

## **TACK CARE**

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### **Tack Selection, Care and Cleaning**

Good tack, properly cared for and fitted, can give many years of service. When selecting tack, buy the best that can be afforded. Good tack is supple and has substance, which is the lifeblood of the leather.

Substance in leather is indicated by thickness, ability to hold more fats, and not being flabby or greasy to the touch. The best leather comes from the butts of the hide and is the part found closest to the backbone. Belly leather is flabbier, more fibrous, and usually bears more scarring from such things as barbed wire than does leather coming from the butts.

Tanned leather has two sides, the grain side and the flesh side. The grain side is the embossed sealed side that faces out and away from the mount. The flesh side is underneath, or the side that lies next to the mount. If unsealed, the flesh side loses moisture more readily; however, when cared for, it receives conditioner into the hide more easily. The flesh side (sometimes referred to as the “rough” side) should not be rough or fibrous; in a good piece of leather it is smooth.

When selecting leather, for instance a stirrup leather or a bridle, take the leather in hand and bend it back into itself, while looking at the grain side. The leather should be slightly wrinkled; it should not bubble up or show large ripples. The leather should not be cracked anywhere (e.g., look in the folds of cheek pieces). Stud attachments should be secure with all stitching done well.

When buying bridles, it should be remembered that new leather will stretch slightly. The new bridle should be adjusted properly – with care taken that it is not within two holes of either the tightest or the loosest hole. If properly adjusted and on the last or the second-to-the-last hole of a new bridle, chances are that, when broken in, the bridle will be too large. When properly fitted, a broken-in bridle should always have the flexibility of one more adjustment, whether tighter or looser.

Bridles come in four sizes: pony, cob, horse, and warmblood or oversized. It is not uncommon to find a 16-hand horse wearing a cob-sized bridle, particularly if the head is quite refined. Therefore, it is important that the mount be measured before the purchase is made. A bridle that is too large is a common problem.

If a bridle has cheek pieces or throat latches that are too large, a cobbler or tack-repair person can shorten them. The repair person will remove the buckles, shorten the leather to desired length, and re-stitch the buckles into place.

New stirrup leathers can stretch quite a bit – even the ones that are prestretched. New leathers should be switched after each ride so they will stretch equally. If not switched, the left side leather will stretch more than the right because that is the side on which the horse is mounted. Older leathers also should be switched frequently to keep the stirrup irons even.

Whenever extra holes are required in a stirrup leather or cheek piece, the other stirrup leather or cheek piece should be laid on the one to be punched to help space the holes correctly.

Planning ahead is encouraged, and if a new piece of tack is needed for a rally or rating, it should be bought far enough in advance to be broken in and supple by the time it is taken to a formal inspection. Allowances for stiff new tack will not be made during formal inspections.

The same applies to tack needing repair. Cracked, dry leather is unsafe and is, therefore, unacceptable. All stitching should be checked carefully, not just looked at. Stirrup leathers are notorious for appearing to be fine, but having the stitching “pop” when pulled on. If the stitching breaks away when a rider is jumping or in the middle of a game, a fall may ensue. Planning and consistent care will pay off. Stitching should be checked regularly.

## Tack Cleaning and Care of New Tack

The process of cleaning tack can be broken down into three stages: cleaning, conditioning, and protecting the leather. The following is a list of commonly found products available for leather care. These are intended as a guideline, not an endorsement for individual products, nor is this an exclusive list as there are many other good products available. See chart below.

Tack-cleaning materials include a small pail, sponges (natural, cellulose or cellulose/3 M backed), clean rags, cleaner, conditioner, leather protector, toothpicks, cotton swabs, toothbrush, paintbrush, steel wool, bridle hook, and saddle horse.

**CLEAN:** Fill a bucket with warm or tepid water – not hot. Using a rag or sponge, dip into the water and squeeze well, so that the sponge is slightly damp. Remove surface dust and dirt. If tack is fairly dirty, a stronger cleaner may be required. Dark, greasy dots or patches found on leather are called “jockeys” and must be removed. The sponge and cleaner or a plastic net dish scrubber can be used to remove these. Jockeys are commonly found on the ends of stirrup leathers, particularly if leathers are long and lie against the mount’s side or on the underside of the saddle flap.

When the tack is soaped with the cleaner, care should be taken not to allow the soap to foam – this indicates the use of too much water, which will dry out the leather. The tack is then rinsed off with a slightly damp sponge to remove the cleaning agent, which is too harsh to be left on the saddle or bridle. You also will remove the dirt. The leather should now be clean; if not this step should be repeated.

**CONDITION:** At this point, it should be determined if the leather needs to be conditioned or oiled. Leather should be soft and supple, with no cracks, and should not squeak while riding (you can hear saddles). Both climate and the use the leather has had will determine the need. If oil is needed, using a 1” or 2” paintbrush (part of the tack cleaning kit) is an easy and fairly neat way to apply it. It should be applied in thin layers. The leather should then be “worked” by hand, bending it back and forth, as

well as rolling. The heat from one’s hand and the rolling action help the leather soak up the conditioner. If the piece of leather being oiled is very dry or new, it is best that oil be applied to the flesh side because the oil will soak in better. (It’s the unsealed side.) Heavy oiling on the grain side of saddle leather can result in stained breeches. When tack is soft enough and the oil or conditioner is soaked in, protection can be applied.

**PROTECTION:** Bar glycerine is the traditional choice of protection. It is important that this step follow oiling the tack. Glycerine soap will seal the pores of the leather to protect and nourish it. If oil is applied after this step, the leather will be duller, lacking “polish”, and the oil will not get into the fibers of the inner layers of the leather, because the glycerine has sealed the pores.

If using bar glycerine, the bar of soap should be dipped into water, and the glycerine should be worked into a damp sponge. If the soap is foaming, too much water is being used. (Dipping the bar and not the sponge results in the right amount of moisture.) Enough soap should be worked into the sponge so that after it is applied to the leather, one’s fingerprint can be seen. It should be applied in a circular fashion to all parts of the leather except suede knee rolls. Excess soap in stirrup leather holes or buckles should be removed by blowing it out or by using a toothpick to remove it.

**OTHER HINTS:** Stirrup pads can be cleaned with a toothbrush and a sink cleanser. Some people, after cleaning irons and bits, put them into the dishwasher to get them very shiny. To clean the elastic on girths, a toothbrush and a paste (not gel) toothpaste works well. The whitening agent in the toothpaste cleans the elastic and rinses out easier than does soap.

Suede knee rolls may be cleaned with the paste hand cleaner used by automobile mechanics to remove oil from their hands. Dampen the suede, then rub in the cleaner. After a few minutes, it should be rinsed off. This may be repeated until oil is gone, then allowed to dry. Care should be taken not to saturate the knee rolls with water.

**CONDITIONING NEW TACK:** Before it is oiled, new tack must fit the mount. Most tack shops will not take back tack that has been cleaned or oiled.

New tack often is covered with a protective whitish coating that needs to be removed before it is conditioned. Castile soap and warm water can be used, following the steps described under tack cleaning.

Oil should be applied to the leather in thin layers with a paintbrush. The leather should not be soaked in oil, "over oiled," or left in oil, or it will become greasy. The leather should be rolled between applications of each layer or oil so that the oil soaks in evenly. Generally, three layers

during a 12-hour period allows the oil to soak in. The process may have to be repeated on a daily basis until the leather is properly treated. As tack becomes broken in, it will not need to be oiled as often or require as much oil.

A new saddle will need its billets and the stirrup leathers conditioned, but care should be taken not to apply too much oil. After three applications of oil, it is best that glycerine be applied over these parts as they will stretch quite a bit anyway, and more so if oiled too much. Switching new leathers from left to right will help to keep them even.

Regular and proper care of tack will increase its useful life, make it more comfortable and safer for the mount, and make the night before a formal inspection much less frantic

### **CLEANERS**

Lexol Cleaner  
(orange container)  
Hydrophane Saddler's  
Leather Care  
Castile Soap (Kirk's)  
Murphy's Oil Soap  
Horseman's Onestep

### **OILS/CONDITIONERS**

Fredelka  
Pure Neatsfoot Oil  
Vegetable Oil  
Bienenwach's Leather Balsam  
Lexol Conditioner (Brown container)  
Lexol Neatsfoot Oil (clear container)  
Tanner's Dressing  
Olive Oil  
Horseman's Onestep

### **PROTECTORS**

Domestic Bar Glycerine  
Belvoir Glycerine  
Farnam's Liquid Glycerine  
Hydolan  
Fiebing's Saddle Soap