


## Trail Tack

User Rating:  / 7

Poor      Best

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In the November 2003 issue of *Western Horseman*, I provided tips on how to negotiate various trail terrain. To further prepare you for the trail, I offer tack-selection tips in this exclusive online article.

As with any discipline, trail riding has its own set of tack considerations. Although about any tack style goes for trail riding, your gear should withstand the stress of rugged riding, plus keep you and your horse comfortable. Here's a rundown of my trail-tack preferences.

### Saddle

When buying a trail saddle, I consider, in order of importance, safety, horse and rider comfort, durability and value.

**Safety:** You don't want a saddle to fall apart as a horse flounders through a bog, crosses a log or navigates a steep incline. A low-quality rigging, or a poorly made or neglected saddle can break down with stress, thus risking danger to you and your horse.

**Horse comfort:** I expect my trail horses to deal with discomfort and continue to do their jobs. However, soreness from ill-fitting saddles, nails protruding through the fleece of poorly constructed saddles, and galling due to hard or filthy cinches isn't acceptable; it's abuse.

Adding pads to build up a base for a wide saddle on a young horse or a mount with low withers somewhat counteracts poor fit, but it causes other problems. For example, to stabilize the saddle, some folks pull the front cinch very tight, triggering a bite, kick, rear or other undesirable reaction from their horses. Instead, find a saddle width that fits your horse properly.

On mature horses, I use 17-inch team-roping saddles, because they're durable, withstand heavy use and hold their value. For young, thin horses, I opt for a saddle with a narrow tree to prevent rubbing on the withers or backbone.

Some riders prefer training saddles designed for function, safety and durability when riding young horses. The advantage of a training saddle is the extra dees for fitting reins or other training considerations. The extra dees on a training saddle allow me to bit up the horse gently to the left or right to teach him to yield rein pressure or develop a certain headset, or to hang a poncho or other spooky item. For half the price, a used roping saddle with the same tree works just as well, and you can use the rear cinch dees to

secure reins or other items.

**Rider comfort:** This is a matter of personal preference. Folks with bad knees might prefer a Cordura saddle's easy-turning stirrups. Folks who don't ride much might be more comfortable with extra cushion in the seat. Some riders opt for a high-cantle barrel saddle or the cutaway of a reining, cutting, or training saddle. To start your search for a saddle to suit your needs, go to a saddle shop with a variety of styles, brands and fits. However, recognize the difference between a novice horseman selling saddles, and an older or more experienced horseman who can help with saddle fitting. To distinguish between the two salespeople, listen for descriptions of aesthetics and subjectivity, versus objective practicality.

**Durability:** Durability is not only influenced by saddle quality, but also by the type of riding you do. If you ride a decently trained horse on wide, well-maintained, gradually sloped trails, your demand on the saddle is much less than that of someone, like me, who traverses rugged country and works green horses. My trail saddles must withstand horses falling against trees and rocks, dallying, etc. I've had horns come loose, riggings tear apart, stirrups ripped off, trees broken and leather chewed off. Brand-name roping saddles tend to use heavier leather, heavier riggings and sturdier trees than off- or lesser-known brands. On the downside, brand-name saddles tend to be heavier, making saddling difficult for some riders.

Although Cordura saddles are easy to clean and handle, most aren't durable enough to withstand rugged riding conditions. If you want a lightweight Cordura saddle, roping models offer a fairly durable tree and reasonably heavy-duty components, but the bars are a little wide for young or thin horses, and the flexible tree requires more tightening of the cinch than I desire on young horses.

**Value:** A used, brand-name saddle offers more bang for the buck than a new, off-brand saddle. For my training programs, I often buy used roping saddles. Used barrel saddles are generally good buys and popular because of the secure fit. Calf-roping saddles also are wise buys, as they're relatively inexpensive and very durable, but they're not as popular with my students because of the low cantle. Team-roping saddles are a compromise for durability and fit, but it's hard to find a good value because of their high demand.

When buying a used saddle, learn to recognize a broken tree, so you don't get home with a weak saddle. To check for a broken tree, lay the saddle on the floor, fleece down. Gently put your knee in the seat and pull up on the horn and cantle, watching for a "give" or popping noise, indicating a break. Then lay the saddle on it's side on the floor, and flex the tree down, again watching for a flex where there shouldn't be one, or a popping noise. Next, flex the tree in upward. Finally lay the saddle on it's back, horn down, and flex the saddle outward toward the side. With the saddle still on it's back, put a knee in the middle of the saddle and gently press down. Each time you flex the saddle, watch for it to bend or flex where a break might be.

There are several high-quality production (factory-produced) saddles on the market in a range of prices. However, finding an older saddle is a smart option, as nowadays many manufacturers focus more on profit margins than quality. However, make sure the saddle fits your horse properly.

## **Stirrups**

Consider the same points outlined in the saddle section when choosing stirrups. I opt for oversized, solid plastic stirrups, because the wide, flat platform enhances rider comfort by distributing concussion across a wide area, preventing foot flexion and keeping large feet from hanging too far off the stirrup edge. Furthermore, the heavy-duty plastic is lightweight, durable and easy to clean. Plus no parts are susceptible to corrosion, except the keeper bolt, and it's galvanized to reduce rust. Avoid stirrups with sharp edges, as they can injure a horse if he falls with the stirrup under him.

## **Tapaderos**

When I train and ride in the mountains, especially in the wintertime, I use tapaderos as a safety measure. The stirrup covers prevent a foot from sliding through the stirrup, causing a hang-up. In inclement weather, tapaderos partially protect your feet from cold air, water and snow. In the brush, tapaderos help prevent your toes and feet from becoming hung.

## **Helmet**

Don't let your pride cost you an injury that could've been prevented. On a new horse or a surly stallion, I wear a helmet. My assistants also wear helmets when starting young horses or retraining older mounts, and students under 18 wear helmets on or around horses at all times. I also encourage my older students to wear helmets during lessons, and demand that novice students wear them on trail rides. When my daughter first started riding problem horses for me, she wore a well-fitted hockey helmet with full-face guard.

## **Front Cinch**

Neoprene cinches are reliable, nongalling and easy to clean, thus help prevent disease spread. For these reasons I won't use a rope, fiber or felt cinch.

## **Rear Cinch**

A rear cinch provides extra security as you ride down embankments or steep slopes. Plus, it prevents the saddle from tipping forward if you lose your balance and tip forward against the swells. However, make sure you have a connector strap between the front and rear cinches to keep the rear cinch from sliding back into the horse's flank.

Tip: Accustom your horse to the feel of a rear cinch before you hit the trail. Riding with a loose rear cinch because your horse doesn't like it snug is asking for trouble. If you can't get your horse to accept a snug rear cinch, take it off. Riding downhill isn't the time to

have your horse start bucking when the rear cinch becomes tight.

### **Blanket or Pad**

For normal half-hour to 3-hour rides heavy, acrylic, oversized blankets work well. An oversized model allows adequate drape under 17-inch saddles. Also, the acrylic is easy to wash and dry; we hose them off if they aren't too filthy and machine-wash occasionally. For longer rides, 1-inch-thick, textured neoprene pads are effective. Although they occasionally squeak when you ride, they stay in place slightly better than nontextured pads.

### **Breast-Collar**

I prefer contoured leather breast-collars, because they hold up well to heavy use. If you notice chafing, try a neoprene breast-collar. Such models are self-lubricating and can prevent chafing. Avoid fleece-lined breast-collars, as they're difficult to clean. As a result, they can harbor bacteria and fungus, contributing to the spread of disease and skin infections, especially when used on multiple horses.

### **Breeching and Crupper**

These tools are useful on mutton-withered horses that don't carry a saddle well, as they reduce saddle slippage when negotiating severe downhill slopes. I prefer a rubber-covered nylon crupper as opposed to a breeching, because the crupper has fewer straps that can become snagged or hung up on the trail. Pick a crupper free of sharp edges or wear and tear that could sore a horse.

In situations where I need extra security, I opt for a nylon breeching. Nylon requires less maintenance than leather and lasts longer.

Tip: Before you ride on the trail with a crupper or breeching, accustom your horse to the gear at home in controlled conditions. Horses occasionally object to both pieces of tack by kicking or bucking.

### **Headstall**

I prefer a headstall with brow band and throatlatch to help prevent losing the bridle in brush. To alleviate worries about loose screws, I replace all Chicago screws with ties, (commonly called "water ties"). Or, if I use the screw, I treat the screw threads with Loctite, a thread-sealing product available at hardware stores. A drop of bright red fingernail polish also works and leaves behind an indication that the screw has been treated.

Some folks prefer halter-bridle combos, and I suspect they can be useful in some situations. However, when I tie a horse, I tie prepared for a battle, and I haven't seen any

combination bridles I thought were as rugged as my hand-tied rope halters (see below).

## **Reins**

I ride with 6- to 7-foot, heavy harness-leather split reins, depending on the horse's size. Not only are these reins durable, but they also enable me to direct rein my horse effectively. Plus, I can pop his rump with the rein ends, if necessary, to get his attention and discipline him. For trail riding, I prefer solid leather rather than braided reins, because on braided reins some of the strength comes from the core, and the core isn't visible, so you risk sudden breakage.

All of my reins have high-quality scissor snaps so I can easily remove the reins to slide on a halter to tie the horse, work him in a round pen or to adjust rein length. I often carry an extra pair of reins, in case of breakage.

## **Hobbles**

I use 2-inch wide nylon hobbles with neoprene or felt lining. This style eliminates some of the leg rubbing caused by unlined nylon or leather hobbles. Plus, in damp, muddy training conditions leather gets wet, causing hobbles to stretch then break. The chain and swivel mechanism in most hobbles is too long for most of my needs, so I cut off the chain to the dee. Then I fasten the two dees together with a locking link.

## **Halter and Lead Rope**

I use hand-tied, 5/16-inch, braided-nylon rope halters. The thin diameter causes discomfort if a horse pulls back; in turn he learns to yield to the pressure or stand still. Thick halters are bulky and don't offer the same training benefits.

For most horses I use 10-foot, 5/8-inch, braided-nylon leads. The rope's diameter is thick enough to grasp, strong enough to hold the most determined horse, yet is still thin enough to tie easily. For stallions or problem horses, however, I prefer a 12-foot lead. Long leads can be awkward to handle, but they're safer than short leads; if a horse spooks on a short lead, the handler risks getting injured.

Tip: Don't turn out a horse out in a rope halter. If you must turn out your horse in a halter, use a style that breaks away if he becomes tangled.

## **Water and Necessities' Carriers**

Although pommel bags are great to pack items on seasoned mounts, I avoid placing them on horses in training. The bulk interferes with my hands and reins. Instead, I prefer saddlebags, which I fasten to the rear of the saddle with saddle strings and tie-down straps that tie or buckle to the rear cinch or rear dee. Use 18-inch saddle strings to leave room to tie a halter or raincoat on top the saddlebag. Make sure the bags are pulled up against the cantle. Square knots work well to hold bags in place and untie easily.

Anything you anticipate tying to the saddle, do yourself a favor and try it a couple of times in the round pen. Have the horse trot and lope with it before you get on. I don't like things that flop around, that catch on brush, or that fall off every mile.