

## **Horseback Riding Safety Tips: Part II**

Our topics for this week are important factors in reasonably safe riding of horses, including:

- **How to check and maintain riding tack**
- **Safer riding attire**
  - **Helmets**
  - **Boots**
  - **Shirts, jackets, and rain slickers**

### **Check and Maintain Riding Tack**

A rider should check and maintain the condition and safety of his own tack (riding gear on horses) and saddle the horse himself. This is just as important as a skydiver packing his own parachute. It not only helps to ensure proper tacking up, but it allows the rider to access the horse's attitude that day. Each piece of tack should be examined, especially the reins, cinch (cinch is Spanish for girdle, girth is old English term for girdle and a term used by English-style riders), and stirrups. Chicago screws, metal rein snaps, and where leather bends around metal are the most probable sites of breakage or coming unfastened. In addition, the string rawhide ties on western cinch latigo straps and on bridles should be checked before each ride.

### **Dress Appropriately**

Equine helmets should be worn when riding, especially if the rider is inexperienced or the horse is young. Equine helmets are designed to protect the back of the head and are different than bicycle helmets. Many bike helmets have gaps in the shell and are pointed in the back to improve air flow, but this design provides insufficient protection for a fall from a horse. Horseback riders should wear an equine helmet that has met standards set by the American Society of Testing Materials (ASTM) international and certified by the Safety Equipment Institute (SEI).

A rider should be sure that the helmet is adjusted to fit his head. The chin strap has a “Y” that fits over the ears which should be adjusted so that the bottom of the “V” portion of the “Y” is just below the ear. The chin strap should be snug enough to permit just one finger underneath. The visor part of the helmet should be 1 inch above the eyebrows. If an impact occurs to the helmet, it should be replaced even if there visually appears to be no damage. No earrings should be worn since they can get caught in the helmet straps. Many states have laws requiring riding helmets for riders 18 years old, or younger. Children should wear helmets around horses, whether or not they plan to ride.

Temporary partial blindness when among horses can be dangerous. Hoods on garments should not be worn. Long hair should be kept from the face and restricting vision. Loose long hair can also be caught in tack buckles, lead chains, and lead line snaps. Goggles should be worn if working with horses in muddy conditions.

Body protectors (protective vests) are recommended for jumping events, especially cross-country jumping. They assist in preventing some bruises, abrasions, fractures, neck, and shoulder injuries. The ASTM also rates vests. British-made vests are rated by the British Equestrian Trade Association (BETA) or the European Committee for Standardization. These have 3 levels of protection with Level 1 being the least protective. The ASTM standard is considered to be between the European standards of 2 and 3. Some are air bag technology and have a ripcord that is attached to the saddle to activate the inflation. Proper fit should permit the wearer to breathe easily and move his arms in a full range of motion.

Proper footwear is very important in riding safety. Western-style riders should wear boots larger than normal so that they are loose enough to come off easily in case of a fall. Traditional cowboy boots are designed for riding. Roper boots have short tops and lower heels. They are designed for walking and are not as safe as traditional cowboy boots to ride in. The boot should go at least half way up the calf and have large heels (at least 1 inch high) and little to no tread. Boots that have crepe soles, deep treads, or are lace-up are more likely to hang-up in a stirrup if the rider is thrown or falls off the horse. The purpose of lace-up boots are to tighten the boot around the ankle. This is just the opposite of what is desired in a safe western riding boot.

Riding clothing should be snug but not tight. To prevent getting hung-up on a Western style saddle horn, the rider should unbutton lower buttons on jackets or slickers (raincoats for riding) to prevent the jacket or slicker from hooking over the horn preventing the rider from leaning back if the horse stops suddenly. Hip length coats may hook the back behind the cantle. Waist length coats or split knee length (“duster”) coats are safer. Other clothing or accessories that might get caught on the saddle horn should also not be worn.

## **Riding Clothing**

Riding pants or jeans should not fold or bunch on the inside of a rider's leg or have a thick inseam, especially at the rider's knee. Otherwise, the friction on the inside of the rider's leg that occurs during riding will abrade the rider's leg. Western-style pant legs should be long enough to bunch ("stack") when standing so that when straddling the saddle the ends of the pants do not ride over the top of the boots.

Pant legs should be over the top of the boots if working in brush to keep weed burrs and other debris out (Texas style) and stuffed inside the boots if working in mud or snow to keep pants dry ("buckaroo," northwestern style). For comfort and to prevent loss of pocket contents, nothing should be carried in hip pockets. If access to pockets is needed while riding, a vest or jacket with pockets should be worn. English-style riders use knee high riding boots that are worn over the lower aspect of their pants that negate the problem of the pants going over the top of the boots.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling 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. Before beginning a ride, the saddle, bridle, breast collar, and other tack on the horse should be checked on both sides of the horse for weakened or improper attachments before mounting.**
- 2. Never substitute any other type of helmet for an equine riding helmet and make sure it fits the wearer correctly.**
- 3. Riding boots should have heels at least 1 inch high and western boots should fit loosely.**

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](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 250 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.