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Trail Guide to Cruppers & Britchens



Backcountry riding and packing involve challenges for both man and animal. Keeping each centered and comfortable shouldn't be one of them.

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FEW THINGS ARE AS UNSETTLING as coming down a steep draw and riding a colt's neck because his saddle slipped forward, or finding yourself deep in the backcountry with a sore-backed pack mule and many more miles to go.

The director of equine studies at Feather River College in Quincy, California, Russell Reid is quick to note that the key to successful backcountry trekking lies in selecting both animals and gear that are well-suited for the job. Here, Reid offers advice on two types of backcountry gear designed

Outfitters have long appreciated the benefits of cruppers and britchens in keeping their loads centered and animals sound while traversing difficult terrain. This backcountry gear is also gaining popularity with endurance and competitive trail riders.



to keep trail and pack saddles from slipping while traversing rough terrain.

While breast collars and rear cinches might be the first tack items that the average recreational rider thinks of, cruppers and britchens are gaining popularity outside the mule and packing worlds. This is happening because more backcountry riders, competitive-trail and endurance-riding enthusiasts have discovered the "centering" benefits of this gear.

Each type of tack is attached to the rear of a saddle and helps anchor it in place as a horse or mule is ridden in steep, up-and-down terrain. Cruppers and britchens limit trail- or pack-saddle

movement, front to back as well as from side to side. They also center and distribute the weight of a rider or pack, accommodate animals with hard-to-fit conformation, such as low withers, or a flat, round or short back, and help prevent sores by maintaining proper rig position.

"Keeping your horse or mule comfortable and healthy for extended trips into the backcountry is the No. 1 priority for outfitters and packers everywhere," explains Reid. "If you have a sore animal out there, you don't often have the option of pulling him out of the work rotation, as you would if you were at home."

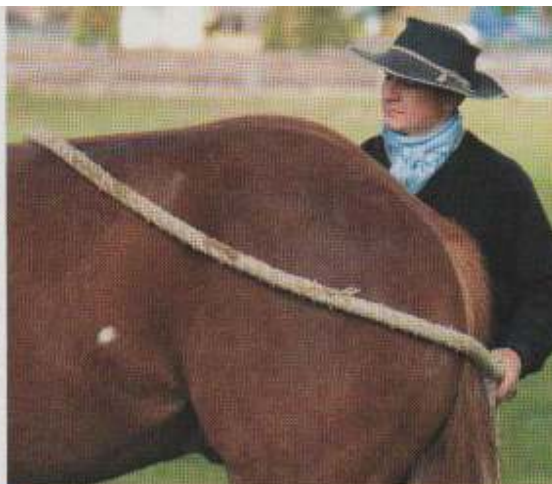
Cruppers

Materials: Cruppers are made of leather or synthetic, such as neoprene. A crupper features a padded U-shaped strap that lies underneath an animal's tail and connects to D-rings on a trail- or pack saddle by means of a single- or double-fork crupper strap. A traditional crupper is often filled with flaxseed, which emits oil that keeps the gear soft and malleable.

Proper fit: Place the crupper under the horse's tailhead. Adjust to allow two-fingers' width between the crupper straps and horse's rump. The crupper should be snug enough to keep the saddle in place in steep terrain, but not so snug that it pulls the tail forward when not in use. A loose crupper will not function properly and can cause sores.

Considerations: If you decide to use a crupper on your saddle, take the time to learn to use it properly by getting hands-on instruction from an experienced backcountry rider. Also, a crupper

One of the most practical pieces of backcountry gear, a crupper is designed to limit the movement of trail- or pack saddles, especially in steep terrain.



Using a short length of soft cotton rope around a horse's rump and underneath his tail can help prepare him to carry a crupper.

must be kept clean and clear of tail hair or it can abrade the sensitive skin under a horse's or mule's tailhead.

Cost: Prices for cruppers start at around \$35, making them among the least expensive pieces of backcountry gear.

Expert advice: "The crupper is probably one of the least used, but one of the most practical and effective pieces of backcountry gear available," explains Reid. "I think people are hesitant to use a crupper because it does require some time to get an animal accustomed to wearing it."

According to Reid, a crupper is also a great tool to use on young horses that are not yet physically mature and have trouble keeping a saddle in proper position.

Britchens

Materials: Also referred to as britchen straps, breechings, breechens or hold-back straps, britchens are either leather or synthetic. Harnesslike in its construction, a britchen features a wide strap that rests around an animal's hips, attaching to the saddle in two places—two quarter straps attach to the front cinch of a pack saddle or to the rear cinch of a trail saddle, and two back straps attach to D-rings on the back of either type of saddle. An additional pair of hip straps running down either side of the animal's hips secures the harness, and buckles back into the main harness.

Proper fit: Adjust all straps so the britchen falls flush with the angle of the hips. An ill-fitted britchen will not work properly and can cause sores and bucking.

Considerations: A britchen is generally easier for an animal to accept than is a crupper, but it still requires training before use.

Cost: At a starting price of \$100, a britchen is more expensive than a crupper, but is a more elaborate piece of equipment.

Expert advice: According to Reid, britchens should be considered mandatory equipment for anyone who rides extensively in rough backcountry. In professional outfitting



A brichen helps distribute the weight of a rider or load without affecting an animal's movement.

and packing operations, he says "You don't see a pack animal leave a camp very often without a brichen and breast collar."

Training

"There are lots of books you can read and clinics you can attend that show you how to desensitize your animal to scary new things," explains Reid. "With cruppers and brichens, I suggest beginning slow and using pressure and release techniques."

Cruppers: Start by rubbing your hands down the horse's or mule's hips, rump and thigh areas. Slowly work your way toward placing a hand underneath the tail. Your animal's natural reaction will be to clamp his tail down to protect himself. If he gets scared and panics, he might also kick or buck.

Apply and release pressure by lifting and releasing your animal's tail. Reward your horse or mule by removing the pressure when he relaxes his tail. As he gets comfortable with your hand lifting and rubbing underneath his tail, try having a handler lead him forward a few steps as you maintain the lift and release. With gradual repetition, your horse or mule should learn to stay relaxed as he moves out with your hand under his tail.

Next, replace your hand with a short piece of soft cotton rope. Make sure you can release the pressure on the rope if your animal gets uncomfortable. The last thing you want is for that rope to burn the underside of your horse's or mule's tail because he panicked and pulled away.

As your animal gets comfortable with the rope, work to get him used to carrying it under his tail while he walks. Be sure to apply and release pressure on the rope so your mount learns to relax and lift his tail when pressure is applied, simulating a working crupper.

Finally, replace your rope with a crupper. Repeat the controlled-walking exercise to be sure your mount is comfortable carrying the crupper. If you've done a good job desensitizing him so far, this last step should be uneventful. It's also a good idea to longe your horse or mule before climbing aboard for your first ride with a crupper, so he can become accustomed to it while you're on the ground.

Brichens: Begin by again rubbing your hands down your animal's hips, rump and thigh areas. Once he is comfortable, introduce a piece of soft cotton rope to the equation—rubbing it in the same areas to help desensitize him. Pay close attention to preparing him for the hold-back strap—the wide strap that fits behind the horse's rump. Simulate the function of this strap by applying and releasing pressure on your rope, much like you would if you were halter breaking a colt with a rump rope.

Have a handler lead your animal forward a few steps as you repeat this pressure-release process. As with crupper training, make sure you can release the pressure on the rope if your animal gets uncomfortable. The object is to introduce each element with as little stress as possible.

Stock with a hard-to-fit conformation, such as this short-backed horse with low withers, can also benefit from the use of cruppers and brichens.



Once your horse or mule moves comfortably with the rope behind his rump, replace your rope with a brichen rig. Repeat the controlled-walking exercise to make sure your mount remains comfortable with the transition from rope to rig.

Again, the transition should be fairly easy if you've taken your time with the previous steps. Longe your horse or mule in full gear prior to climbing aboard to help troubleshoot any discomfort. 🐾

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