Overview of English Bridles

Bridle types vary in function and design within the English riding disciplines. The three main types of English bridles include the snaffle bridle, double bridle and bitless bridle.

Snaffle Bridle
The snaffle bridle is the most commonly used bridle because of its versatility and functionality. It is typically used in starting young horses, trail riding, in all of the sport horse disciplines—hunter, jumper, dressage and eventing—and in fox hunting. A snaffle bridle consists of any of the many types of single snaffle bit, such as an eggbutt, loose ring or dee ring snaffle, a single set of reins attached to that bit, and any of a number of types of noseband or caveson. These include:
- the standard caveson
- flash noseband
- crank noseband
- drop noseband
- Figure-8 or grackle

A snaffle bridle works through pressure—pressure from the bit as it applies to the bars and corners of the horse’s mouth, lips, tongue and palate, and pressure from the bridle as it applies to the horse’s poll and nasal bone.

In an English snaffle bridle, the noseband keeps the horse’s jaws aligned and prevents the horse from opening its mouth wide enough to avoid the bit and rein aids. When adjusted properly—not too tightly or too loosely—the noseband also transfers some of the bit pressure from the bars of the horse’s mouth to the nasal bone. A noseband also provides a place for a standing martingale, if used, to attach. The type of noseband or caveson that is allowed and designed to be used as part of a snaffle bridle varies slightly according to the English riding discipline. For example, a simple caveson is the only type allowed in the hunter or jumper divisions, cross country and fox hunting. These bridles are classically styled and understated as well, and innovations designed for the ultimate comfort of the horse are usually tastefully discreet, as illustrated in the Showmark Deluxe Hunter Bridle.

Styling on snaffle bridles begins with the color of the leather. Black remains the current trend for dressage riders. The appearance of a dressage bridle is classically understated and simple, as can be seen in the Warendorf Deluxe Dressage Bridle (photo next page). Comfort features, such as soft padding on the noseband, browband and crownpiece, are usually hidden from view. Some color or sparkle is occasionally added to a dressage bridle through the use of subtle, contrasting padding or piping on the noseband and browband, or through the use of a browband embellished with crystals, simple metal insets or beads.

Circuit Grand Prix Bridle with hunter dee ring snaffle bit

A dressage bridle is the most common bridle used in the dressage division. The appearance of a dressage bridle is classically understated and simple, as seen in the Warendorf Deluxe Dressage Bridle (photo next page). Comfort features, such as soft padding on the noseband, browband and crownpiece, are usually hidden from view. Some color or sparkle is occasionally added to a dressage bridle through the use of subtle, contrasting padding or piping on the noseband and browband, or through the use of a browband embellished with crystals, simple metal insets or beads.

Tip: Inspect your reins during regular cleaning. Reins should always be replaced if the stitching begins to fray, if any lacing begins to loosen or if the closures become compromised.

Related Topics
How to Measure for a Bridle
How to Measure for a Bit
How to Adjust a Snaffle Bridle
How to Fit a Halter
Types of Halter
Understanding Leather Colors

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**Weymouth Bridle**

Also called a double bridle or a full bridle, the Weymouth bridle can be spotted on horses training in the upper levels of dressage. The double bridle has two bits—a Weymouth or curb bit and a bradoon—and two sets of reins. A curb bit has a non-jointed mouth piece, usually with a port that allows room for the horse’s tongue, a curb chain that exerts pressure under the chin, and shanks that allow a leverage action. A narrow curb rein is connected to a ring at the lower end of the shank. When a rein aid is used, the leverage on the shank of the bit travels up to the horse’s poll.

A bradoon is a type of snaffle bit that is thinner in diameter than a standard snaffle bit and has smaller rings to prevent interference with the shanks of the curb bit. To assist the rider in identifying the reins by feel, the snaffle rein, which attaches to the rings of the bradoon, is usually wider or of a different style than the curb rein.

Styling of the Weymouth bridle for the dressage ring typically includes black leather to coordinate with black dressage saddles. The noseband of a full bridle, to allow room for the curb bit to function, does not have a flash. However, a crank closure is often used today. As with the snaffle bridle for dressage, this type of bridle is understated and classic in appearance, with any subtle embellishment included only on the browband and occasionally the noseband through subtle piping or padding. Comfort features are discreet.

**Bitless Bridles**

Bitless bridles rely on pressure on key areas of the horse’s head without the use of a bit in the horse’s mouth. A rider or trainer may choose to use a bitless bridle on a horse for many reasons. It might be used temporarily for the retraining of a horse that has been ridden by a heavy-handed rider or suffered a mouth injury. It might be used because a horse has dental issues or difficulties tolerating a bit to such an extent that behavioral issues developed. Other riders choose to use a bitless bridle for the overall comfort of the horse.

Bitless bridles are developed and offered as a complete unit, such as Dr. Cooks Bitless-Bridle and the Tory Leather English Side Pull. Some hackamores, such as the Herm Sprenger Short Shank Hackamore and the Hackamore Noseband, can be attached to the cheek pieces of a snaffle bridle to replace both the noseband and bit to create a bitless bridle. Additionally, the Rambo Micklem Original Multibridle may be used without a bit.

**Tip:** If you plan to show with a bitless bridle, check the competition’s governing rule book. Bitless bridles are not always permitted for use.

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**Tip: Check the Rules**

Riders planning to compete are urged to consult the United States Equestrian Federation Rule Book for guidelines on tack usage. Riders participating in a fox hunt are encouraged to consult the governing rules of etiquette for the specific hunt club to learn of any required tack appointments.