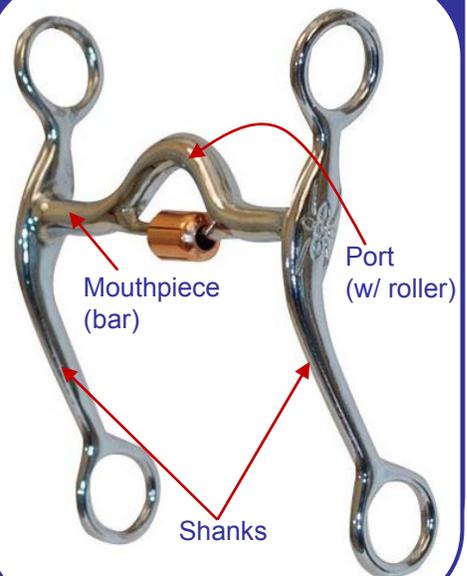


Full Cheek
Not appropriate
for Western

More on mouthpieces after the next rule...

- References to a bit mean the use of a curb bit that has a solid or broken mouthpiece, has shanks, and acts with leverage. All curb bits must be free of mechanical device and should be considered a standard western bit. A description of a legal, standard western bit includes:
 - 8 1/2" maximum length shank to be measured as indicated in the diagram illustrating legal bit. Shanks may be fixed or loose.
 - Curb bit mouthpieces must be round, smooth, and unwrapped metal of 5/16" to 3/4" in diameter, measured one inch in from the cheek. They may be inlaid, but must be smooth. Nothing may protrude below the mouthpiece (bar), such as extensions or prongs on solid mouthpieces. The mouthpiece may be two or three pieces. A three-piece, connecting ring of 1 1/4" or less in diameter, or a connecting flat bar of 3/8" to 3/4" (measured top to bottom), which lies flat in the horse's mouth, or rollers are acceptable.
 - The port must be no higher than 3 1/2" maximum, with rollers and covers acceptable. Broken mouthpieces, halfbreeds, and spades are standard.

Standard western curb bit (one style of many)



Western, Ranch, and Speed Events Divisions, continued

What does it mean? ... Mouthpieces

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

What is "smooth"?

Smooth simply means that there are 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 it not smooth may include (but are not limited to) any kind of twist, a wire wrap, carvings into the metal that create ridges, chain, etc.

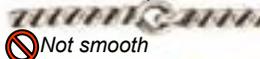
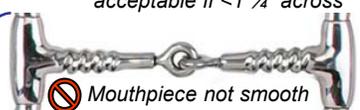
Mouthpiece examples (applies to both snaffle and curb bits):



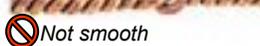
Connecting O-ring (aka "Lifesaver") → can be a maximum of 1 1/4" diameter.



← wrap on connector bar is acceptable because it is not a primary pressure point.



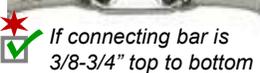
Top is a fast twist or "corkscrew." Below is a slow twist. Both create numerous sharp pressure points.



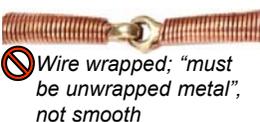
Twists and loose links = not smooth.



← If the center link is a connecting flat bar, it must be 3/8" to 3/4" top to bottom.



Both have metal inlay, but only the top example is inlaid flat and smooth. The sample below has protruding links.



← Rule states "must be unwrapped metal." This includes wire-wrapped.

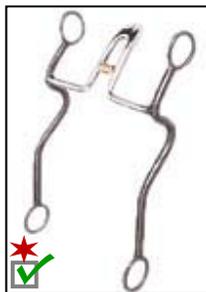
Curb mouthpiece examples:



Half-breed



Prong bit
Metal protruding below the bar causes sharp pressure points



Port should measure ≤ 3 1/2" high and shanks ≤ 8 1/2" long



All three of these examples have acceptable 3-piece mouthpieces.



Western, Ranch, and Speed Events Divisions, continued

- References to a romal means 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.
- 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

- 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.

Examples: Curb Straps



✓ All of the above curb straps are acceptable



★ OK if $\geq \frac{1}{2}$ " wide

The curb straps below are NOT acceptable



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

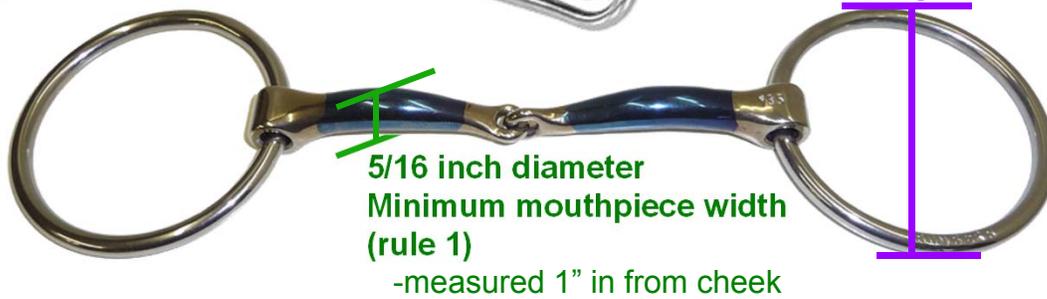
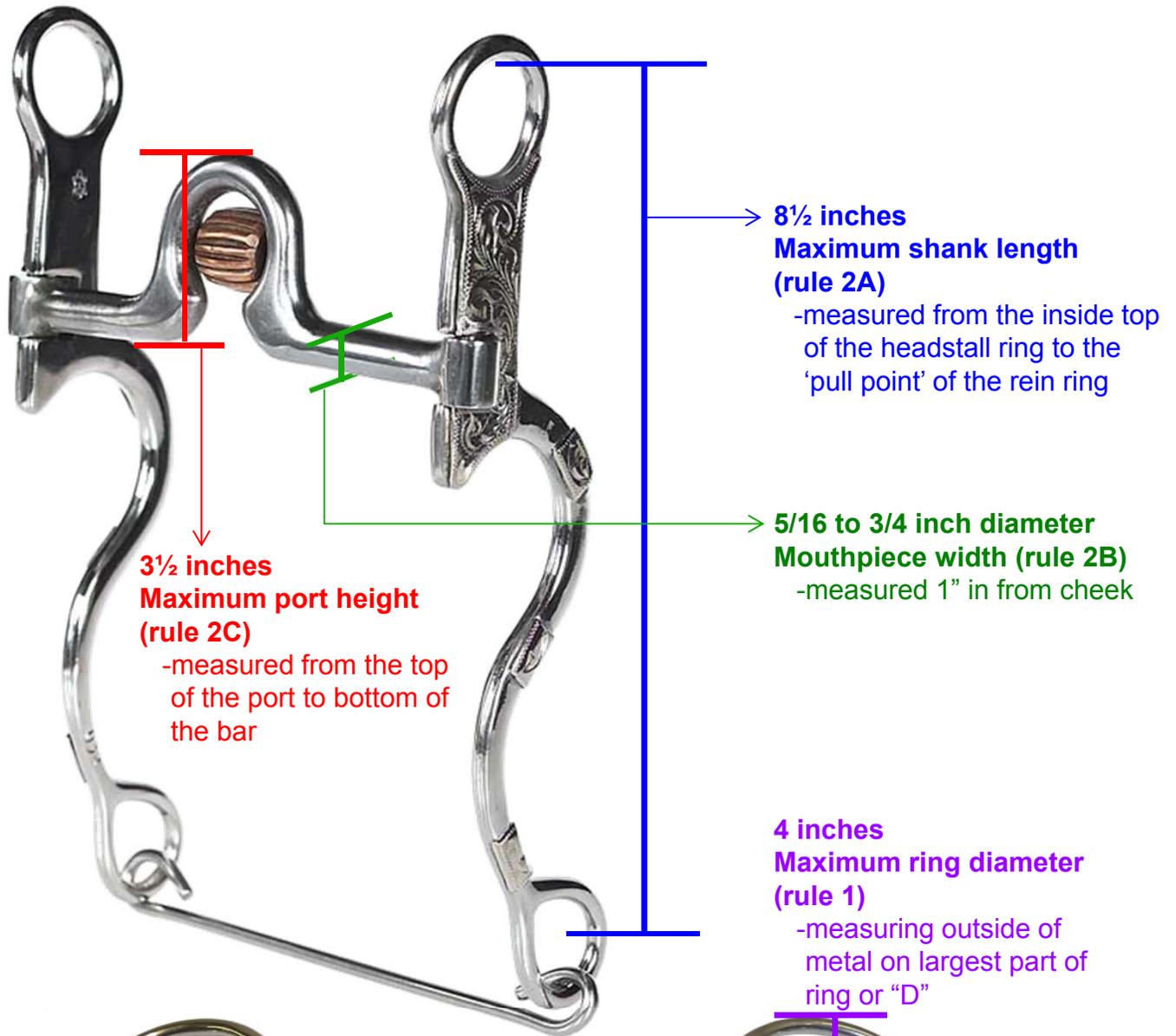


⊘ Chain $< \frac{1}{2}$ " wide



⊘ Rigid bar added to chain.

Western, Ranch, and Speed Events Bit Measurement



Connecting ring or flat bar on either curb or snaffle (rule 1 and 2B):

Connecting ring, 1¼ inch maximum diameter

Connecting flat bar, 3/8 – 3/4 inch maximum, measured top to bottom

Western and Ranch Divisions

1. References to 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.

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. Nothing over the nose or under the jaw may be rigid.



Rawhide bosal



Easy/Fast stop
Rigid material under jaw



Mechanical Hackamore



Fast stop
Rigid material over nose; & mechanical

2. Slip or gag bits, and donut and flat polo mouthpieces are not acceptable.

What does it mean? ... slip/gag, donut, and polo mouthpieces

Slip bits allow the mouthpiece to slide up the shank when pressure is applied, thereby increasing the leverage action in the mouth. With gag bits, the reins (attached directly to the headstall) slide through the bit rings and pull the mouthpiece up in a similar fashion. Neither type of 'gag action' is allowed.

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



Slip mouthpiece
Gag action AND not smooth



Gag bit
Gag action not allowed



Donut mouthpiece



Flat polo mouthpiece

Western and Ranch Divisions, continued

3. Horses five-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.

Examples ... holding curb reins



✓ Correct hold



✗ Incorrect hold



✓ Correct hold



✗ Incorrect hold



✓ Correct hold

★ Note: as stated in 4B, any of these holds are acceptable in Ranch classes.

Examples ... holding snaffle/bosal reins



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



✗ Incorrect hold



✓ Correct hold



✗ Incorrect hold



✓ Correct hold



✗ Incorrect hold

4. Horses six-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. When using split reins, the hand is to be around the reins, and if desired only the index finger may be between the reins. Violation of this rule is an automatic disqualification.
 - B. In ranch classes when showing in a curb bit, reins must be held in one hand, but may be held in any manner.

Speed Events Division Only

1. References to hackamore mean the use of either a mechanical or non-mechanical 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 Events Division. Regardless of what type of hackamore is used, The materials over and under the nose must be flexible.



Rawhide bosal



Mechanical Hackamore
OK in Speed Events



Easy/Fast stop
Rigid material under jaw



Stop & Turn
Rigid material under jaw



Fast stop
Rigid material over nose

2. Slip or gag bits will be allowed provided the mouthpiece and shank requirements/limitations are met as described in the Western & Speed Events section. "Rutledge Roper" bits will also be allowed.

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

Slip bits allow the mouthpiece to slide up the shank when pressure is applied (reins pulled), thereby increasing the leverage action in the mouth. With gag 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 of which 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

3. Horses of any age may be shown with a snaffle bit.
4. Riders may use two hands on the reins regardless of type of bit and age of horse.
5. Judge or appointed equipment official may prohibit the use of bits or equipment deemed too severe.

Hunter Division, all classes except Dressage

1. 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. The use of a bit converter (a U-shaped piece of leather that fastens between the snaffle ring and the curb ring at the end of the shank on the Pelham) is not illegal, however, it is not considered correct amongst most judges, and therefore may be penalized. 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. I.e., 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.



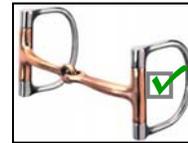
O-ring/Loose ring



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 both 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 (Weymouths) have separate curb & snaffle (bridoon) bits and require two reins.



Kimberwick
2 location options to attach one rein



Either rein attachment location is acceptable.



Pelham w/two reins
Correct use of pelham



Pelham w/converter
Bit requires 2 reins,

(#2 A&B rules and examples on next page.)

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. -Triangle (knife edge), true gag action, and elevator bits are not allowed.

What does it mean? ... gag and elevator bits

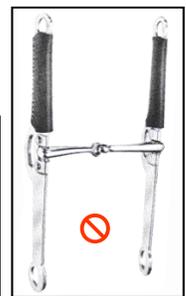
Gag bit, *True gag action*



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 headstall attachment, or mouthpieces that slide up & down on the cheek rings, and create a mouthpiece-lifting gag action when pressure is applied.



Elevator Bit



Hunter Division, continued

2. In reference to mouthpieces, nothing may protrude below the mouthpiece (bar). 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 1/4" 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.

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 (1 piece) or broken (2 or 3 pieces), and if there is a connecting ring or flat bar, those connectors must meet the same respective measurements. It does not mean the connecting piece has to be a ring or flat bar.

Hunter 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 (nor Dressage).



✓ Simple jointed, round

Waterford bit is specifically listed as acceptable. →
Three smooth, round balls linked together.



✓ Waterford Bit



✓ Three piece mouthpiece

← Three-piece with connecting flat bar or roller.
Smooth and within rules.



✓ Roller in joint is acceptable

Top is a fast twist or "corkscrew."
Below is a slow twist.
Both are acceptable snaffles in Hunter.



✓ Specifically allowed



✓ Single twist



✓ Single twist

Single twisted wire is acceptable snaffles in Hunter, as long as minimum diameter is met.



✓ Specifically allowed



✗ Wire wrapped

Triangle or knife-edge bit. →
Sharp edge is very sharp on the bars & tongue.



✗ Shape specifically disallowed



✗ Multiple links disallowed

Double twists are allowed, lose links not allowed.



✓ Double twist allowed

Multiple rollers set in the mouthpiece →
result in many pressure points.



✗ Mouthpiece not permitted shape



✓ Port is less than 1 1/2"

← Three piece with port as connector – within rules.



✓ Port is less than 1 1/2"

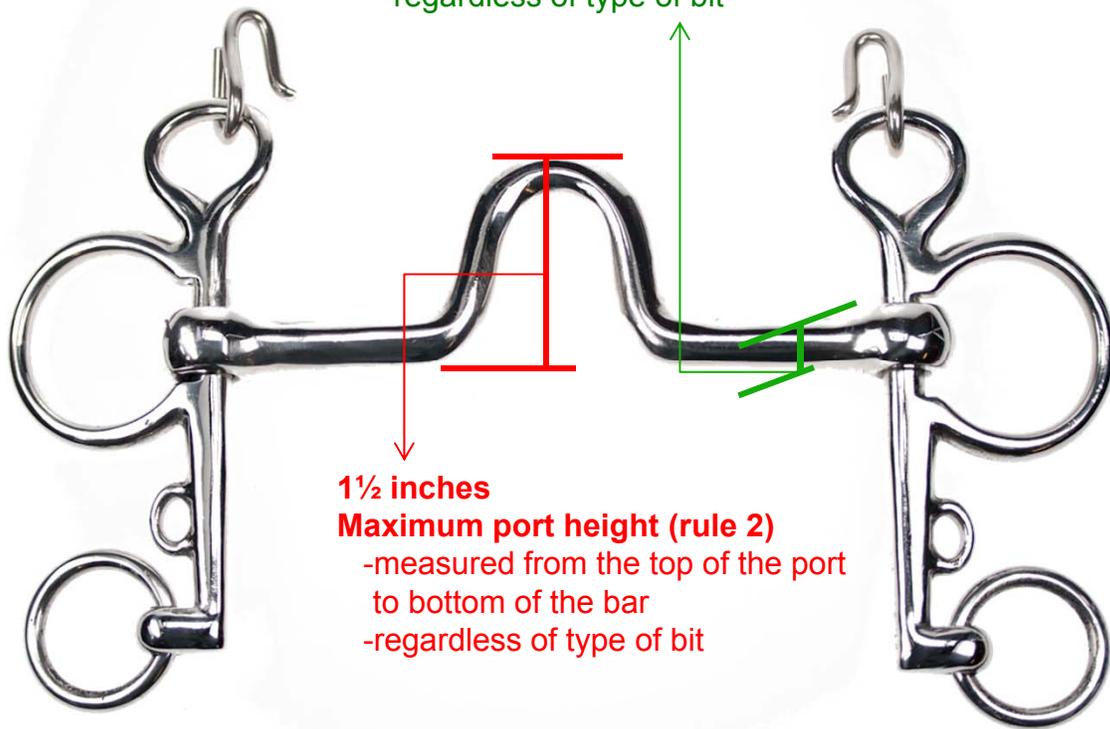
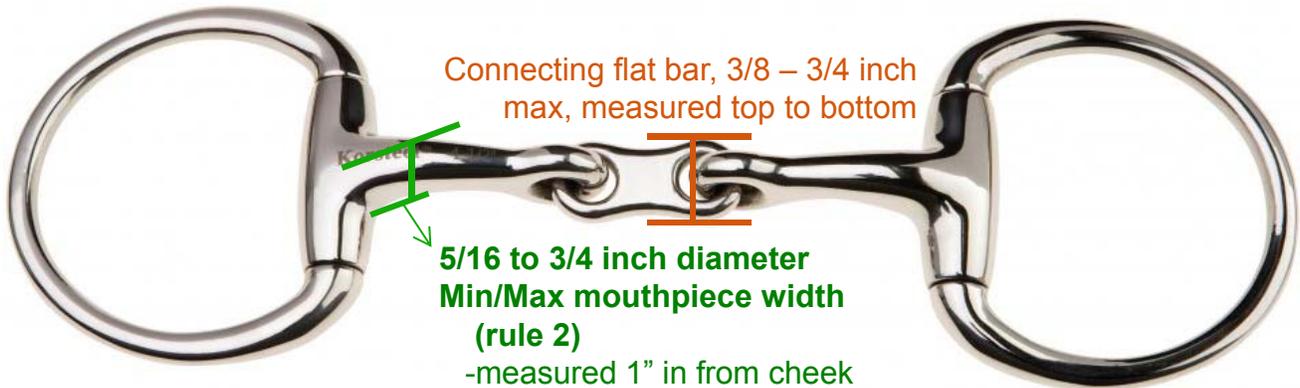
← One piece with wide port – within rules.

Mouthpiece made of a series of rollers. →
Results in allowable smooth round shape.

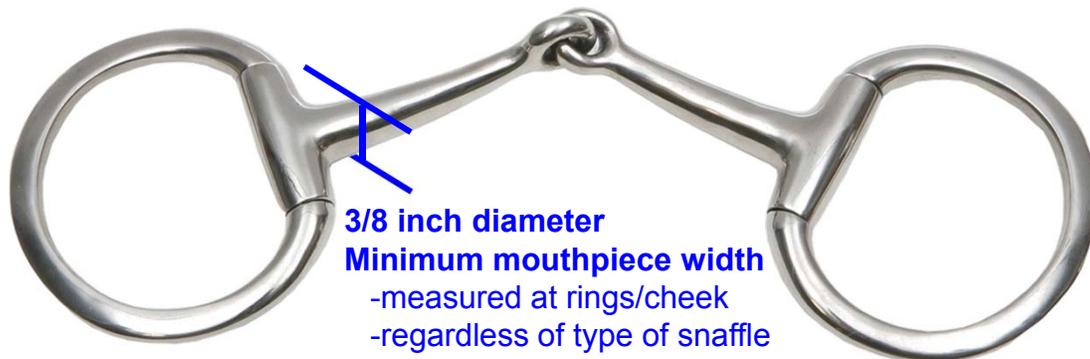


✓ Smooth and round

Hunter Bit Measurement



Dressage Bit Measurement



Dressage

Even though Dressage is in the Hunter Division, it has different rules for bits allowed. Some bits that are allowed in other Hunter classes are not acceptable in the Dressage classes.

All bits must be smooth and with a solid surface. Twisted, wire and roller bits are prohibited. A bushing or coupling is permitted as the center link in a double jointed snaffle; however, the surface of the center piece must be solid with no moveable parts. The mouthpiece of a snaffle may be shaped in a slight curve, but ported snaffles are prohibited.

Bits must be made of metal or rigid plastic and may be made with a rubber, plastic or leather covering; flexible rubber bits are not permitted as bridoons. Bits may not be modified by adding latex or other material. Bits with mouthpieces made of synthetic material are permitted, provided that the contours of the bit conform to the contours of one of the bits pictured. The diameter of the snaffle mouthpiece must be minimum 3/8 inch diameter at rings or cheeks of the mouthpiece.

Numbers 1, 2, 6, 10, 11, and 12 describe mouthpieces that can be with any acceptable ring/cheek.
 Numbers 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9 describe rings/cheeks that can be with any acceptable mouthpiece.

Acceptable mouthpiece + acceptable ring/cheek = Legal Bit for Dressage

1. Ordinary snaffle with single-jointed mouthpiece.	3. Racing snaffle (D-ring).
2. Ordinary snaffle with double-jointed mouthpiece.	4. Snaffle: with cheeks, with or without keepers. -without cheeks (Egg-butt).
6. Unjointed snaffle (Mullen-mouth).	5. Snaffle with upper or lower cheeks.
8. Dr. Bristol.	7. Snaffle with cheeks. (Hanging or drop cheek; Baucher). This may be a D-ring or other ordinary snaffle as pictured in Nos. 1-6
<p><u>Dr. Bristol:</u> connecting bar is more rectangular and rests at an angle to the tongue. Not allowed.</p> <p><u>French link:</u> connecting bar is a rounded-corner dog bone shape and rests flat on the tongue.</p>	9. Fulmer.
10. French snaffle.	
11. Snaffle with rotating mouthpiece.	
<p>Both #11 and #12 rotate forward and back from the center joint.</p>	
12. Rotary bit.	

<p>Ported snaffles prohibited</p>	<p>No rollers/moveable parts in center link</p>	<p>No keys</p>	<p>No flexible rubber bits used as a Bridoon</p>

Saddle/Gaited Division

Saddle Seat

- Horses must be shown in full bridles (curb and snaffle) or pelham with two reins. The use of a bit converter (a U-shaped piece of leather that gastens between the snaffle ring and the curb ring at the end of the shank on the Pelham) is not illegal, however, it is not considered correct amongst most judges, and therefore may be penalized. Snaffle bridles will only be allowed in Saddle Seat & Gaited Pleasure, Showmanship, and Conformation classes.
- In reference to mouthpieces, nothing may protrude below the mouthpiece (bar). 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". Mouthpieces must be smooth.
 - They may be smooth inlaid, synthetic wrapped (including rubber or plastic), or incased. Waterford bits are allowed.
 - 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. (Mouthpiece examples on next page.)
- 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.
- Design of the bridoon mouthpiece must conform to that of acceptable snaffles in previous rule. However, smaller dimensions of the mouthpiece are permissible.
- Bits with shanks over 8 1/2" in length are not permitted.

What does it mean? ... Bit types

Pelhams and full bridles (Weymouth) use a snaffle and/or curb action, depending on which rein is pulled. A pelham has a shank and requires reins to be attached to both the snaffle ring and curb ring.



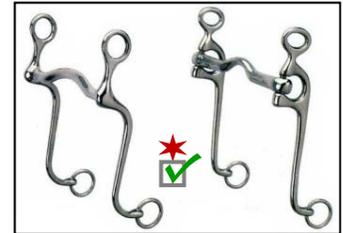
Pelham, Broken mouthpiece
Must be used with 2 reins



Pelham w/two reins
Correct use of pelham



Pelham w/converter is
nonconventional check 1st.



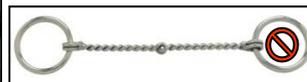
Walking Horse Bits
OK if shanks measure $\leq 8\frac{1}{2}$ "

Full bridles (Weymouths) have separate curb & snaffle (bridoon) bits and require two reins.



Bridoons:

— 3-piece mouthpiece



— Twisted mouth; not smooth



— single jointed mouth

Saddle/Gaited Division, continued

What does it mean? ... Mouthpieces

Regardless of the type of bit (snaffle, pelham, weymouth, 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 there is a connecting ring or flat bar, those connectors must meet the same respective measurements. It does not mean the connecting piece has to be a ring or flat bar. The connecting piece could also be a roller or hinged port. After meeting the basic parameters, much of the determination of whether a mouthpiece is acceptable or not comes down to if it is smooth.

What is “smooth”?

Smooth simply means that there are 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 it not smooth may include (but are not limited to) any kind of twist, a wire wrap, carvings into the metal that create ridges, chain, etc.

Mouthpiece examples:



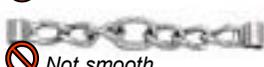
Waterford bit is specifically listed as acceptable. →
Three smooth, round balls linked together



← Three-piece with connecting flat bar.
Smooth and within rules.



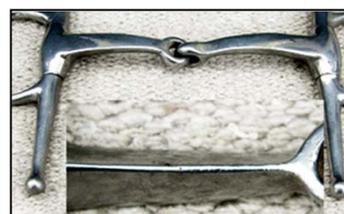
Top is a fast twist or “corkscrew.”
Below is a slow twist. Both create
numerous sharp pressure points.



Twists and lose links = not smooth.



Triangle or knife-edge bit. →
Sharp edge is very sharp
on the bars & tongue.



← Three piece with port as connector.
Smooth and within rules.

Multiple rollers set in the mouthpiece →
result in many pressure points.

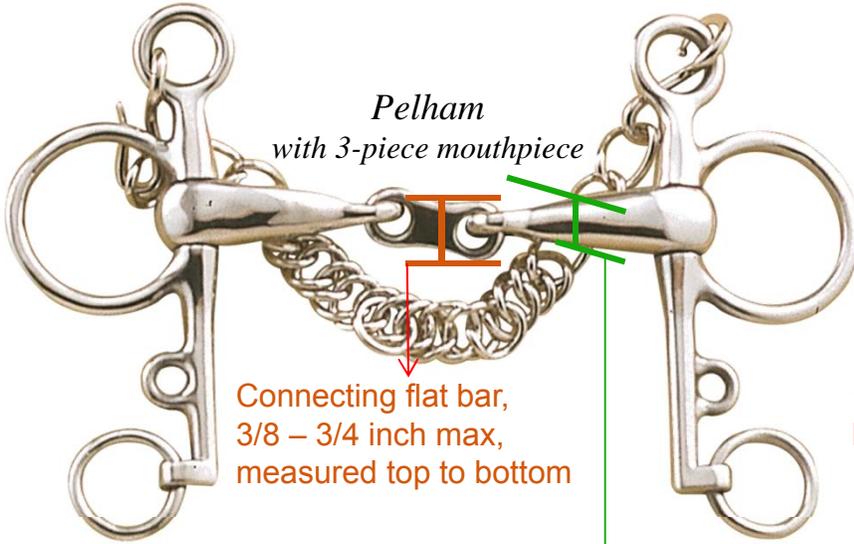


← One piece with port. Smooth and within
rules as long as port is 1½” or less.

Mouthpiece made of a series of rollers. →
It is still smooth against the bars & tongue.



Saddle/Gaited Bit Measurement

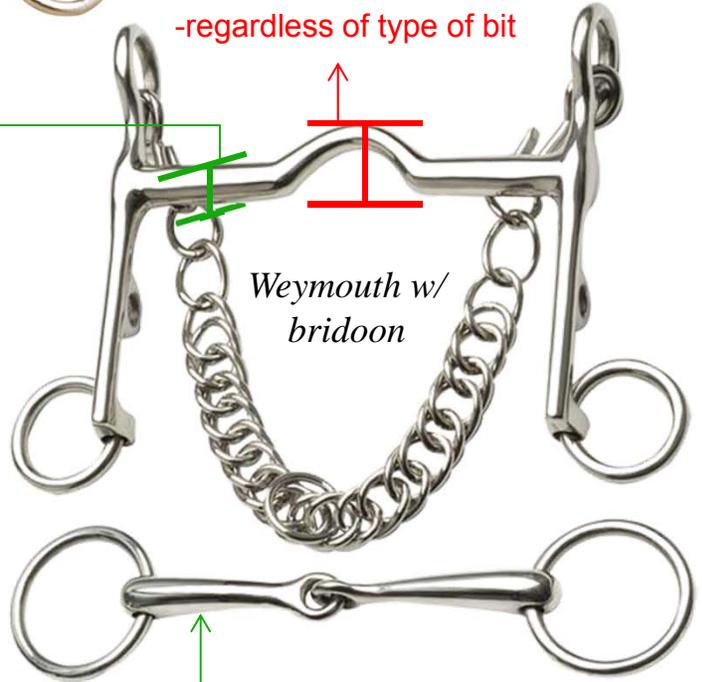


*Pelham
with 3-piece mouthpiece*

Connecting flat bar,
3/8 – 3/4 inch max,
measured top to bottom

1½ inches
Maximum port height (rule 2)
-measured from the top of the port
to bottom of the bar
-regardless of type of bit

5/16 to 3/4 inch diameter
Min/Max mouthpiece width (rule 2)
-measured 1" in from cheek
-regardless of type of bit



*Weymouth w/
bridoon*

Bridoon mouthpiece (rule 4)
-may have smaller diameter than
5/16 inch
-Weymouth (curb) portion must
still be 5/16 inch minimum



*Walking Horse Bit
with 2-piece mouthpiece*

8½ inches
Maximum shank length (rule)
-measured from the inside top of
the headstall ring to the 'pull
point' of the rein ring

Saddle/Gaited Division, continued

Gaited

1. Bridles/bits should coincide with the style of riding chosen. See the appropriate section (Western, Hunter, or Saddle Seat) for bit requirements.
2. Paso Finos may show in hackamores as approved by PFHA for Pleasure classes.
3. Tennessee Walking Horses may be shown in a curb bit typical for the breed as long as the mouthpiece and shanks comply with the parameters described above for Saddle Seat.

What does it mean? ... Bits for Gaited

Gaited horses may be shown in Western, Hunter, or Saddle type tack, depending on the breed of the horse and/or the preferences of the exhibitor. Follow the bit rules for the style of riding used.

Tennessee Walkers are typically shown in long shanked curb bits. This is an allowable bit for the TWH for both Western and Saddle Seat tack.

Paso Finos often show in types of hackamores not described in this section. See the PFHA rules for Paso bridles.

