

The Packing Game

For horseback hunters, packing out game can be a test of horsemanship, strength and nerves. A veteran Montana outfitter offers advice for getting the job done safely.

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PICTURE THIS: THE SUN has just crested a mountain ridgeline, its rays cutting through the cold autumn air. You crouch in a stand of aspen, rifle in hand, watching a bull elk graze in an alpine meadow 200 yards away. You've been up since 4 a.m. preparing for this moment, to say nothing of the weeks spent conditioning your stock, gathering supplies and setting up camp in the backcountry. It's hunting season, and all that effort comes down to the squeeze of the trigger.

This scenario is familiar to Warren Johnson, owner and operator of Hell's A-Roarin' Outfitters in Gardiner, Montana. His 30 years of professional hunting and horse-packing experience have taught him that making the kill is the easy part. It's packing out the game that tests your horsemanship and packing skills. In preparation for this year's hunting season, we asked Johnson for insights on the art of packing out big game.

The "Half Method"

Johnson outfits dozens of hunts each year, and favors the "half method," a technique pioneered by his father, who outfitted in Montana in the 1930s.





A hunter leads two pack mules loaded with the spoils of a successful hunt. Making the kill is just the beginning of the work; getting the game back to camp is the real challenge.



Always dressed in hunters orange, packers must think of safety first. When packing game, this means balancing a load to avoid soiling a pack animal, or worse, causing it to buck a load off on the trail.

"He used to cut his game into quarters, like everyone else, but he figured there had to be an easier way," Johnson says. "He experimented and came up with the 'half method,' a technique that requires minimal handling of the meat before it's ready to be loaded on a pack animal.

"To halve an animal, begin by removing the head and antlers," Johnson explains. "Then, split the body length-wise down the backbone to create two halves."

Packing halves requires less field work to prepare the meat (only two sections, versus four), the pack loads are easier to balance, and the halves ride more securely on the trail.

Lifting 250 pounds of meat onto a fidgeting pack animal is no small task, and is further complicated by the fact that a game animal's shoulder is heavier than its hind end. Consequently, keeping a half-load balanced requires a trick or two.

First, hobble the pack animal and tie its lead rope to a tree. Next, drape the game-half across the pack saddle so the hind-end hangs lower than the shoulder. Orient the meat so the legs point toward

the rear of the pack, creating a streamlined load that should travel smoothly through brush and snags.

"Lay the meat with the hide-side down to the saddle," he says. "The friction of the hair against the horse will keep the load from sliding and shifting on the trail. Be sure, though, that the bones don't poke or rub the pack animal. Over time, it will sore a horse, or worse, cause it to buck on the trail."

Johnson is of the Decker saddle school. In his experience, Deckers fit today's larger pack mules and horses best. The majority of hunters, however, opt for the better-known sawbuck pack saddle. Whichever is used, Johnson is adamant about the importance of tying down a load.

"The biggest wrecks I've seen on the trail were because someone just hung game meat in soft-sided panniers and didn't bother tying them down," he says. "If a horse begins to buck, there'll be a terrible wreck. Decker saddles use sling ropes for tying meat down. For packing sawbuck-style, a packer should use a lash

cinch and tie down with a box hitch." (Learn how to do this on the Web at westernhorseman.com.)

Gut Reaction

"A horse's natural instinct is to stampede at the smell of blood," Johnson warns. "Packing game meat goes against a horse's nature, and you have to admire an animal that will do that for you."

Before traveling into the backcountry, Johnson puts his pack stock through a training regimen that includes conquering the fear of blood, desensitizing the legs and body, and familiarizing stock with packing gear.

"I prepare a horse or mule by tying an elk hide to its pack saddle in the confines of a corral," he explains. "This allows a pack animal to get used to the smell of blood and the idea of having game meat on its back."

Johnson will also dab a little blood on his fingers and present it for the horse to smell. For on-the-trail training, he recommends locating a rookie horse down-

wind in the pack string from a veteran that is carrying game meat. The constant smell of blood as they walk down the trail, combined with the calming effect of the veteran horse, will help to acclimatize the youngster.

"Packing game involves a lot of rope throwing, so I also desensitize a pack animal to the feel of rope," he says. "First, I tie up a foot to teach a horse or mule to stand still. Then, I tie a 15-foot length of rope to its foot and let the animal drag it around the corral. As the rope gets dragged and stepped on by other horses, the horse or mule learns to stay calm and not to panic."

Canvas tarps, or "manties," can be particularly spooky pieces of equipment for horses and mules. Johnson throws blankets and tarps around his stock, using "sacking out" training principles to get them accustomed to the feel and sound of canvas.

The final consideration when preparing stock for hunting season is an animal's physical conditioning. One bull elk will

create two loads that weigh 250 pounds each—a hefty burden for pack stock. Add the fact that a pack string could travel 10 to 20 miles to pack out a load, and it's critical that horses and mules be in optimal shape.

Johnson gets his stock in shape for hunting season by using them on summer pack trips, which builds their strength and stamina. Hunters can get their own stock ready for fall by taking them on day-long or overnight pack trips.

Packing the Rack

Every hunter dreams of a trophy mount to hang above the fireplace. The quality of a trophy, however, depends on the packer's ability to get the head and antlers out of the backcountry in good condition.

Johnson recommends a hunter "cape out" a trophy bull in the field. This entails removing the head from the body, leaving a large section of hide from around the shoulders still attached. A taxidermist uses this "cape" of extra material for making a trophy mount.

"Lay the cape and head on top of a pack, with the meat-side down against the pack," Johnson says. "This protects them from getting blood and meat stains."

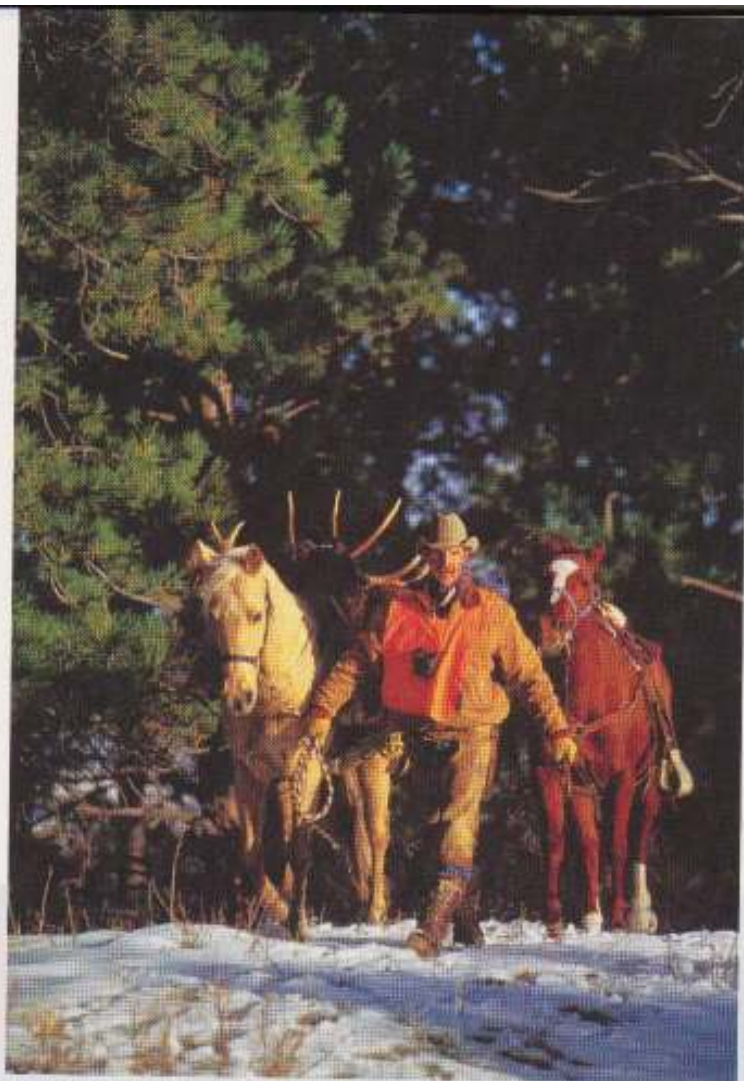
Antlers' shapes and points make them difficult to load on a pack animal. Johnson has two techniques to safely pack an antler rack of any shape and size.

"If a set of antlers is wide enough to span a pack horse's body, hang them from the top of the load with the tines pointing toward the rear," he says. "For smaller racks, cut a three-foot length of tree branch as a support on top of the load. Set the antlers on top of the branch with the tines pointing up, and tie down the load."

Trail Maneuvers

The job of packing out game is not complete until the pack string is safely back in camp. Unfortunately, it is the nature of big game hunting that a kill is rarely made in a convenient location.

"Take the quickest and safest route when leading a pack string," Johnson says. "A lot of times, a pack string must go over deadfall and between narrow trees. When you encounter an obstacle, give the pack



Equines are known for their blood-phobia. Control your stock's reaction by dismounting a short distance from the kill site, then leading them on foot.

animals time to maneuver so they won't stumble or wrap their lead ropes around a tree trunk. Give a seasoned pack animal time to think on the trail and it will get you through anything."

A pack string is safest when it is walking down the trail; stopping along the way increases the chances of a wreck.

"The best thing you can do is to get them from point A to point B quickly," Johnson advises, "and get the pack loads off as soon as possible."

A kill site deep in the backcountry might be a day's ride from camp, so Johnson carries lunch with him on the trail. With a sandwich tucked in the saddlebag, he eats on the go rather than making a dangerous pit stop. A responsible packer sacrifices his

own comfort to ensure his stock's safety.

"When leading a string off-trail, switch back across steep terrain," Johnson adds. "Learn to read the land's natural contour to make the route easier for pack stock, and keep a constant watch on your load. Avoiding a jam will make things easier for everything involved: you, the stock and your pack load." 🐾

Contributing writer Ryan T. Bell chronicles cowboy life and backcountry experiences in his Blog "Route 287," which can be found at westernhorseman.com. To learn more about Hell's A-Roarin' Outfitters, visit hellsaroinoutfitters.com. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.

