

Rescuing Wet Leather

By Anna Carner Blangiforti – President & Founder, Leather Therapy Products

Califon, NJ; Jan 1998--The rain clouds hid behind that far ridge. Fooled by clear skies, you left your oil skin coat behind when you packed lunch and headed out. Now you're only halfway home and a steady drizzle soaks everything in sight. As your trail companion gripes about her saturated saddle and soggy reins your mood turns as dark as the sky. Have you both just ruined hundreds of dollars-worth of tack?

Another day, you're in the ring when the heavens open up but the committee declares the show must go on. Or the track posts sloppy conditions and the grooms back in the shed rows get ready to deal with post-race gritty grunge.

Many horsemen believe wet leather is ruined leather. That's not quite accurate. Neglected wet leather may be ruined. But if you take action while the leather is still damp, you can head off fibre damage and protect your equipment investment.

WHAT'S GOING ON

At the microscopic level, leather is made up of a tangle of fibres resembling a pad of steel wool. These fibres are held together with protein bonds. In the tanning process, hides are soaked in chemicals to prevent the fibres and their bonds from decomposing. Then fats and oils are tumbled with the hides (this was once a hand process known as "currying") to keep the protein bonds from drying out and to make the leather supple.

Keeping those protein bonds lubricated and supple is the key to long-lasting leather. If those bonds dry out completely, they shrink, become brittle and break. Once broken, they can't be mended. The leather is permanently weakened. Soaking dried out leather in oil may make it supple and bendable again, but it won't restore the protein bonds or its strength.

When water penetrates leather, it forms temporary bonds with the oils that are lubricating the leather fibres then floats them to the surface as it evaporates. Without those lubricating oils, the leather feels stiffer. Its fibres are more brittle and subject to breakage. You need to put the oils back in.

THE SOLUTION

The solution is to take action before that wet leather completely dries. Remove any dirt or mud from the wet leather with a damp rag. If necessary, use a non-greasy cleaner to remove heavy soil or traces of old conditioner that have floated to the leather's surface.

While the leather is still damp and its pores are still open, apply a coat of a penetrating pH-balanced penetrating leather conditioner which duplicates the fat liquors tumbled with freshly tanned hides to make them supple. As the water evaporates, capillary action will pull the conditioner down between the fibres to take its place. The wet leather needs to absorb conditioner deep within its fibres to replace currying oils flushed out by the water. Thick or waxy conditioners tend to stay near the leather surface. Look for conditioners with a neutral pH and avoid cleaners or conditioners with a harsh, alkaline pH. Non-pH-balanced products damage and eventually weaken leather fibres.

Many of us are guilty of tack neglect at one time or another. Next time you're caught out in the rain, don't think of it as the ruination of your tack. Look at it as an opportunity to stop putting off that leather conditioning you've meant to do but just haven't gotten around to yet.