

## **Footwear for Horseback Riding**

Our topics for this week are:

- **Dangers of being hung-up (having a foot trapped in a stirrup and dragged by a horse)**
- **Appropriate footwear for Western and English riding**

A long time ago, when I was 21 years old and leading trail rides, I had to save a girl from being dragged by a horse. The girl had claimed to be an experienced rider but she was not and she had worn inappropriate attire to ride, including tennis shoes for footwear. When our group was in a meadow and moved up to a lope, her inexperience became clear. She rode unbalanced with her toes down. Fairly quickly her left foot slipped entirely through the stirrup and the stirrup slipped up to her knee as she slid to the left side of the saddle. Fortunately, I was able to ride up alongside her horse and grab a rein and stop her horse before the girl hit the ground.

Being hung up in a stirrup and dragged by a horse in a groomed area may be survivable, if the horse does not kick you, step on you, or slam you against a wall or gate. Being dragged by a horse outside an arena is more dangerous since you risk the same injuries as in an arena plus rough ground, including rocks, limbs, streams, and being dragged for a longer distance.

### **General Requirements for Riding Footwear**

Some people are slaves to fashion and like western-style clothes with a lot of bling. I like western dress that is functional and durable. Fashionistas tend to wear their pants inside their western boots because their pants are too tight to wear on the outside and they want to show off their boot shafts. If someone is planning to use boots to ride horses, they should be far more concerned with the functional design and durability of their riding boots than they are about showing off the artwork on their boot shafts.

Appropriate footwear and proper foot position are extremely important to a horseback rider's safety. Whether or not you become disfigured, disabled, or dead from riding horses depends a lot on your footwear. A riding boot's purpose is to protect the rider's foot and ankle and to prevent the foot from being caught in a stirrup. No matter what the riding discipline, boots with a heel at least 1 inch high are needed and the rider should ride with the heel pressed down. The sole of the boot should be smooth, relatively thin, smooth leather or with almost no tread. The toe must not be boxy and not squared off. Crepe soles, deep treads in the sole, and lace up boots can increase the chance of the foot being trapped in the stirrup during a fall. English boots that

have a zipper in the back of the boot shaft are fine, but other zippered boots, especially with zippers on the inside of the calf, should not be worn when riding horses.

### **Western Riding Boots**

Not all western style boots are intended for riding horses. Squared off toes, blocky or short heels, and treads on the soles are not for riding. Western riding boots should fit loosely so that if the boot hangs up in a stirrup, there is a chance the foot will slip out. Riding boots are not comfortable to walk much in. The old vaqueros and cowboys preferred to be in the saddle to work. Working requiring a lot of walking or standing was considered demeaning. Pointed or rounded toes are easier to get into a stirrup when mounting and will bend easier in a hang up to free the foot than street-style blocky toes. Low, wide heels are comfortable for walking and unsafe for riding. Traditional western riding boots have high heels with an angled back portion which can allow a boot that slips through a stirrup to be more easily pulled out. Roper boots were designed for calf ropers to feel more comfortable on the ground with a blocky heel, broader toe, and shorter shaft. They are not as safe as the traditional Western boot for extended time in a saddle.

### **English Riding Boots**

English riding boots are either tall boots or paddock boots. Tall boots should extend to just below the kneecap and are used for dressage and field events. Paddock boots only extend to above the ankle and intended for stable work. They are not for competition or showing. If used for pleasure riding, the rider should also wear chaps or half chaps.

Tall boots fall into one of three categories: field, dress, and dressage. Field tall boots are used for hunting and jumping events. Dress and dressage tall boots are stiffer and more likely to have a back zipper.

Unlike Western boots, English boots are meant to be worn snugly, but not to cause pinching. This allows the rider to feel the horse's sides and to give controlled cues to the horse. Tall boots are not prone to going through a stirrup, plus English saddles have a stirrup bar which should be kept open and well oiled. Stirrup bars in open position allow the stirrup when pulled backward to disengage from the saddle. This is not possible on a Western saddle.

### **Additional Hang-Up Riaks**

Hang-ups can happen with appropriate footwear if the stirrups do not fit your foot. The bottom of the inner surface of the stirrup should be 1 to 1½ inches wider than the width of your boot. You should ride on the ball of your foot and not the arch. Your heels should be pressed down at all times when riding.

Leaning back in a saddle to go under tree limbs can increase the possibility of a hang-up. Always lean forward. Don't ride horses that may rear. If a horse rears and the rider falls backward, the chance of a foot getting hung-up is high.

Hang-up risk is also high during a dismount, particularly with short riders. Horses should be trained to never move during a dismount. The rider should either free both feet from the stirrups and slide down the side of the horse or at a minimum move your left foot part way out of the stirrup before dismounting.

## **Alternatives**

What are the alternatives? Well, you can quit riding horses (that is no fun), ride bareback (not the safest thing in the world to do), or use tapadero stirrups. Tapadero stirrups are hooded which prevents a foot from going through the stirrup. They are used when riding in high brush to protect the rider's feet, in extremely cold climates for warmth, for decorations on parade saddles, and should be on all children's western saddles to prevent hang-ups.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular subjects contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

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

- 1. Riding boot and foot position in a stirrup are important to prevent hang-ups and being dragged by a horse.**
- 2. The risk of a hang-up is particularly high during dismounts or if a horse rears.**

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

Additional information is available at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://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.