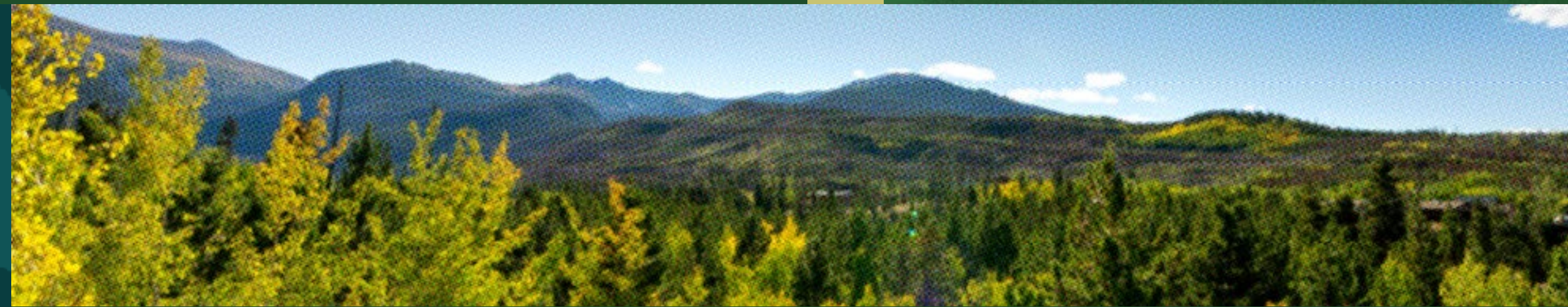


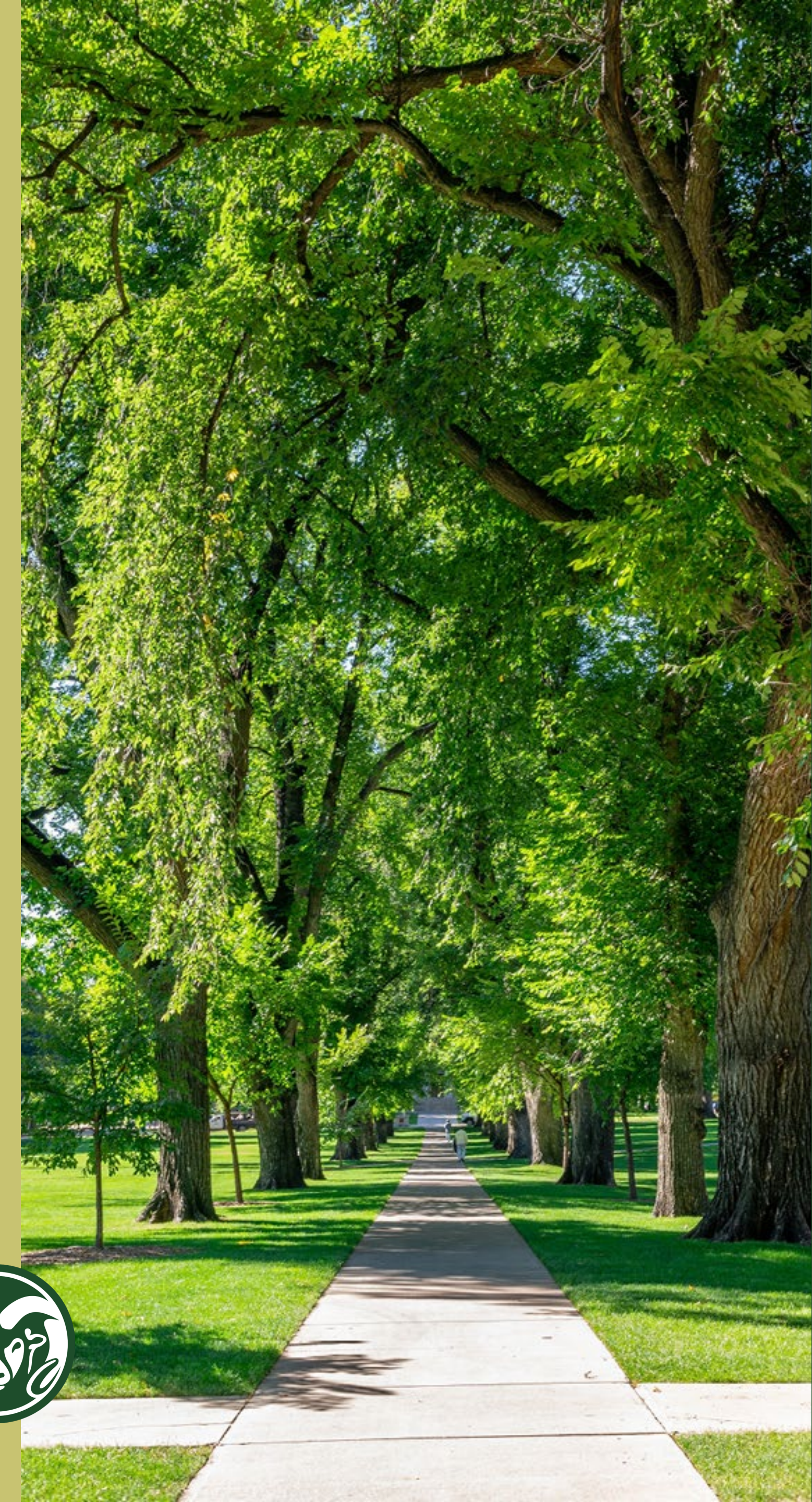
Equine Bits & Bridles – Understanding, Selection, & Use

Chaffee/Lake County Extension

Rebecca Sheriff Chrestensen | Spring 2026



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About the Presenter

- 4-H Specialist for Chaffee & Lake Counties
- Passionate about 4-H Horse & Horseless Horse Projects
- Past experience with Certified Horsemanship Association (CHA) & Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH Intl.) horsemanship programs
- Rider, instructor, barn manager, etc.





Foundations of Communicating with your Horse

- Horsemanship is about:
 - Emotional control (for horse & rider)
 - Speed control (gaits, rating gaits, lengthening/shortening strides)
 - Directional control (left, right, forward, & backward)
 - Body control (positioning, balance, etc.)
- Tack selection is one small part of communication between horse/handler/rider



Foundations of Communicating with your Horse

- Think of your bit, headstall, & reins like a cell phone connection
- Spotty service? Frustrating, poor timing, lack of communication
- Strong signal? Clear, timely, understanding line of communication
- Good tack & equipment can foster proper communication between horse/rider



Traditional Western Horse Progression

- Snaffle Bit
- Hackamore
- Two-Rein
- Straight up in the bridle
- Historically connected to the vaqueros and buckaroos of the Great Basin



"Simplified" Western Horse Progression

- Snaffle Bit
- "Grazing" bit (leverage bit)
- Faster transition from a snaffle into a leverage bit, originated with the great cattle drives of the West and 19th century ranching in Texas (Wyoming Livestock Roundup, 2021)



Photo Courtesy of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna

History of the English Horse Training Progression

- Roots in military cavalry needs
- Schooled in a cavesson to preserve the mouth, brought into the snaffle, and then into the "full double" aka Weymouth bridle (Poltz, 2008)
- Many civilizations had extensive horse training philosophies (Romans, Greeks, French, English, Germans, etc.)

Main Categories of Bits

Snaffles



Western
Leverage/Curb



Hackamores

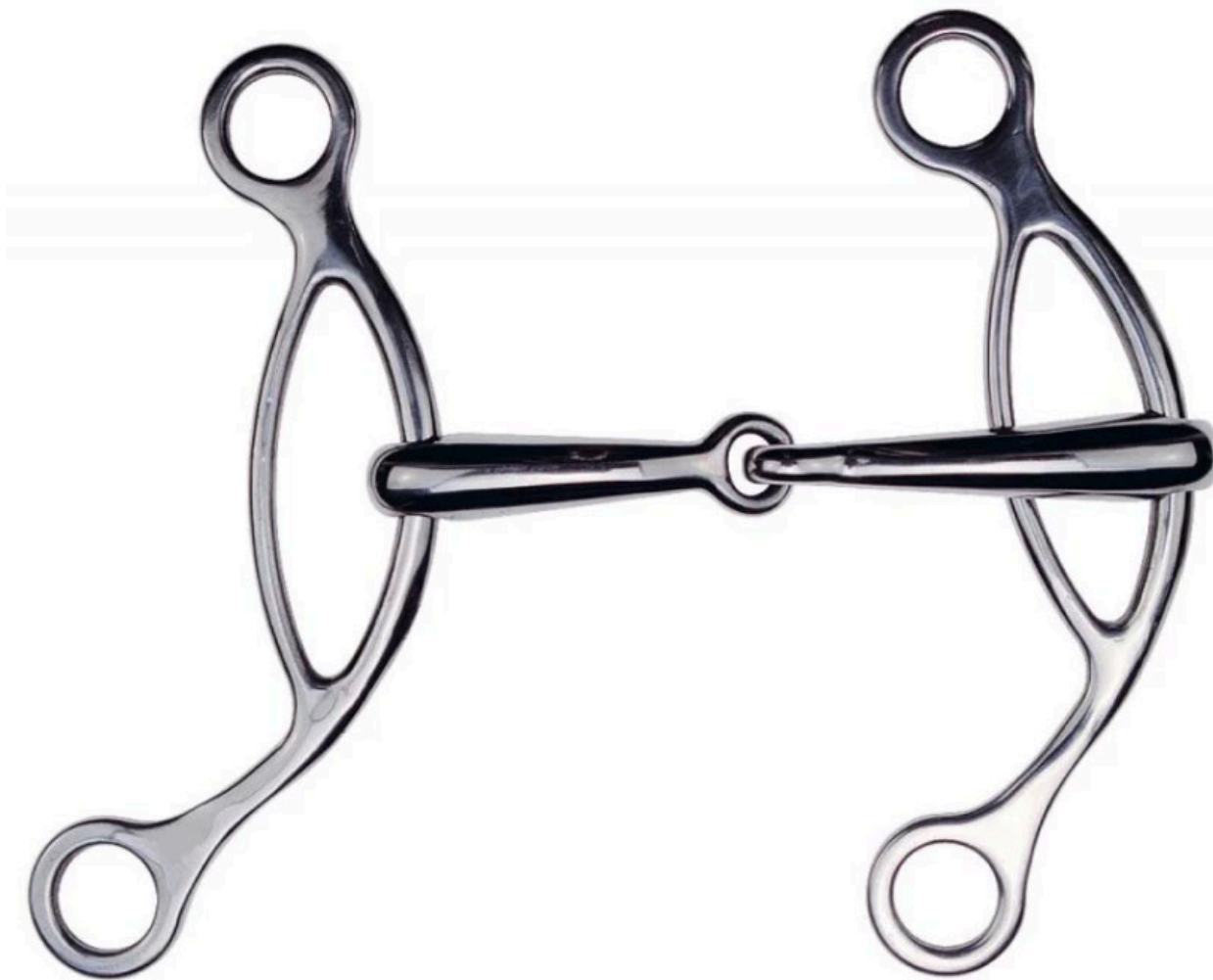


Main Categories of Bits

Full/Double English
Bridles



Gag Bits



Spade Bits



Main Categories of Bits

English Leverage Bits



Pelham Bit



Kimberwick Bit

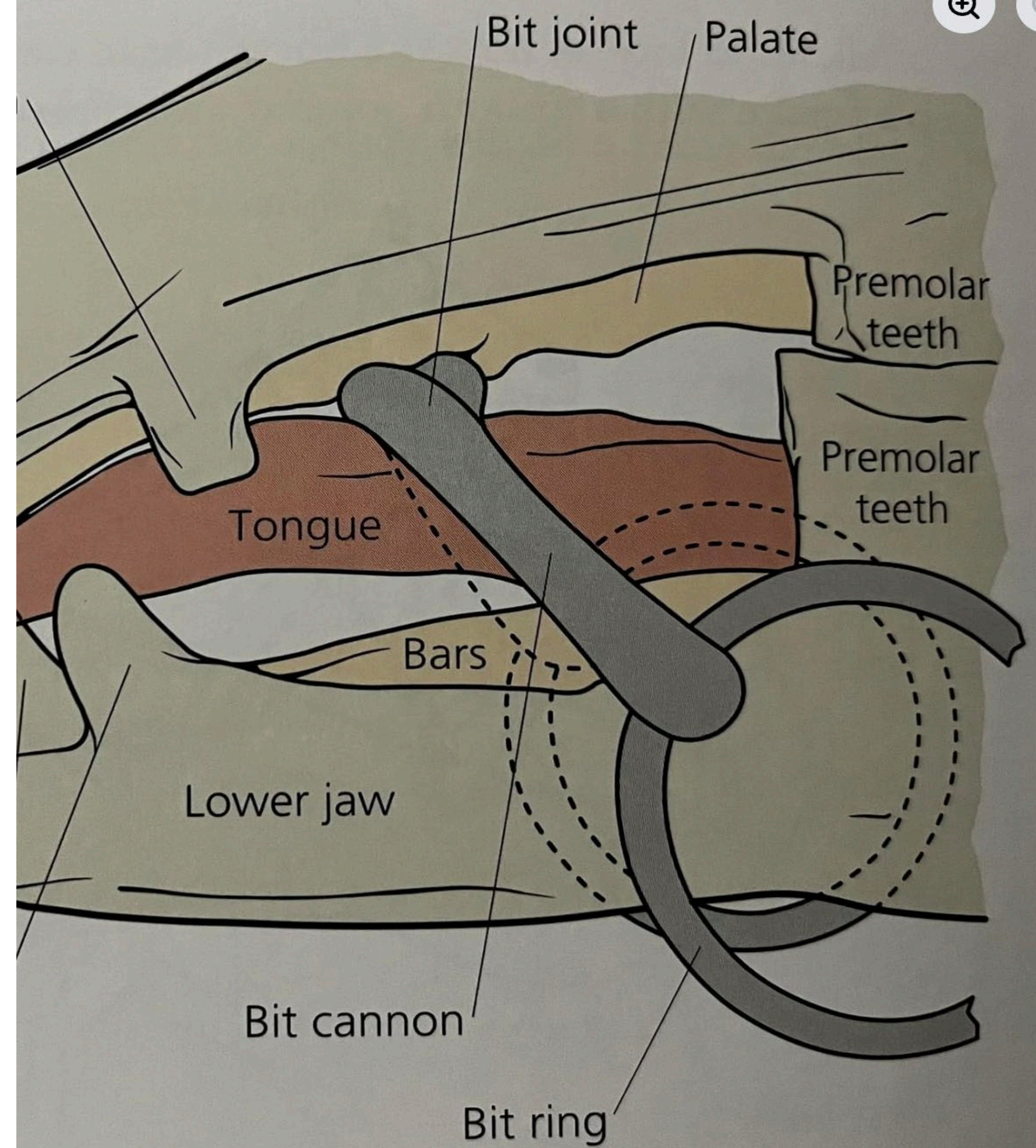
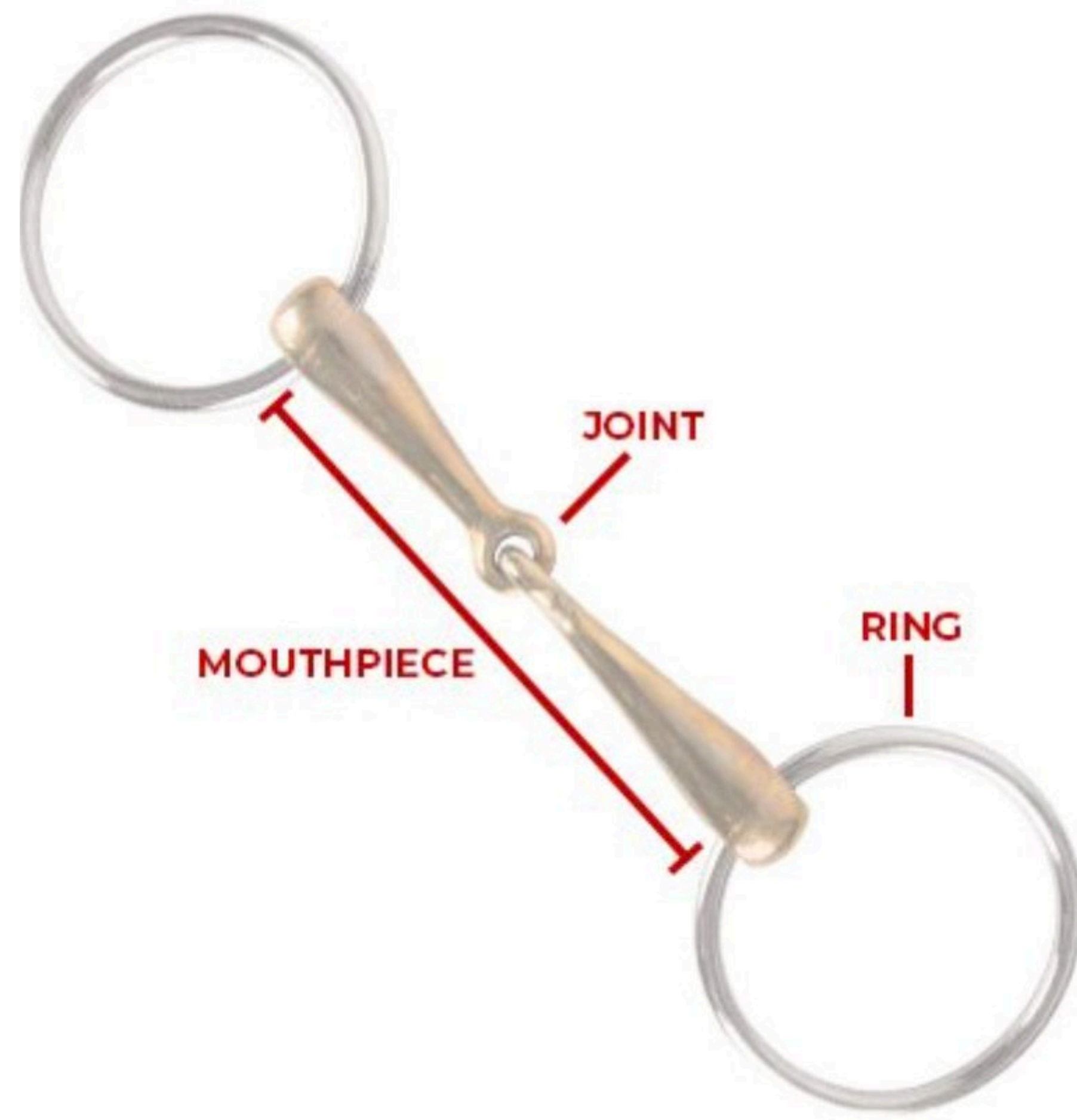
Bitless Bridles/Side
Pulls



Mechanical
"Hackamores"

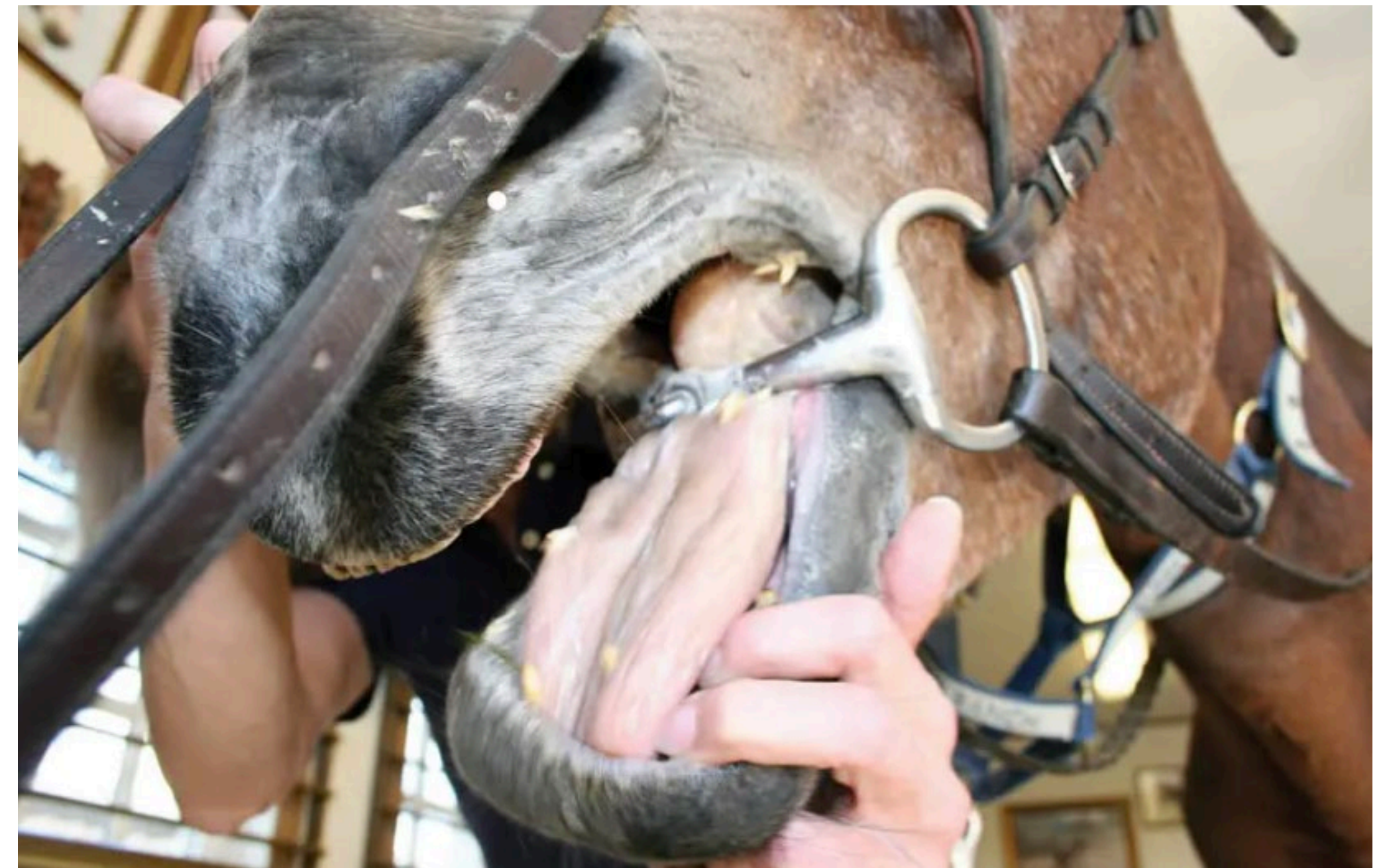


Parts of Snaffle Bit

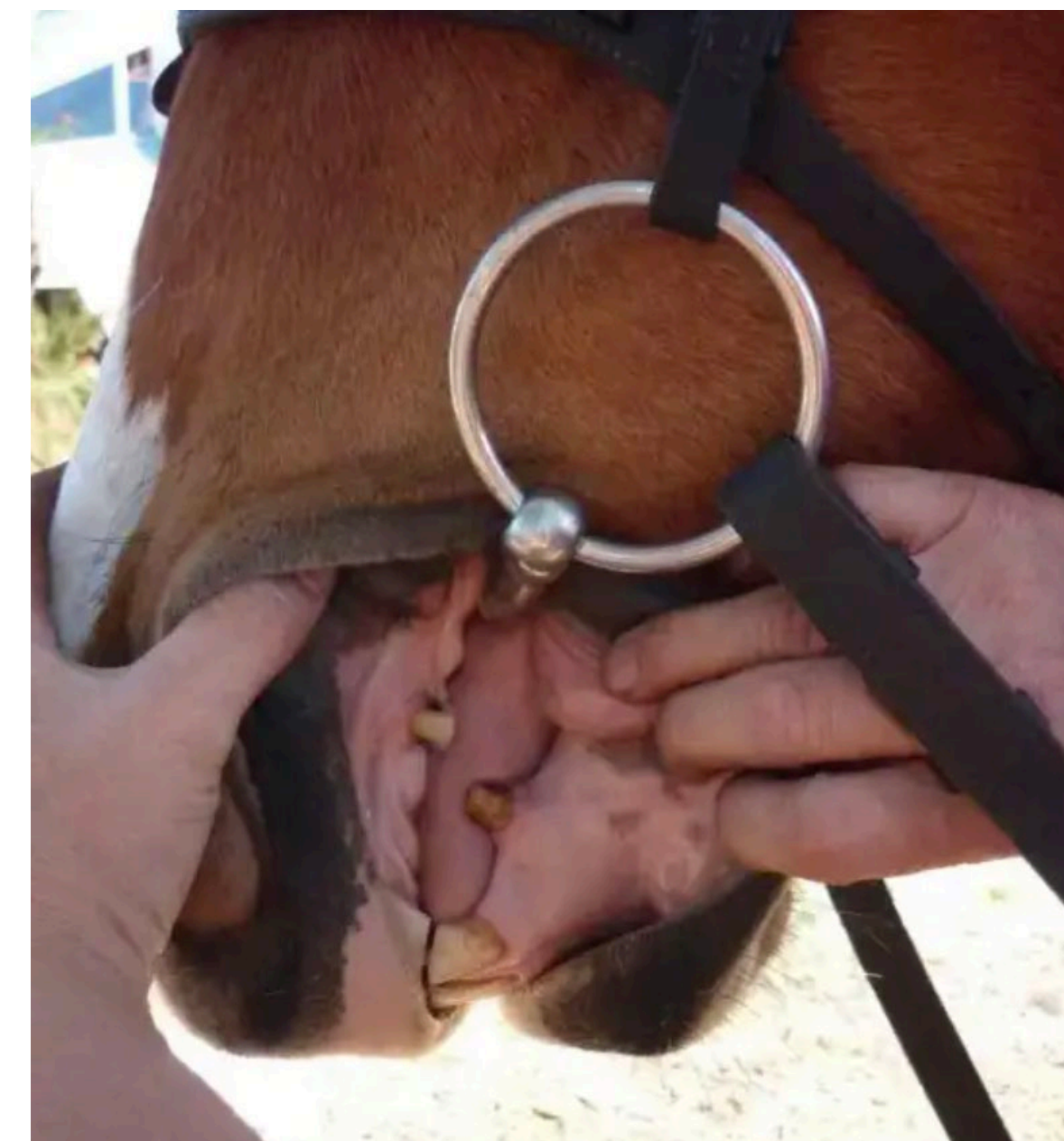


Addressing the "nutcracker effect" of a snaffle

- Single jointed snaffle bits are not designed for backward pressure on both reins – snaffle bits are a lateral tool
- When a snaffle is used laterally, it's an opening & lifting motion on one rein at a time
- The horse's jaws, tongue, and soft tissue prevent the nutcracker effect from happening, like it does on a shelf

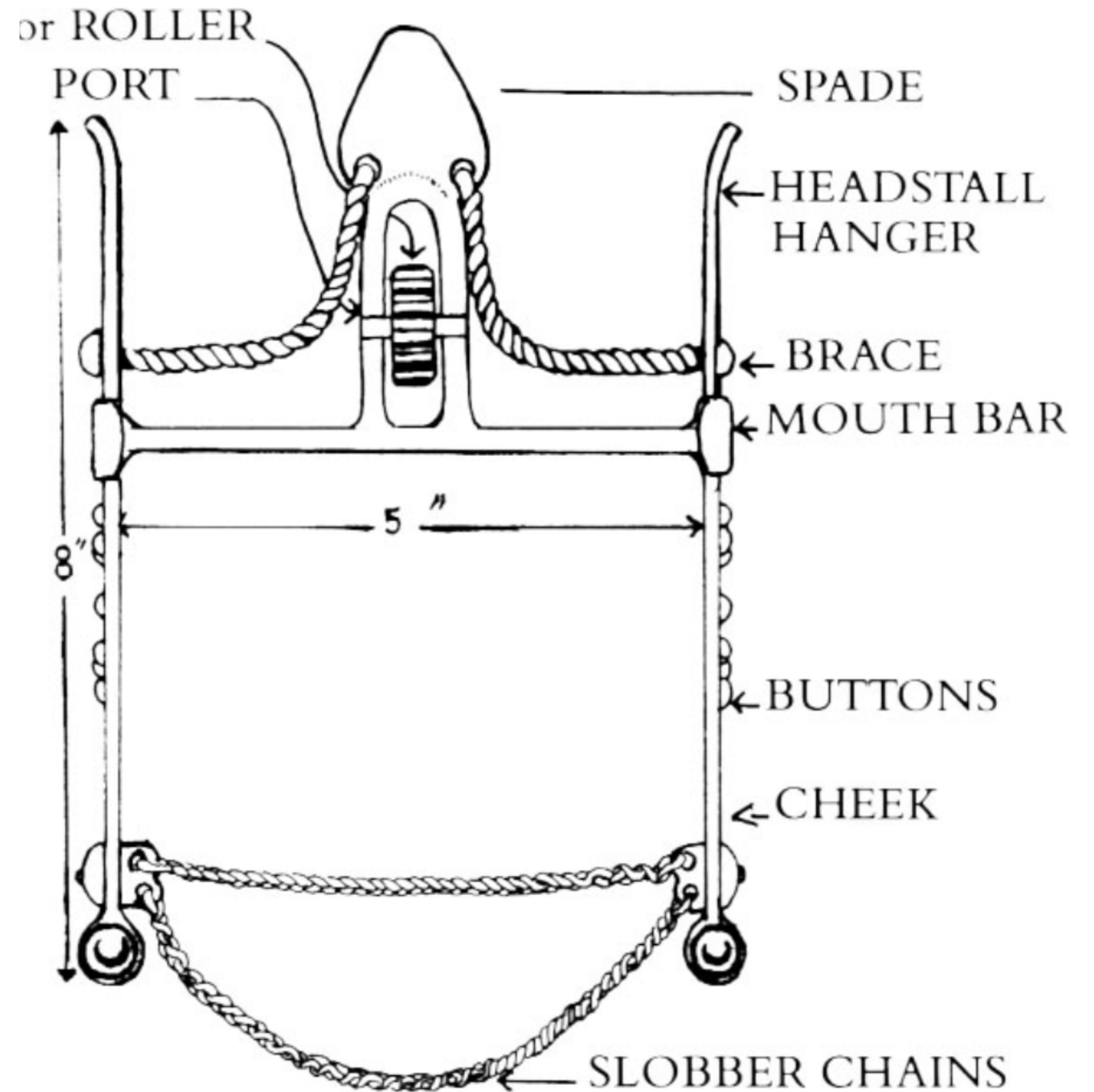
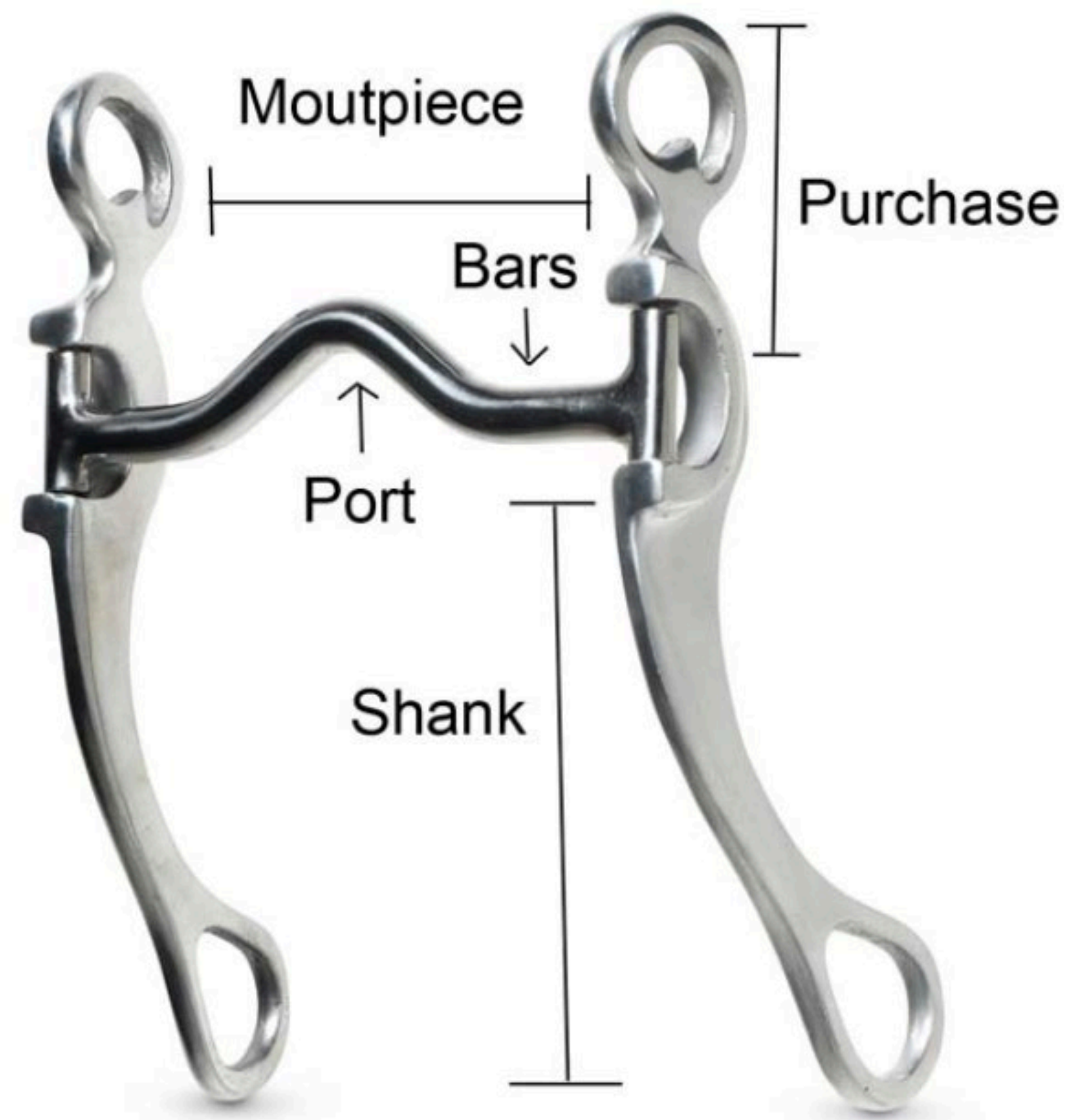


Lucky Three Ranch (above) & Bit Bank Australia (below)





Parts of Leverage Bit





Bit Materials

- Stainless Steel – looks nice, but does not lead to salivation
- Rubber / Plastic – may be found on English snaffle bits, not as durable as metal
- Sweet Iron – leads to salivation, many horses prefer
- Copper – leads to salivation, many horses pr
- Silver – often found as décor on bridle bit cheekpieces





General Bit Sizing – Mouthpiece Width

- 3", 3 ½", 3 ¾", and 4" are miniature sizes
- 4" and 4 ½" are pony sizes
- 4 ¾" and 5" are Arabian sizes
- 5" and 5 ½" are horse sizes
- 5 ½" and 6 are Warmblood sizes
- 6" and up are draft sizes

Most standard-order bits are 4 ½" to 5 ½" inches

Typically you want 1/8" to ¼" inch of space between mouthpiece and horse's lips

General Bit Sizing – Mouthpiece Thickness

- Thickness is typically measured in millimeters
- Measure on the mouthpiece, closest to the cheekpiece/ring
- Too thick? Horse cannot comfortably close mouth
- Too thin? Horse may be cut/bruised before he can respond



Headstall? Bridle? What's the difference?

Headstall



Bridle



Eleven anatomical considerations

1. Poll (behind the ears)
2. Ear base
3. Browband/forehead
4. TMJ (jaw) joint
5. Facial crest (ridge/pointy cheek bone)
6. Windpipe (throatlatch)
7. Cheekpieces
8. Noseband/cavesson area nerves
9. Molars and cheeks
10. Bars of the mouth
11. Nasal Bone
(Presteq Equine Sports, 2026)



Nerves of the horse's head (Bahr Saddlery)

EQUINE FACIAL PRESSURE POINTS

Horses are susceptible to facial pain and injury, and if your bridle isn't designed with this in mind, you could unknowingly be causing pain.

-  POLL AND AREA BEHIND EARS
-  MAIN BLOOD STREAM
-  AREA ABOVE EYE
-  MAIN NERVES
-  CHEEKBONE
-  AREA WHERE BRIDLE PASSES OVER TEETH
-  JAWBONE
-  NASAL PASSAGE
-  CHIN GROOVE



Bit & Bridle Pressure Points

Proper fit ensures correct pressure
on pressure points



Bridle Fit Considerations

- Improper fit may lead to undesirable behavior (head tossing, flipping, rooting, reluctance to be bridled, etc.)
- Common issues
 - Cheekpieces adjusted too short/long
 - Browband too small
 - Throatlatch too tight
 - Curb strap too loose
 - Bit too narrow (between rings/shanks/purchase)

Adjusting a Curb Strap/Chin Strap

- 1-2 fingers of space
- Ensure chain curbs lay flat
- Rein goes between cheekpiece and curb strap
- Too loose? Lose curb action of leverage bit





Fitting a Hackamore

- Hanger sits right below corner of eye
 - Can add a jowl strap to keep hanger away from eye
 - Event contact around noseband
 - Mecate rein drapes nicely
 - Heel knot serves as counterweight & balances the rig
 - See page 11 of 4-H Horse Show Rule Book
53. Whenever this rulebook refers to hackamore, it means the use of a rawhide-braided, leather-braided or rope bosal. It does not refer to a so-called mechanical hackamore or side pulls. Absolutely no metal will be permitted under the jaws regardless of how padded or covered when using a hackamore.

Western Styles

Browband



Split Ear



One-Ear/Sliding Ear



English Styles

Standard



Double

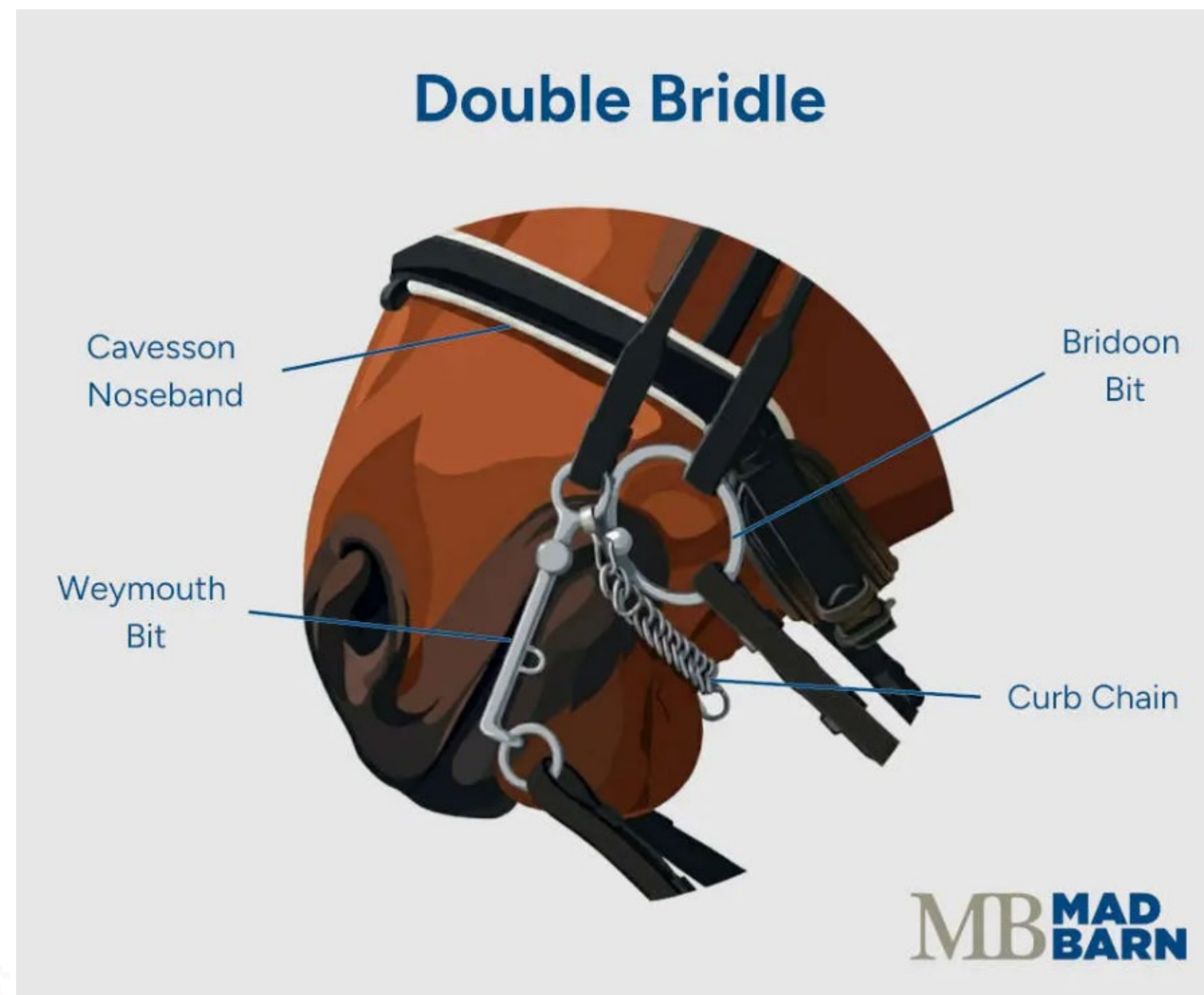


Figure 8/Flash



Main Types of Western Reins

Romal Reins



Mecate Reins



Roping Reins



Main Types of Western Reins

Two-Rein Set Up



Split Reins



Main Types of English Reins

Single Reins



Double Reins

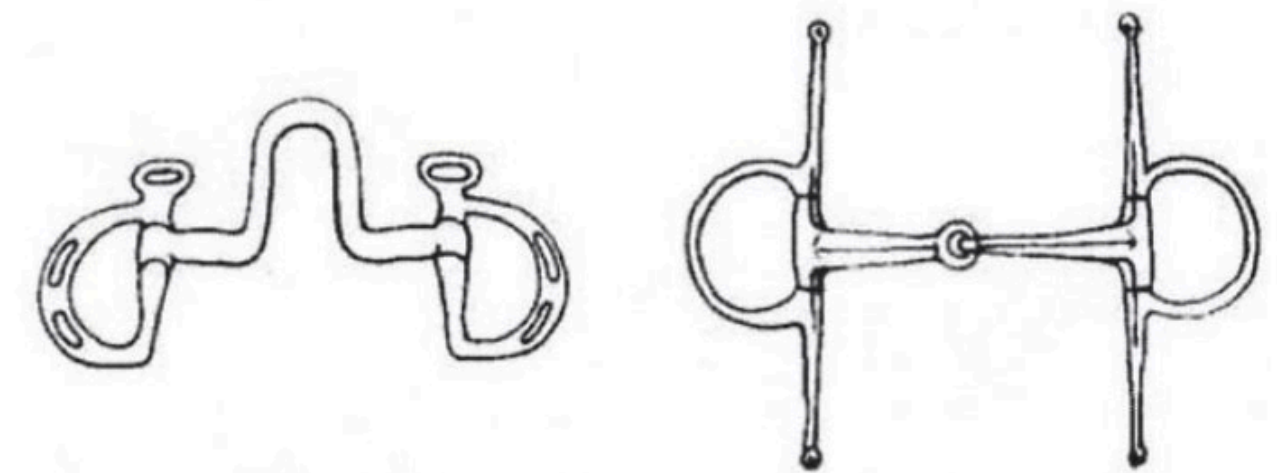


52. Prohibited: Triangular (fishback) bits, snaffles less than 5/16 inch in diameter and English ports over 3-1/2 inches in height. Refer to the current USEF Rulebook for legal bits in the English Divisions, when not covered in the Colorado 4-H Rule Book.

Illegal English Bits

UNACCEPTABLE ENGLISH BITS

See Colorado 4-H Horse Show Rule Book, page 9



Excessive Port

Triangular Mouth

55. Whenever this rule book refers to a bit in **Western and Ranch Horse Performance Classes**:

- A. It means the use of a curb bit that has a solid or broken smooth mouthpiece, is a minimum of 5/16" and maximum of 3/4" in diameter, has shanks (shanks to be no longer than 8 1/2") and acts with curb action. Curb straps or chains are required.
- B. Mechanical hackamores, chain or gag bits are prohibited in Western Performance and Ranch Horse Classes.

BASIC WESTERN MOUTHPIECE STYLES



Broken Mouth



Roller or Cricket Mouth



Low and Medium Port Mouth



Correction Mouth

Low or Medium Acceptable
Excessive Port Unacceptable
(greater than 3 1/2")

Illegal Western Bits

See Colorado 4-H Horse Show Rule Book, page 11-12

UNACCEPTABLE CURBS



Not Legal – Round Leather -
too narrow at chin, not flat



Not Legal – Round Leather -
too narrow across, not flat



Not Legal – Round Braided Leather -
wide enough, but rough and not flat



Not Legal – Braided Leather (Rawhide) -
too narrow and too rough



Not Legal – Single Link Chain -
if under 1/2" wide



Illegal Bits

Bits with mouthpieces less than
5/16ths in diameter

*Check your pony bits, as smaller
bits are often smaller in diameter
to accommodate their smaller
mouths & palates



Illegal Bits

Fishback snaffles have a sharp/pointed ridge on the mouthpiece



Illegal Bits

Mechanical hackamores not permitted in Western Performance or Ranch Horse classes. ARE permitted in Gymkhana classes.

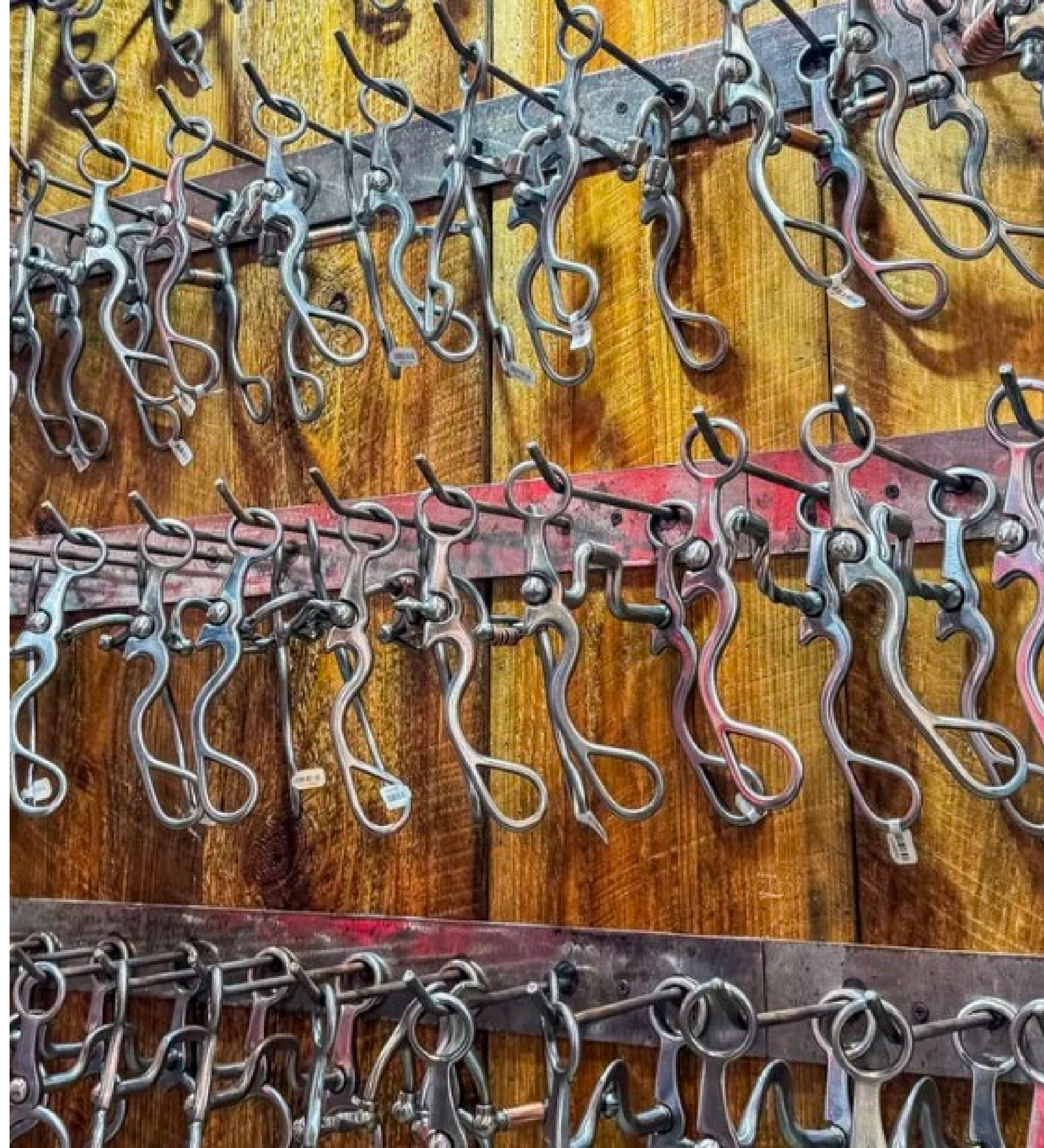


Illegal Bits

Any form of chain bits

Biting Principles

- Age of equine
- "Soft as possible, firm as necessary"
- Ability of the rider
- Education level of equine
- Medical issues



Points to Remember

- Not one bit will "cure" a behavior
- Bit severity should never be used as a "band aid" for poor training
- Often a horse needs better education, not a stronger bit
- Check your horse's teeth alongside your veterinarian



4-H Horse Show Rule Book

- Colorado 4-H Horse Show Rule Book is the #1 guide for bit, bridle, tack, & gear requirements for various classes
- Each discipline/division has different guidelines
- Familiarize yourself with the rule book ahead of the show!
- Practice with the tack you intend to show with
- [Rule book available at this link](#)



County Considerations

- Each county may have specific rules or regulations
- Check with your county Extension specialist
- Chat with your horse club leader, trainer, instructor, or mentor





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Questions?

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1 minute survey –

<https://forms.gle/CFZXYw4MUjXvQ5j89>

