

Avoid Skin Problems With Clean Equipment

By KATHARINE LARK

You know how a pair of jeans can get after even ONE hot day spent riding, grooming and/or shoeing horses — how they turn grey-brown instead of blue and stand up without you in them? They would surely be uncomfortable to wear the next 15 days in a row.

Well, that's how a cinch or a saddle blanket can be to your horse — uncomfortable. Sweat and dirt combined create a near-concrete coating right where the object contacts your horse's skin. After a time, the cinch or the blanket rub raw sores that are complicated by the septic material introduced by accumulated filth.

Leather and nylon tack will build up sweat/dirt layers, too, and a bit can become crusted with enough old saliva and food to abrade deep sores into the corners of the horse's mouth.

To avoid wearing sores into the flesh of your mount, you simply clean off your equipment after use. It is easier in the long run to quickly rinse the bit, brush the sweat from pads, blankets, etc., and take a damp sponge to leather right after use. The added advantage to this cleanliness habit is that your equipment will last years longer and the two to four times yearly major scrubbing is much easier.

Because I clean equipment, most of the time, right after use, I only have to do an all out, all day, heavy duty scrubbing once in the spring and once in the fall. I choose autumn so that I can put away items I won't use during winter in a well cleaned/oiled/covered condition. In the spring, I get everything ready for training/showing and the thorough cleaning lets me discover every item that needs repair before I have it break during use.

Now everyone has their favorite way to clean leather. Any method is correct that leaves the leather clean and supple and nourished. The important thing is to DO it. For the all out scrubbing, I attack all metal with a "Chore Boy" dish scrubber cloth that is really abrasive to the scum but does not scratch metal. If I store metal, I coat it lightly with Vaseline.

You need to choose a warm, dry day for washing girths, cinches, saddle pads and blankets, rugs, sheets and such if you are going to wash them at home in tubs like I do. You can use the heavy duty washing machines at a laundry but it gets expensive and sometimes the owners don't approve (a lot of hair is left behind and buckles, surcingles and snaps make a lot of noise).

Out in the fresh air, fill three tubs with water (warm is nice but not essential). In one tub, soak each item and use a scrub brush and a bar of laundry soap to thoroughly work all the dirt loose. Put the item into the second tub for a rinse in water to which a cup of liquid bleach has been added to disinfect the fabric (skip this bleach rinse for bright colors and such). Then dunk the item into the third tub of fresh water with a cup of vinegar which removes the chlorine from the bleach and all traces of soap. Then wring or sling as much water out of the item as possible and hang it over a fence to dry in the sunlight. Be sure to renew the water as it becomes filthy and consider using the dirty water on a spot of grass or on trees (pour the bleach water out on concrete to help clean it or in the barn aisle to disinfect it, but not directly on plants) so that the precious resource of our water is used as efficiently as possible.

It is a good idea to bring out all of your grooming equipment at this time and wash everything in this same manner. Towels used on your horses, rags, saddle covers, anything you can think of including halters and leads will benefit from a good scrubbing.

When things are *thoroughly* dried, you should put the frequently used items where they are easily found and store the other things under old bed sheets to keep dust away, with mothballs or cedar shavings between the items. I have found that mothballs help repel mice/rats.

If you really don't have the time to keep things as clean as you wish you could, you can do well by your horse by having two cinches and two sets of saddle blankets/pads that you alternate each week, taking the dirty set to be washed when you *can* find a moment. It is worth the effort.

And don't forget to groom your horse before each ride. This will keep him more comfortable, your equipment cleaner and will keep the horse's skin healthier by increasing circulation of blood.

I don't know about it being next to Godliness, but cleanliness WILL make your life and your horse's life more comfortable and safer.