

Horse Harnesses

Our topics for this week are:

- Parts of a horse harness
- Steps in harnessing horses
- Harness horse bridles
- Harness horse teams

Harnesses are worn by horses used to pull wagons, carts, sleighs, plows, or other loads.

Applying a harness to a horse is called **hitching up** (British call it “putting to”). A harness can be a breast strap (breast collar) worn across the chest for pulling light loads. Heavier loads with a breast strap can impair breathing, so they are pulled with a collar and hames harness.

A **hames** is two curved metal or wooden frames that are padded by the collar. **Collars** are always put on the horse before the remainder of the collar and hames harness. Poor fitting breast collars or full collars can injure the horse’s skin of the shoulder or damage nerves to the shoulder cause the muscles of the shoulder to become weak and shrink, a condition called “sweeney.”

Neck collars should only be used with vehicles that have whiffle trees, which move with the movement of the horse’s shoulders. The collar should fit loose enough to allow the flat of the hand to slide under the collar and the horse’s trachea. Two types of neck collars exist: the **Kay, or closed collar**, is used for light harnesses and the **open collar** is open at the top and closed with a strap.

Other parts of the harness include **breeching**, which is a strap that goes behind horses closest to the load to aid in slowing or stopping the load being pulled. Breeching straps should ride halfway between the hocks and point of the hip. It should be loose enough to allow the width of a hand under it. **Traces** are straps that connect the collar to the crossbar of the load (the **single tree**, the British term is “swingle tree”). The saddle or pad is a strap that goes around the chest of the horse and is attached by the girth. The saddle and girth of a light harness is collectively called a **surcingle**. Saddles have tugs and terrets. **Tugs** are loops to hold up the shafts of a wagon. **Terrets** are metal loops to channel the reins. The belly band, attached to the saddle and is loose, keeps the shafts of a cart from rising up. The saddle is attached to the breeching’s loin strap and the crupper by a backstrap. The crupper is a padded loop that goes under the tail to keep the saddle from slipping forward. The backstrap to the crupper should be loose enough to allow the width of a hand underneath it. Tail hairs are pulled to be short to keep draft horses tails from getting entrapped by the harness tack. The order of tacking up a harness horse is critical for proper application.

The Proper **Order of Harnessing a Horse is to:**

1. Place collar around the neck
2. Fasten hames in the collar
3. Place the harness saddle, back band, bellyband, girth, crupper, loin strap, and breeching on as one unit
4. Put the tail through the crupper

5. Tighten and buckle the girth of the harness saddle
6. Run the false martingale from the bottom of the collar between the front legs and attach to the girth
7. Run the reins through the saddle terrets and then the hame turrets
8. Put the bridle on and attach the reins
9. Attach the overcheck strap from the bridle to the saddle ring
10. Attach the vehicle to the harness

Bridles for harness horses are similar to those for riding horses. Some bridles have *blinders* (also called blinkers or winkers) to block the peripheral vision and encourage the horse to concentrate on just what is in front of him. An *overcheck* attached to a bridle and the pedestal on the saddle prevents the horse from grazing when hitched up and the horse's head from going under a shaft of a wagon if the horse stumbles. Two common bits are the snaffle bit and the Liverpool bit.

Horses closest to the wagon, called *wheel horses*, must be the largest and strongest to stop the wagon on command. In an 8-horse hitch, the next pair are the *body team*, then the *swing horses* and finally the *lead horses*. The lead horses must be the calmest to ignore distractions and lead the other pairs forward.

Now, let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Harnessing a horse must be done in proper sequence**
- 2. Temperament is important in positioning members to a team of harness horses**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.