Saddle and Tack Care in Hot and Humid Environments

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The southern United States has a very active horse community. From hunters and jumpers to western show enthusiasts, trail riders and working ranch horses, many have found the South's climate to be appealing for equestrian activities. While riders enjoy the weather, it creates some challenges in caring for saddles and other tack.

During the cooler months and during periods of drought most horse owners have little problem with their leather equipment. When the weather becomes hot and the humidity climbs and the rains are frequent, a tack room can become a breeding ground for mold and mildew. Frequent care, particularly of tack used daily can become a chore. There are several things a rider can do, however, to lower the incidence of mildew on saddles and tack.

Cleaning

Leather items under frequent use should be kept as clean as is practical. Headstalls, reins, stirrup leathers and other saddle parts contact sweat from the horse and may additionally be impacted by dirt, rain and sweat from a rider. Daily cleaning might involve a simple wipe down with a cloth and proper storage in the tack room. Several times each year or as practical, saddles and bridles should receive a thorough cleaning. This should involve some disassembly of the piece. The item can then be scrubbed with a good liquid glycerin saddle soap, sponge or brush, and adequate water. Don't be afraid to use a water hose on light pressure to rinse away soap and dirt. However, absolutely avoid completely submerging a saddle as damage to the saddle tree could occur. When cleaning and conditioning saddles, attention should be given to the back of fenders, top of stirrup leathers and back of riggings as these areas take abuse and are often missed in the maintenance process.

Saddle soap comes in bar, cake and liquid varieties. Bar and cake soaps tend to build up in tooling and stitching and can be difficult to rinse clean. Liquid saddle soaps are easier to apply and easier to remove. Some horsemen report good results with Murphy's Oil Soap. There is occasional misconception that leather can be cleaned and conditioned in one process. Most saddlemakers disagree as leather must first be cleaned, allowed to dry, and then conditioned. An exception to this rule applies to antique leather items. To discourage excessive cracking and drying of very old leather it should not be allowed to completely dry before being oiled.

Oiling and Conditioning

A side effect of leather cleaning is removal of oils from the leather. Those essential oils must be replaced in order for tack to remain flexible and have a long life. 100% pure neatsfoot oil is derived from cattle byproducts and serves as excellent nourishment for dry leather. In hot, humid environments however, pure neatsfoot oil has some disadvantages. It mildews more readily than otheroils and will sometimes leave residue on a rider's pants. Blended oils such as Tee See penetrate and condition well. They also soften the leather fibers making the leather more pliable. Saddles treated with blended oils are also less likely to mildew than those conditioned with pure neatsfoot oil.Not all blended oils are equal. Some neatsfoot compounds contain heavy petroleum products and should be avoided. Some saddlemakers use extra virgin olive oil

to condition saddles. Olive oil does penetrate well but does not provide the same conditioning and softening effect as neatsfoot oil and many of the blended oils. Corn and vegetable oils should be avoided for leather care as these oils can become rancid and tend to promote the growth of molds. Any saddle or tack item being oiled should be allowed to first dry after the cleaning process. Oils will penetrate better if warmed, and many saddlemakers will also place the leather in the sun to "warm up" prior to oiling. This process allows oil to penetrate the pores deeply and more evenly. In locations with high humidity, it is important not to over oil an item. The goal is to add life back to the leather but not saturate the leather fibers. Too much oil will break down leather, cause excessive mildew and leave residue on clothing. It is appropriate to mention that oiling leather can have a darkening effect. This might not be a problem for many horsemen but can be a concern for a western showman attempting to keep a saddle as light colored as possible.

Once a saddle or bridle has been oiled and allowed to dry, it is generally advisable to apply a finish to the leather. A finish will serve to seal the fibers and add protection from moisture and dust. Finishes fall into two categories: lacquers and conditioners. Lacquers such as Fiebing's Tan-Kotedo an excellent job of sealing and waterproofing but do add some stiffness to the leather. This might be a plus for someone wanting to make their tack have a shine and be scratch resistant, but it may sacrifice suppleness in that favorite, broke in saddle. Tan-Kote does do an excellent job in helping to prevent the molds and mildews that can be a problem in southern climates. Some riders have used commercial wood lacquers and floor polishes as finishes for their saddles. These should be avoided as they are very difficult to remove when an item needs to be re-oiled and the finishes can crack after time in sunlight.

Leather conditioners such as Passier'sLederbalsammay contain oils, natural waxes and lanolin. These products provide an excellent finish while tending to enhance the pliability, softness and suppleness of the leather. They are generally applied with the fingertips and worked into the leather. After drying, any excess may be buffed with a soft cloth. Conditioners are typically a better choice than lacquers for English saddle leather and for western saddles where a fast break-in and soft leather are considered important. Applied in moderation, conditioners do not typically encourage the growth of mildew.

Protecting an Ultra-light Colored Western Show Saddle

For a number of years many riders showing in Western Pleasure classes have selected saddles with a very light finish. These saddles are often only used at the horse show and spend the remainder of their time in the trailer or tack room. Keeping the leather light on a saddle is a challenge. Saddle skirting tans just like human skin in sunlight, and in man-made lighting. Therefore, keeping such a saddle covered when not in use is advisable. Saddle covers should be stored unzipped so air may circulate, particularly when a saddle might still have moisture from a recent ride. Caring for a light oil saddle should be minimal and less frequent than for a saddle used daily. A wipe down with a damp sponge and saddle soap should be sufficient for cleaning. One of the few oils that does not darken is Lexol-nf Leather Dressing. Some saddlemakers will also use Tan-Kote as a protective finish and to add a shiny coat to a light saddle.

Cleaning Suede

Many western saddles have suede padded seats and some english saddles have suede knee rolls. Often the best cleaning technique is simply to take a stiff plastic brush or a brass brush and remove dust and dirt. This method will also help to raise the nap of the leather. Some saddlemakers use a brass brush on a cordless drill. That procedure works well but should be avoided on padded seats with quilting as the drill will damage the stitches. Suede typically does not need to be conditioned.

Storage

Heat and humidity are tack's enemies. When practical during the summer months, saddles and bridles should be stored in a tack room with some method of removing moisture from the air. Using a dehumidifier or an air conditioner will make for a drier storage environment.

Additional Comments

- All leather products have a useable life expectancy.
- There exist high quality leathers and poorer quality leathers. Purchasing better quality tack will cost more upfront but the horseman will enjoy its use for a longer period of time.
- Saddle and bridles should be evaluated frequently to ensure the rider's safety. Cracked leather in stress areas should be replaced.
- Healthy leather in occasional use can and will grow mold and mildew during hot, humid weather.
- Without routine care, saddles and bridles can become too dry. While these items may not grow mildew, they may be in danger of breaking and causing injury to horse or rider.
- Mold and mildew on leather tack can be successfully managed with the correct products and a moderate amount of time and effort. ■

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