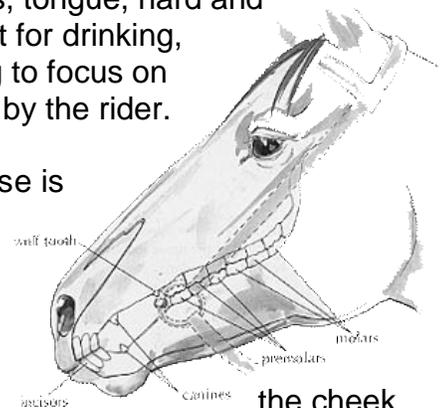


## Bits and Biting Issues Michael Thomassen

The mouth of a horse is a complex anatomical area. The lips, cheeks, tongue, hard and soft palate and teeth are all important structures. The mouth is important for drinking, eating and communication between horse and rider. This article is going to focus on the interaction between the mouth of a horse and the bit and bridle used by the rider.

A snaffle bit is probably the most common bit used when a young horse is started but is also commonly used in horses throughout their lifetime. A snaffle interacts mostly with the corners of the lips, tongue and bars of the mouth. The bar of the mouth is the space on the lower jaw where there are no teeth.



A leverage bit, also known as a curb bit, has 2 main components, the cheek portion and the shank portion. The ratio of shank to cheek length determines the amount of leverage. A leverage bit also has a curb strap which is located behind the chin on the lower jaw. This bit interacts with the tongue, bars and the curb strap interacts with the lower jaw.



Bitless bridles, as the name implies, do not have a mouth piece but do still interact with the mouth. A hackamore is an example of a bit less bridle. A hackamore will apply pressure to the cheeks, lower jaw and bridge of the nose.

Biting problems can obviously affect a horse's performance. Symptoms of issues include head shaking, overly extending the nose, over flexing at the poll, excessive salivation or chewing while wearing the bit. The symptoms can occur because of trauma to the tongue and bars, or lacerations of the tongue, cheek or corners of the lips.

A thorough oral examination can identify many of these issues. Treating these issues may include changing the type of bit that the horse is being ridden in, not using a bit for a period of time to allow injuries to heal, and routine dentistry. Routine dentistry includes a thorough exam of the mouth under mild sedation to identify possible issues and is usually followed by a dental float.

A dental float can be performed to remove sharp enamel points on cheek teeth and create a bit seat. A bit seat is created when the front edges of both the upper and lower second premolars are rounded slightly so the front edge of the tooth is smooth. A bit seat and extracting wolf teeth, if present, allows the bit to fit more comfortably in the horse's mouth.

