

Maintenance of Leather Tack for Horseback Riding

Our topics for this week are:

- **Aspects of leather quality**
- **Cleaning and conditioning leather tack**
- **Mildew and storage of leather**

Leather is tanned animal skin. Most leather in the U.S. comes from cattle hide. Thick, strong leather for safe tack comes from select steers, not heifers, and is vegetable tanned.

Tanning makes leather more durable, pliable, and resistant to wear and rot. The most common methods of tanning are vegetable tanning and chrome tanning. Vegetable tanning produces leather that is non-corrosive to metal, non-irritating to the skin, can be carved or molded, and is strong, if thick. Vegetable tanning is used for saddle and other tack construction. The Hermann Oak Leather Company, founded in 1881, in St. Louis, Missouri is the leading vegetable tanned leather manufacturer in the U.S. Hermann Oak Leather Co. tans only steer hides.

Chrome tanning is less time-consuming and less expensive than vegetable tanning and more commonly used. It produces leather that is soft, pliable, and strong when thin. It is often used for making leather clothes. Most chrome tanning is now done in Mexico and Argentina. Well-tanned quality leather can last generations if treated properly. It should not be constantly stretched, soaked with water, nor allowed to dry out. Leather can be shaped by wetting it to create the desired shape, but must be dried slowly with gentle ventilation. Heat should not be applied for drying. Leather should not be soaked in water. The internal fibers will swell and be weakened. Proper conditioning of leather will make it water resistant, but not water proof.

Cleaning and Conditioning Leather Tack

Care of leather should begin with cleaning with a soft cloth dampened with 3:1 water to vinegar solution or water with 1 to 5 drops of dishwashing detergent as often as needed to remove surface dirt and grime.. Abrasion can wear the external surface of leather and small particles of grit ground into the leather can abrade internal fibers.

A damp cloth is acceptable for cleaning leather because the moisture added is on the surface and if properly ventilated, the leather surface will dry quickly. Some commercial leather care products contain glycerine, a common humectant used to moisturize human skin. It will

also make leather more pliable, but it is absorbed by leather and will attract and retain moisture that can promote growth of mildew.

Leather should be moisturized 1 to 4 times per year with oil, usually neatsfoot oil. This lubricates the internal fibers and inhibits drying and becoming brittle. The frequency should be more often if exposed to moisture, drying, or dust. Not only the smooth surface of the leather should be oiled. The more porous rough underside of the leather on saddle shirts, fenders, and similar parts of saddles and other leather tack should also be oiled. More oil is absorbed by the roughout side than the smooth side of leather.

Saddle soap will remove remaining surface dirt that has been softened by neatsfoot oil, add some conditioning and leave beeswax on the surface which will create a water-resistant barrier and will aid in retention of the neatsfoot oil conditioning.

Storage and Mold

Fungi, mold and mildew, can damage leather. Mold is green, red, or black and more penetrating and damaging than mildew. However, mildew is, by far, the most common. It is a powdery white flat growth. Eventually it may turn brown. Mildew grows in warm, damp, stagnant air flow, and dark environments. Dirty or sweaty tack is most susceptible for rapid mildew growth. It is inhibited by humidity less than 60% and temperatures less than 70 degrees or more than 90 degrees.

Leather should never be stored in a plastic bag where it would likely mold. Exposure to extreme heat and very low or high humidity should be avoided. Exposure to air and gentle ventilation reduces the risk of mildew. Simply using tack outdoors on a regular basis helps prevent mold and mildew. If leather tack is not used regularly, a couple of hours in the summer sun when humidity is low once a month can be beneficial in inhibiting mildew from drying and exposure to UV light.

Leather tack should be stored indoors when not in daily use or receiving a brief sunlight exposure. The tack room should be climate-controlled for humidity, temperature, and air flow. After use, tack should be wiped clean of dirt and sweat with a damp cloth. Dirty or sweaty saddle blankets and pads should be rinsed and allowed to dry, preferably in sunlight, before being folded and/or taken indoors. Saddle blankets or pads should not be stored resting directly on or under a saddle.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

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

- 1. Leather tack should be cleaned and conditioned at least once per year.**
- 2. Initial cleaning should be done with a damp cloth.**
- 3. Conditioning is performed with application of neatsfoot oil.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 325 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.