

Horseback Riding Tack: Halters, Lead Ropes, and Saddles

Our topics for this week are types and uses of:

- Halters
- Lead ropes
- Saddles

Basic Equipment and Facilities

Handling equipment for horses that attach to the horse's body is called *tack*. Most tack is made of leather, but some is made of nylon or other synthetic materials. Stitching in tack can break and materials can wear out, particularly where leather bends sharply around metal rings and buckles.

Halters and Lead Ropes

Halters ("head collar" - British) and lead ropes are the most basic equipment needed to handle and restrain horses. Halters are usually made of leather, rope, nylon, or polyester. Parts of a halter are the noseband which includes the nosepiece and chinpiece, connecting strap, throat latch piece, cheekpiece, crownpiece, and buckle. Leather and synthetic strap halters have metal nose and cheek connectors.

Leather halters will break under pressure and cause little discomfort when pulled against. These characteristics promote disrespect for restraint and will trap moisture underneath the halter that can cause skin problems. Nylon or polyester will not break, although their metal connectors can. They cause little discomfort when resisted, traps less moisture and dirt than leather. If near a fire, a nylon halter can melt and glue itself to the horse's skin. Rope halters will not break, causing discomfort if pulled on and therefore less resistance to restraint. Rope halters do not trap moisture or dirt.

Leather or nylon strap halters have rings (connectors) that the nosepiece, chinstrap, cheekpieces, throatlatches, and crownpiece attach to. There are noseband, cheekpiece, and throatlatch rings and a single leading or tying ring on the lower aspect of the noseband. Attachments to the rings or the rings can break under moderate stress.

Lead straps with a chain shank and clip are sometimes used on difficult to handle horses, primarily racehorses and breeding stallions. The chain shank is clipped to a halter and then run through some of the halter rings to exert leverage and pressure on the nose, chin, or gums. Halters with round rings should be used if a chain shank will be used to reduce the risk of the chain from binding in the ring.

Although common in Europe and with racing thoroughbreds in the U.S., horses should not be turned out in a pasture or pen with a halter on. If a pasture halter is considered absolutely necessary, a *breakaway halter* with velcro attachments or a leather "fuse" (adjoining leather straps thinner than normal halter straps) joined by a Chicago screw. Breakaway halters have an important disadvantage that they may break at a time that restraint is needed. They can also teach a horse that pulling back with a halter on is an effective escape route which eliminates an important psychological advantage that handlers usually have with properly trained horses, i.e.,

pulling back does not lead to escape.

Twisted cotton lead ropes are the most comfortable for handlers. They are strong, provide good traction for gripping with the hand, and hold hitches well. Metal halter clips can be attached, but are not necessary for attachment to the halter since a double sheet bend hitch can be used. Braided nylon is available in a variety of colors and a popular choice, but is slick and does not hold hitches as well. Metal halter clips are clamped on the end of nylon lead ropes. The metal clips or their clamp on the rope is the weakest part of a nylon lead. Lead ropes for only leading and tying horses are usually 9 to 12 feet in length. Longer, heavier lead ropes of 15 to 20 feet are used for longeing or leading other horses, such as pack horses from horseback.

Riding Tack

In addition to halters and leads, tack includes saddles, reins, harness, breast collars, cruppers, and martingales. Many horse handlers, especially veterinarians and veterinary technicians may not use riding tack, but it is important to know how others use tack on their horses for proper communication and the inspection of improper use that could cause safety problems to horses or people or produce physical injury to the horse.

Saddles

The major saddle styles in the U.S. include *Western* (with a horn to dally a rope for cattle restraint) and *English* (relatively flat in front without swells). *Australian* saddles (swells in front but no horn) have increased in popularity in the last 20 years. Less common saddle types are racing, endurance riding, and sidesaddles. The strap that holds the Western saddle on is called the *cinch* and the English riding term is *girth*.

Western saddles may have one cinch if used to demonstrate leg communication with the horse. Saddles intended for use working cattle or trail riding have a back cinch that keeps the saddle from shifting up in back when a rope on a horn pulls the saddle forward or when riding down sloping ground. Western cinches may be canvas, neoprene, cotton, nylon, or mohair. String mohair cinches allow better air circulation and are cooler, are cleaned easily, and stretch enough to conform to the shape of the horse.

Two cinches on a saddle is called *double rigging*. Double rigging is preferred for roping, ranch work, and trail riding on sloping ground. The double rigging is termed *full* if the front cinch is below the swell of the saddle and there is a back cinch. A *7/8 full rigging* has a front cinch that is 7/8 of the distance from the cantle to the swells. The attachment to the saddle is a Y-shape. A *3/4 rigging* is a front cinch located 3/4 of the cantle to swell distance and can be either single-rigged (1 cinch) or double-rigged. *Center fire rigging* is one cinch attached at the middle distance from the cantle to the swells. Attachments of cinches to a Western saddle can be D-ring attached to the saddle tree, in-skirt, or flat plate. In-skirt and flat plate attachments reduce leather bulk between the horse's sides and the rider's legs.

There are three main forms of English saddles: *dressage and saddle seat, close contact*, and *all-purpose*. Dressage and saddle seat saddles have straight flaps. The cantle on dressage saddles is high and on saddle seat saddles, it is low. Close contact saddles are used for events that include jumping. They have a curved flap and less padding. All-purpose saddles are a combination of both.

English style girths are often leather. Only one girth is used on English saddle. The position of attachment to the saddle is analogous to 3/4 attachment on a Western saddle. English

girths have double buckles on each end of a single girth. An English overgirth has one buckle on each end of the girth and a strap that wraps around the horse's chest and over the saddle seat. Overgirths are used to stabilize polo saddles.

Saddle blankets or pads aid in padding the horses back from getting friction and pressure *saddle sores* on their back. If poorly designed or misfitted to the horse, saddles can easily cause back sores on horses. For example, Arabian horses have more narrow ribcage and shorter backs than quarter horses. A quarter horse saddle will cause back skin sores on an Arabian horse.

Western stirrups are generally 5.25 inches wide, *bell-bottomed stirrups* that are used by ropers to stand and be balanced. Bell-bottomed stirrups use a leather wrap on bottom to reduce the friction with the sole of a boot and getting hung up. *Roper* and *Visalia stirrups* are flat bottomed and similar to bell stirrups. *Oxbow stirrups* (also called Rodeo stirrups) are circular and for riding on the arch of the foot, reducing the risk of blowing a stirrup, i.e., the foot slipping out. Oxbow stirrups are used by cutting horse riders, barrel racers, and to start young colts under saddle. If hung up and dragged, the rider can free himself easier than with bell-bottomed stirrups by just rolling over on his stomach toward the horse. Oxbow stirrups are less likely to be crushed around the rider's foot if rolled on by a horse that falls. Other or additional options to prevent hang-ups are break-a-way stirrups or stirrups with *tapaderos* (front covers to prevent the foot from going through the stirrup). Tapaderos also keep brush or branches from being caught in a stirrup and help keep feet warmer in cold weather.

English stirrups which are called *irons* are metal, open ended, and attached to the *stirrup leathers* which, in turn, attach to the saddle at the stirrup bar. The stirrup bar latch should be kept in open position. In the open position, the stirrup leathers attachment to the saddle can detach from the saddle if pulled backward as when a rider would fall off with a foot caught in the irons. English-style riders can safely wear tighter boots than western riders and lace-up boots because of the irons release bars on English-style saddles. Stirrup length varies with the type of English riding. Dressage and saddleseat riders need to use longer stirrup lengths, while events involving jumping require shorter stirrup lengths.

Other equipment that may be attached to a saddle include a *crupper*, which is a strap from the back of the saddle that goes under the horse's tail. Its purpose is to prevent the saddle from slipping forward. A *breast collar* (also called "breastplate" or "breast girth") is a strap that goes across the front of a horse's chest and attaches to both sides of the saddle. Breast collars may be 3-piece, tripping, or pulling. Three-piece collars are Y-shaped and the lower strap attaches to the middle of the cinch. A tripping collar is a broader strap that only attaches at each side of the saddle. A pulling collar is broad, Y-shaped, and attaches at the middle of the cinch and higher on the saddle, near or at the saddle horn. All breast collars should not press on the chest high enough to press on the trachea.

A breast collar keeps the saddle from slipping backwards, and if the cinch fails, the breast collar prevents the saddle from sliding underneath the horse. *Martingales* are varied ("standing," "running," "German," "Irish") but all are straps attached to the cinch or breast collar that runs to the reins or a noseband to prevent a horse from raising its head too high. Most run to rings on their ends that the reins slide through. Standing martingales run to a noseband. Western *tie-downs* are standing martingales. If using martingales, a rider must avoid prolonged, extreme head flexion which can cause pain and interfere with a horse's respiration. In English riding this is called *rollkur* and is banned by the International Federation for Equestrian Sports.

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

- **Regular halters should never be left on horses while they are in pens or pastures**
- **Twisted cotton lead ropes are the safest for handling and tying horses**
- **English saddles have a stirrup bar latch that should be kept open to prevent a thrown rider from being dragged**
- **Since Western saddles do not have a stirrup bar, it is critical that loose fitting boots with heels of at least one inch high be worn to reduce the risk of being dragged.**

Abby says it is time to wrap up this episode.

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.