

Some Dangerous Habits of Horse Handlers and Riders: Part II

Our topics for this week are **dangerous habits while tacking up and mounting.**

Horses at a public riding stable have been chosen for their tolerance for riders' poor horsemanship. Riding the average horse relatively safely that is not part of a public riding stable requires a rider to have proper preparation and training. A rider should be able to catch the horse he plans to ride and know how to tack it up correctly.

Bad Habit #1: Using poor quality tack or not maintaining your tack in good repair.

When you ride horses, your life can depend on the quality and condition of your tack. When you buy tack, you should buy the best quality you can afford and when assessing quality, silver bling adds nothing to safety. In addition, some tack with a lot of bling have the poorest quality leather and stitching. Leather is most likely to crack, tear, or break if it is dirty or dried out. The surface of all leather tack should be cleaned as needed depending on riding or storage conditions. Replenishing the oil in leather should be done at least once per year and more often in dry storage conditions. Tack should never be stored in direct sunlight and never in plastic bags or containers. Brief exposure to water from rain or crossing rivers or streams will not damage well conditioned leather, but it should be wiped dry as soon as possible.

Leather is most likely to break at points with a lot of movement and where the leather has to make a sharp bend, such as billets in the saddle skirt, or rein attachments to the bit. All points of bending of leather straps should be checked frequently depending on the age and care of the tack. Also, metal connectors, particularly involving the bridle should be checked for cracks frequently.

Bad Habit #2: Not cleaning the horse's haircoat and hoofs prior to tacking up.

A horse's haircoat should be brushed clean before tacking up. Dirt or dust under the saddle blanket or cinches can cause saddle sores. The hoofs should be picked out to exam the health of the foot and, if shod, the condition of its shoes. Packed mud or ice in the hoof can impair a horse's ability to maintain its footing.

Bad Habit #3: Tying a young or unfamiliar horse to a hitch when saddling.

Horses should be taught to stand still while being saddled. Young or unfamiliar horses may pull back if tied up when being saddled. It is safer for a horse and rider to drape the lead rope over a forearm while saddling. Well-trained horses can be ground tied and saddled. Ground tying is not really tied. The lead rope is simply dropped and the horse stands still. Not tying the horse and expecting it to stand still aids in having the horse learn to stand still while being mounted.

Bad Habit #4: Using a too small, too thin, or too thick saddle blanket.

A saddle blanket should extend 2 to 3 inches in front of the swells, 2 to 3 inches past the back of the saddle, and 2 to 3 inches, or more, below the skirt on each side. A too thin saddle blanket may not provide enough cushion and a blanket with a saddle pad may provide too much padding over the withers and could increase the risk of slippage of the saddle to the side. Most useful saddle blankets are about 7/8 inches thick.

Bad Habit #5: Not attaching the front cinch first when saddling or releasing it last when unsaddling.

The first attachment should be the front cinch and the last detachment should be the front cinch to prevent the saddle from sliding off or under the horse until you are ready to remove the saddle. Back cinches, breast collars, tiedowns, and cruppers should be attached later and detached before the front cinch.

Bad Habit #6: Tightening the cinch too fast or not checking the tightness at least 3 times.

Horses instinctively inhale when a cinch is being tightened. It is wrong to assume you can appropriately tighten a cinch with one try. If done too fast or too tightly, they become “cinchy”, that is, showing discomfort when cinched up. The cinch should be tightened slowly until slightly snug with an intention to tighten it more after a break. Before mounting, the cinch should be slowly tightened to a point that still allows 3 fingers to be easily slid between the cinch and the horse. After the horse moves around, especially in hot weather, the cinch should be checked again. Tightening or checking the tightness of the cinch should be done a minimum of 3 times, more may be appropriate for some horses and some environments.

Bad Habit #7: Roughly applying a bridle.

Horses with healthy ears do not become head shy if properly handled in the past. Bridles should be applied after the horse is saddled. They should not be tied, but a lead rope should be placed around the horse’s neck or the halter’s crown piece fastened around its neck to be able to control and position the horse to receive the bridle. When the bit is presented to the horse, it should be allowed time to take the bit without banging it on it’s teeth. The horse’s ears should always be handled gently, including when pulling the crown piece of the bridle over its ears. It is a good practice to go over the far ear first and then the near ear and to also cup a hand over the ear and gently push it forward and pull the crown piece over your hand than directly over the ear.

Bad Habit #8: Using a tie-down improperly.

Tie-downs are used by ropers and barrel racers to prevent a horse from flipping its head up during speed events in an arena. They should not be used outside an arena. A loose horse that has a tie-down on may try to cross water and could drown. A drooping tie-down can be stepped into and trap the head down if the horse lowers its head as if to graze. This can cause the horse to panic. Tie-downs need to be adjusted to the size of the horse and run through a keeper ring on a breast collar.

Bad Habit #9: Pulling yourself into the saddle by the horn and cantle.

When you mount a horse, it should be primarily by the impulsion from your right leg. Hopping a couple of times in rhythm can improve your final hop to mount and prevent pulling the saddle sideways. Your right hand should be on the horn or cantle for balance not to pull yourself up. Your left hand should grasp the mane and reins for balance and control. If you mount properly, you should be able to mount without the cinch being fastened. Pulling the saddle sideways when mounting is uncomfortable for the horse and could result in the saddle sliding to the side or even under the horse. If you cannot mount properly from the ground, a mounting block should be used.

Bad Habit #10: Allowing the horse to move while being mounted.

It is dangerous for a horse to move while you mount. Mounting improperly is a major reason that horses will try to move during mounting, so before working on the horse's problem of moving, you need to learn to mount without causing discomfort to the horse. After you mount, you should sit still for at least 10 seconds and expect the horse to wait for your clue to move.

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. Riders should know how to catch and effectively handle their horse while on the ground.**
- 2. Selecting quality tack and properly maintaining it is important for horseback riding safety.**
- 3. A rider should not pull on the saddle with both hands when mounting.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my recent 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 150 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.