

SWEAT AND LEATHER DON'T MIX

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OLDWICK, NJ -- An adage quoted by many trainers with minor variations asserts that it takes a lot of wet saddle blankets to train a horse. In less colorful language, they mean training is hard work and hard work means working up a sweat.

Sweat may be good for horses in training but it's bad for your tack. You can assume that wet saddle blankets also mean wet girths, saddle flaps, reins, bridles, cheek pieces, and other wet leather parts depending on your sport. Left to dry, that sweat can damage your leather. Dirty leather not only becomes stiff and dry, but the collective gunge can also irritate your horse's skin. Combined with dirt and accumulated grease from gummy leather care products, sweat becomes a breeding ground for bacteria that eat away at stitching weakening it permanently.

Successful training requires a plan. So does tack care. Make it easy to clean your tack as soon as possible after riding and you're more likely to tend that tack faithfully. Follow a quick cleaning routine after every ride and schedule a more thorough cleaning at regular intervals.

At a minimum, wipe sweat away with clear water, rinsing your tack sponge between swipes and wringing it almost dry before taking the next pass over the leather. Use enough water to flush salty sweat out of the leather's surface pores but don't saturate the leather. To do the best job, use a neutral pH leather cleaner to dissolve and lift away sweat and dirt.

Buy a liquid leather cleaner with a neutral pH in a size that's convenient to hold in your hand. Bottles with spray or squirt tops are easier to apply without spills than those that pour. (For economy, you can also buy larger sizes and decant them into your favorite applicator bottle.)

When it's time to clean that tack, squirt or spray the leather conditioner onto your tack sponge and wipe tack down. Pay particular attention to the undersides to parts that have been against the horse and to stitching lines that can trap sweat. Rinse your sponge frequently (if you set a bucket of water out before your ride, it will be a comfortable temperature when you return) to avoid wiping sweat from one area onto another.

Periodically, take tack apart buckle by buckle and do a thorough cleaning. Use a toothbrush, cotton swabs or even toothpicks to nudge any accumulated dirt from stitching lines, holes, and tooling.

Choosing a neutral pH cleaner is important to your leather care program. Products with a low (acidic) or high (alkaline) pH damage leather fibres over time. Soaps, for example, including vegetable-based soaps, generally have a very alkaline pH of around 9 and at around a pH of 7, leather fibre bonds begin to deteriorate. It would be a shame to take the right steps to prolong the useful life of your tack only to find you were using harsh products that actually caused harm.

The consistency of a product is important, too. A good cleaner absorbs deeply into the leather and does its work without leaving residue in crevices or along stitching lines. Bacteria can thrive in any greasy excess left behind by the wrong leather care products. While leather conditioners should be used only occasionally on tack, leather cleaners are formulated for regular, even daily, use. Check the label to be sure which one you have.

Making your horse sweaty doesn't have to mean ruining your tack. Have a plan for leather care, follow it faithfully, and enjoy your tack investment for many years to come.

Anna Carner Blangiforti's hand-raised Arabian gelding Justinian provided the inspiration for her Leather Therapy line which includes Leather Therapy Wash, original Leather Therapy Restorer & Conditioner, FINISH and Water Repellant. She is founder and president of Unicorn Editions, Ltd.

Leather Therapy makes leather behave...beautifully!