

# RECOMMENDED LEATHER CARE

*Regular maintenance and attention to your equipment's leather and metal hardware will ensure a long, useful and safe life.* Leather equipment lasts the longest through frequent, gentle care and not sporadic, heavy cleaning. Well-maintained leather should have a supple feel - you should be able to bend and flex it without difficulty. Excessively dry leather will not bend easily and can be accompanied by visible cracks in the leather's surface. It can also be slippery and very hard causing discomfort to both horse and rider as well as diminished communication. Over oiled leather will be limp and soggy and can leave oil stains on clothing. Either extreme condition compromises the leather's longevity, strength and safety.

**DAILY CARE & FREQUENCY:** If you ride from 4 to 6 times a week, you should *lightly* clean and condition your equipment every 2 to 4 weeks. The actual frequency of cleaning and conditioning will depend upon the quality of your equipment, the climate, storage conditions and the amount of use your saddle gets. After riding, wipe any dirt, dust, mud, sweat, saliva, etc. from your bridle, saddle and girth with a soft cloth. Any dust or dirt left on the leather can act as an abrasive which can begin to wear the top surface of the leather away - this begins to weaken the leather and compromises its strength. Remove saddle pads from the underside of the saddle to allow air to circulate around the panel. The frequent washing of saddle pads will help to keep the panel's leather from getting too hard and moldy as well as be more hygienic for your horse's back. Cover the saddle with a dust cover or store in a saddle bag to keep dust from accumulating on it. New saddles should only be conditioned for the first several weeks of use and not cleaned.

**ENVIRONMENTAL & USE FACTORS:** Climate and humidity conditions as well as the amount of use a piece of equipment gets are the main factors in determining how often leather maintenance should be done. Leather goods should be stored in a dry, well ventilated, and relatively dust-free tack room. In areas of higher humidity, a dehumidifier could be used to reduce the high amounts of moisture in the tack room. Sweat from both the horse and rider, dust and dirt coupled with a warm air temperature are the prime factors in mold and mildew growth and damage. This usually appears as a white or green powder on the surface of the leather along with a distinct odor. If left to its own devices, mold and mildew can cause permanent damage to the leather in the form of dry rot. Once dry rot has begun, no amount of conditioning or oil saturation will reverse it.

## **SUPPLIES**

- Bucket of WARM water
- Tack sponge for soap and a separate sponge for oil
- Soap - pH neutral soap
- **100% PURE** Neatsfoot oil - **NOT** the Compound
- soft cloth or towel
- soft, stiff brush for sueded areas
- metal polish (optional)
- sturdy saddle stand, bridle hook
- saddle bag or dust cover, bridle bag
- time and patience!

**STEPS FOR CARE:** *Leather care should be done as a two step process: cleaning, then conditioning.* You must first physically remove the dirt from the leather by cleaning it with a pH-neutral soap and water. One step products do not permit this process and can actually seal dirt onto the leather's surface by plugging its pores. Some saddle manufacturers have introduced leather care products specifically designed to work with the leathers used in their saddles. Check with your saddle's manufacturer about these products and the recommended care of their saddles. Not all products work well on every type of leather. If you have a brand-new saddle, be sure to read and activate, if necessary, your manufacturer's warranty.

Before you begin, be sure to take your leathers and girth off of your saddle and take your bridle completely apart. If you plan to polish the saddle or bridle's hardware, do this task first before proceeding. Be careful not to get any of the polish cleaner on the leather. Buff the hardware to a shine with a soft, clean cloth.

If you have a suede seat or knee pads, it's best to clean these areas first by gently but firmly using a soft, stiff brush to brush the dirt and dust out and to bring up the nap. Periodic gentle brushing of the suede's nap will aid in keeping it from "slicking over". NEVER use water to regularly clean suede! This will cause the suede to harden and crack over time.

To begin cleaning the rest of the leather, dunk a tack sponge into the warm water and wring it out well. Take a swipe or two of the glycerin bar soap and work up a slight lather on the leather. Do not scrub especially hard as this abrasive motion can begin to wear away the naturally protective grain surface of the leather and remove the colored dye. Rinse the sponge thoroughly and wipe off any remaining lather. Lather left on the leather can leave white, sticky residue that can actually attract dirt and grime causing the build up of "dirt jockeys" on the surface. If "dirt jockeys" do appear on the leather's surface, the initial cleaning as was just described will begin to soften them making it easier to remove. Clean every area of the saddle - the seat, the top and bottom sides of the skirts, flaps, knee pads, and sweat flaps, the panel and billets. *Do not use soap to clean rubber lined reins - it will deteriorate the rubber grip.* Never leave a wet saddle or other piece of leather equipment in a hot, unventilated vehicle or trailer- the leather will bake and crack!

While the leather is still slightly damp, wipe a light coat of the oil conditioner on every surface area of the saddle that you cleaned. Let your saddle sit for a period of time - wipe any unabsorbed conditioner off with a soft cloth. If there are parts of your saddle (i.e., the panel leather, seat, billets or the edges of the sweat flaps) that are particularly dry, it may be helpful to oil your saddle and let it sit to warm in the sunlight. Don't forget to occasionally condition your billets! Billets need to be supple and strong as well - not soggy and floppy, nor stretched, dry and cracked. Wrap the sponge around the billet and rub the strap up and down, not across. This same conditioning step can be used for all strap-type goods (i.e., reins, leathers, bridle parts). When conditioning leather bordering sueded areas, be sure to leave approximately a ¼" border near these areas. NEVER put oil on suede or rubber lined reins! Your leather should now have a warm glow and feel supple and flexible.

Placing a saddle dust cover on the saddle or in a saddle bag will keep dust from accumulating and ruining your diligent leather care! Your saddle will be fresh and ready for your next ride! It is also a good idea to keep your bridle this way if possible. You may even notice that a saddle that was once dry and slippery now has a "grip" to it. Think of caring for your leather goods the way you would care for your skin - gently, routinely, and thoroughly. Keep your leather care routine consistent and frequent.

### *A word about Neatsfoot oil...*

The pesky myth still persists about Neatsfoot oil rotting the stitching on bridles and saddles. 100% PURE Neatsfoot oil is traditionally made from boiling the hooves of cattle. Today, Neatsfoot oil can be made of liquefied animals fats or a blend of other fats. Neatsfoot oil COMPOUND can and may contain petroleum based additives that are more harmful to the leather than to the stitching. Be sure to read the listed ingredients if in doubt. The thread used in today's bridles and saddles are nylon based which resists rot. However, a piece of leather which is never oiled or super-saturated will crack or tear around the perfectly intact stitching. Saddles that are excessively dry due to lack of conditioning may begin to show light gray areas (on black leather) where the top layer of the leather's grain has been worn away by friction. For brand-new saddles, using well-broken in, used leathers will help to break in the flaps and be less abrasive than a pair of brand-new leathers.