

Tacking Up for Horseback Riding

Our topics for this week are proper tacking up, including:

- Correct saddling procedures
- Non-stressful bridling

Tacking up is putting the riding gear on a horse. There are potential hazards in the process of tacking up, particularly putting on the bridle since the horse can resist by swinging its head and hitting a handler's face. Other potential hazards are being kicked when reaching underneath the horse or being stepped on during tacking up.

Saddling

Before saddling, the horse should always be brushed first, including under the chest where the cinch or girth will press on the skin. Each foot should be picked up and the bottom surface cleaned with a hoof pick. Packed dirt, mud, or snow can interfere with traction and act in a similar manner to sliders used to move furniture. Cleaning the feet also allows the rider to check for lameness and search for its cause. Proper use of the pick is to push dirt and debris away from the handler. Pulling the pick toward the handler may result in injury to the handler or the frog of the horse's hoof.

After the horse has been groomed and the hoofs picked out, the saddle pad or blanket should be placed on the back 4 to 6 inches further up the neck than where it should sit when the horse is ridden. The pad is then slid back slightly to get the hair underneath to lie flat. The offside stirrup is placed over the saddle seat. With one hand grasping the roll of the cantle and the other holding the horn, swell, or front of the skirt, the saddle is lifted and laid down gently on the horse's back. The front of the saddle pad or blanket should be about 1 inch in front of the saddle. The saddle blanket should be lifted and tented under the gullet of the saddle to allow air to reach under the pad and prevent the pad from binding on the withers. Before reaching underneath the horse to grasp the cinch or girth, the horse should be forewarned by a pat on the lower chest. When reaching underneath the horse, the handler should reach with his right hand and face forward in relation to the horse to protect his head from a possible kick.

Saddling is similar with an English saddle, except the irons should be run up to the saddle before saddling the horse. Swinging irons can injure the rider or the horse. Plus, unsecured irons can catch on fences and other objects or the horse can catch its hoof or jaw in an extended iron. After saddling, the irons can be run down and the length of the stirrups can be readjusted before or while the rider is in the saddle.

If a double-rigged (2 cinches) western saddle is used, it is important to connect the front cinch first and then the back cinch and breast collar, if using one. The back cinch should not be so loose that a hoof could get caught in it when kicking at belly flies or for other reasons. A loose back cinch can also allow a branch to slip under it on trail rides. There should be a cinch keeper (cinch hobble) that is a small strap which connects the front and rear cinches underneath the horse's chest to prevent the rear cinch from sliding into the flank area. Back cinches are

fastened last when tacking up, and unfastened first when removing the saddle.

The front cinch should be tightened at least three times:

- (1) when initial saddling,
- (2) after the horse relaxes, and
- (3) after the handler has longed the horse or ridden for a few minutes.

The final tightening of the girth on an English saddle can be done while sitting in the saddle. Tightening the cinch on a western saddle must be done from the ground. The final position of the front cinch should be with the front edge about 4 inches (4 finger widths) behind the horse's elbow. The rider should be able to slip 3 fingers under the cinch or it is too tight.

After fastening the cinches, accessory equipment that attaches to the cinch can be fastened, such as a breast collar, martingale, or tie-down. Tie-downs should always be run through a keeper in the breast collar, so when the horse puts its head down, it cannot step over the tie-down and trap its head in that position with the tie-down under a front leg. Tie-downs should never be attached to a curb strap or chain which could cause serious injury to the mouth or teeth. They should only be attached to a noseband.

Bridling

A bridle is a headstall with attached reins, bit, chin or curb strap, and usually a throatlatch. The bridle is put on the horse after saddling. All components of the bridle should be inspected for integrity of the leather and proper attachments. If using a snaffle bit, a chin strap should be attached to the snaffle rings between the bit and the reins to prevent the bit from slipping through the side of the mouth and so that the chin strap does not interfere with rein communication with the mouth.

The horse should be untied prior to bridling. The halter is removed and the crownpiece is fastened around the neck. The lead rope should be draped over the neck to keep it off the ground where it might be stepped on by the horse or wrapped around the handler's leg. The bit should be rubbed with the rider's hands to check for any rough or sharp spots on the bit and to check for excessive heat or cold bit temperature. The rider stands on the horse's left side just behind its ears. Split reins should be draped over the right shoulder to keep them off the ground as with the lead rope. If using romal or loop reins, the reins are put over the neck before bridling. Loop reins must never hang down in front of a horse due to the danger of it stepping through the loop and entrapping its head. Working horses are often taught to ground tie (remain stationary if the reins are dropped to the ground). Only split reins must be used for ground tying.

The rider's right hand is placed on top of the horse's upper neck. While holding the headstall with the left hand, the rider's left hand is placed on bridge of the horse's nose. The right hand is slid up the horse's neck and between its ears and then reaches down to the horse's forehead to grasp the top of headstall (crownpiece) which is held with spread fingers. The rider's left hand is then moved down to the bit and the bit held under the muzzle.

The thumb of the left hand is placed under the bit and the other fingers used to push the chin strap away from bit. The bit is brought up the horse's mouth with the rider's hand while simultaneously lifting the crown piece with the right hand. If the horse does not voluntarily open its mouth to take the bit, the thumb of the left hand is placed in the mouth at the bars (gap) of the

teeth and pushes up on the roof of the mouth to encourage the horse to open its mouth. The bit is gently put in the mouth and chin strap under the chin.

The crownpiece of the headstall is placed over right (offside) ear and then left ear by cupping the right hand over the ear and pushing the ear forward while lifting the crown piece over the right hand covering the ear. The same procedure is repeated to place the crown piece over the left ear. The headstall drags over the rider's hand, not the horse's ears. Care should be taken when lifting and pulling the crown piece backward over the right hand and the horse's ear that the headstall does not rub the horse's eye, particularly on the right side. The forelock should be pulled from under browband so that it can aid in fly control of the ears and keep the head cooler. If the headstall is split ear, the ear on the side of the split is placed in the split first and then the headstall is put behind the other ear.

The throatlatch should be fastened with sufficient laxity to permit free movement of the horse's head without the throatlatch binding the throat. Four fingers should easily slide between the throatlatch and the horse's throat. Adjustment of the browband is then checked, including cheek pieces and placement of the bit in the mouth, and chin or curb strap as well as the throatlatch strap. Both the chin strap and throatlatch should have about 3 fingers width distance from the jaw and throat, respectively. If the horse gapes its mouth and rolls its tongue, the bit may have gone under its tongue by mistake.

Cavessons and *nosebands* are headstall accessories separate from the bridle in western riding and incorporated in the headstall of the bridle in English riding. A cavesson keeps the mouth from gaping open to relieve the pressure exerted by the bit. Nosebands are connected to a strap that runs through a breast collar and attaches to the cinch. Its purpose is to prevent the head from being raised beyond a desired point. Either cavessons or nosebands should cross the nose above the level of the nose cartilage with one or two fingers space underneath. A drop noseband is placed over the bridle with the noseband around the lower part of the nose in front of bit. Drop nosebands should allow the horse to lick but not open the mouth.

When removing the bridle, a romal or other looped reins are placed over the neck near the ears. Split reins are placed over the rider's right shoulder. The halter or lead rope is put around the neck between the reins and the saddle. After unfastening the throatlatch, the headstall is taken off over the left ear and then the right ear with right hand. The rider's right hand is kept between the horse's ears and the headstall slowly lowered to allow the horse to push the bit out of its mouth without banging on the horse's teeth. The ease in removing the bridle, particularly being gentle with the horse's ears and letting it slowly drop the bit from its mouth, sets the tone for success in the next bridling attempt.

Unsaddling is done in reverse order from saddling. For example, accessories that attach to the front cinch (chest harnesses, martingales, tie-downs) should be unfastened before the front cinch is loosened. With doubled-rigged saddles, the rear cinch should be undone before the front cinch.

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

- **Prior to tacking up, the horse should be groomed, including picking out its hoofs**
- **All straps and back cinches should be attached after the front cinch and all straps and back cinches should be unattached before the front cinch**

- **The girth or front cinch should be tightened slowly and at 3 different times before riding**
- **Bridles should be applied and removed without discomfort to the horse's ears or bumping the bit on their teeth**

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.