

Fitting a Bridle Correctly

In this issue the experts at the Society of Master Saddlers take a closer look at how to fit a bridle correctly.

A correctly fitting bridle is essential for your horse's comfort and performance.

This feature explains the process that should be undertaken to ensure your horse's bridle is suitably fitted and also describes the correct way to put it on.

PUTTING THE BRIDLE ON

Firstly, we will go through the steps to correctly fit a snaffle bridle on your horse. It is advisable to have the horse tied up and then un-fasten the noseband of the headcollar whilst leaving the headpiece slightly pushed back so you can put the bridle on. The noseband and throat lash should be undone and the reins should be put over the horse's head and back to the end of his neck. Make sure you are stood on the left hand side of your horse and take the bridle in your right hand with your right arm positioned under the horse's jaw. The bridle should be held just under the brow band with both cheek pieces held together.

The bit should be held in the left hand and then press gently on the horse's gums in the gap between his teeth until he opens his mouth. Then pull the bridle gently up the horse's head, sliding the bit over the horse's tongue.

Keep the bit in the mouth whilst you use both hands to slide the headpiece over the horse's ears and secure it behind them. Then pull the forelock over the brow band. Check that the bit, noseband and brow band are all straight. Fasten the throat lash and noseband (and the flash if there is one). The noseband should sit on the inside of the cheek pieces.

HOW SHOULD THE BRIDLE FIT?

A well fitting bridle should have all the side buckles roughly in line with the horse's eye when fitted to the middle adjustment holes, with plenty of extra holes so that it can be adjusted up or down. It is very uncomfortable for the horse if the buckles end up just below the browband. Recent pressure testing has shown this to be a particular problem area and any pressure here can cause discomfort and have a serious effect on performance, so make sure all buckles fit well below this area.



A well fitted bridle with Cavesson noseband and shaped headpiece

The **browband** should be comfortable sitting flat across the front just below the ears, not pulling the headpiece into the ears or sagging with a gap at the front. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the browband is too tight when it may be that the headpiece is too wide where it sits behind the ears, it is more frequently the headpiece that rubs the ears than the browband being too tight. In this case you may need a shaped headpiece, many styles of which are available.

You should be able to put four fingers sideways under the **throatlash**.

The throatlash does not prevent the bridle from coming off, if it were tight enough to do this it would impair the horse's breathing and swallowing - it is purely for aesthetic purposes.

The splits in the headpiece should not be visible above the browband or start too far below it.

The bit should sit comfortably in the horse's mouth when the cheek pieces are buckled on the middle holes, with one or two creases at the corners of the mouth. (This varies according to the type of horse and type of bit, but basically if the horse looks comfortable it probably is.)

A **cavesson noseband** should be fitted about 2cm below the cheekbones with space to easily put your thumb underneath it when fastened, and the head and cheek straps should sit just in front of the bit cheeks otherwise the noseband may eventually tip down at the front. There should not be too much extra strap on the back of the noseband as this flaps around and looks untidy. If the cavesson is too high under the cheekbones this can cause a great deal of discomfort.

If you are using a **flash** strap this should not be adjusted too tightly so that it pulls the front of the cavesson down and it should be fitted so that the buckle is not near the mouth or the bit and with the point of the strap going downward and not up. Never

under any circumstances should the end be tucked into the loop on the front of the cavesson and you should never use a removable flash attachment as both these will cause great pain to the horse. Recent pressure testing has shown that Flash nosebands cause by far the most pressure of all noseband types and therefore should really be avoided.



Flash fitted correctly.

These attachments should not be used

A **Crank** noseband should be fitted similarly to the cavesson but not too tight. The Crank has the advantage that it has a separate strap at the chin fitted to rings or squares and this allows some jaw movement. You must make sure however that the padded section of the chin strap is fitted centrally and this goes for all chin pads.

If you find you need to fit any type of noseband very tightly it is likely you need to sort out biting or dentistry rather than clamping the mouth shut. The horse must be able to move his jaw to enable him to move his tongue and to swallow.



A properly adjusted Crank noseband.

A **drop noseband** is very tricky to fit correctly. It should sit a little lower than a cavesson but must not impair the airways at all, and it should rest on the facial bones. The chinstrap should fit under the bit and in the chin groove without the buckle or rings interfering with the bit or the horse's lips. The cheek straps should not fit too

close to the eye. Many manufacturers have now developed types of drop nosebands, which have two straps under the jaw, one above the bit and one below. These are much better as they resolve the issues of the cheek straps getting too near the eyes and the chin straps interfering with the bit or mouth. In pressure testing drop nosebands came out favourably when compared to flash nosebands and Cavesson nosebands.



Three types of drop noseband correctly fitted

There are two types of **Grakle** noseband, firstly the standard figure 8 which consists of the headstrap and two separate straps which go around the nose. These fit below the cheekbones and under the chin but are not recommended as the top strap tends to sit too close under the cheekbones and the two continuous straps can be over tightened, which does not come out too well under pressure testing. **The Mexican or High ring Grakle** however is very useful, as the rings give it some articulation allowing the horse to move his jaw and tongue. It should however be fitted very carefully with the rings on top of the cheekbones not underneath them. The cheek buckles must not be too high and the jaw and chin straps should be fitted so that the buckles and straps do not interfere with the bit or mouth. The High ring Grakle, fitted correctly came out very well on pressure testing.



The standard Grakle poorly fitted.



A well fitted Mexican Grakle

The length of **reins** is very much a personal thing, but as a rule of thumb, when the horse is being ridden there should be enough rein for the horse to have a good stretch but not so much that your feet could become tangled in them, particularly for children.

Something to you should consider is that symmetry is very important with bridles. If you have adjustment on both sides of the bridle with cheeks, noseband straps, chin straps and even the throatlash, they should be adjusted so that they are level and this will greatly enhance your horse's comfort and performance.

Keep bridles and bits scrupulously clean and keep leather supple with recommended products.

Any bridle should suit its purpose, for instance a cob or hunter with a large head should have a sturdy bridle with a wide noseband and browband, and a show pony with a fine head would look better in a fine bridle with narrower noseband. If you are competing you should check the rules to make sure any bridle and particularly noseband you intend to use is legal.



A heavyweight cob in a sturdy bridle

The mouthpiece of the **bit** should be about 1/2" (1 cm) wider than the horse's mouth so that the sides don't pinch, but not so wide that it will move about too much and not function properly, as well as looking unsightly. There are a number of Bit manufacturers now who make some really good bits which are ergonomically shaped for the horse's comfort. Some of them will visit your yard and hold clinics and some provide affordable on line fitting training which is well worth doing and The Society of Master Saddlers regularly hold a one-day in depth bridle fitting course.

And finally, if you are struggling to find a bridle to fit your horse properly you should consider getting a specialist bridle maker to create a bespoke bridle. It may not be as expensive as you think and you will have one that is exactly to your requirements. You can find many specialists by looking on the Society of Master Saddlers website.