

Saddling, Bridling and Riding the Western Horse¹

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Horse sports are very rewarding when safety practices are followed. But maintaining safe working conditions when handling horses cannot be overemphasized.

Riders should have a working knowledge of horse behavior so they can anticipate and prevent potential hazardous situations. Horses are easily startled animals by nature, but most accidents can be prevented by using proper handling methods (see MU publication G02878, Safe Ground Handling of Horses). This publication discusses basic riding techniques and provides information on proper saddling, bridling and riding.

Be sure that the horse and rider are suitable for each other. Beginners should ride only calm, dependable horses — preferably older horses — until they are proficient enough to handle more difficult ones.

Your equipment must be adequate for the situation and in good repair. Check the rigging, cinches, latigo straps and billets of your saddle to be sure they are strong and that there is no danger of breaking. Check bridles and reins, especially at stress points, and make sure the leather is strong and supple. Leather that is dry and cracked can break easily.

SADDLING

When preparing to saddle your horse, make sure you do not lay the saddle on the ground where the horse could step on it. Set the saddle on a saw horse or stand made for that purpose.

Before saddling, groom your horse thoroughly. Be sure there are no sores on its back or in the cinch area, as this

could cause the horse to wring its tail or buck. If there are saddle sores, consider using extra padding or a girth pad, or give the horse time off until the sores heal. Also check your blanket for foreign objects or dirt buildup, and be sure that the blanket is dry.

Place the blanket well forward and pull it back toward the rear of the horse until the front rests at the withers. This pulls the hair backward in the direction it should lie. Never pull a blanket forward, as it will reverse the direction of the hair and cause discomfort.

Make sure there are no wrinkles, and be sure the blanket offers adequate padding for the horse. Some horses require more padding than others and some may require extra padding at their withers to prevent binding the shoulders. Also make sure that the saddle cinch is clean, as dirty cinches can cause saddle sores.

Pick up the saddle so that the fork is in your left hand. You will saddle the horse from its left side, so lay the cinch, or cinches, over the seat and hook the right stirrup over the saddle horn. This prevents you from tripping and keeps them from hitting the horse's side as the saddle comes down on its back, which could scare the horse and cause it to jump into you. Never approach the horse carrying a saddle with a dragging cinch, as you could step on it and fall under the horse. Also be sure there is nothing between you and the horse that you could trip on as you carry the saddle.

Raise the saddle as high as you can and set it down gently on the horse's back. This helps prevent back soreness and helps assure the horse that the saddling experience is nothing to fear. Throwing the saddle onto the

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horse's back can cause bruising and may aggravate any existing back problems.

Place the saddle so that at least an inch of blanket lies in front of it. Placing it too far up on the blanket could cause the blanket to work its way backward on the horse as you ride. Do not place the saddle too far forward, which restricts shoulder movement and causes discomfort, or too far back, which can cause kidney damage and sore backs.

Move to the opposite side by walking behind the horse, either by keeping a hand on the horse and walking as close as possible, or by keeping a distance of several feet to ensure that you are out of kicking range. Talk to your horse frequently, especially when changing sides or starting something new. This ensures that the horse is aware of your presence and it helps to calm a nervous horse.

Let the cinch and stirrup down, making sure they do not slam down on the horse's side. Never release the cinch and stirrup by pushing them over the saddle from the left side. This could hurt or startle the horse.

Make sure the blanket is even and that the cinch is straight. Then move back to the near side and pull the blanket up into the gullet of the saddle to prevent pressure on the withers and slipping of the blanket.

Reach under the horse and grasp the cinch with your left hand, facing the rear of the horse. If using a martingale or breast collar, you may need to thread the cinch through the end of the martingale or breast collar before fastening the cinch, unless your cinch has a ring to which you can attach them. In this case, tighten the cinch before attaching the martingale or breast collar.

If you use a rear cinch, tighten the front one first. Put the latigo, or cinch strap, through the cinch ring and the rigging ring twice. Then you can either tie a cinch knot to secure the cinch, or you can buckle it if the cinch has a buckle and your latigo has holes for it.

Completing the cinch knot before tightening the cinch is much easier because the rigging ring is not pulled tight. To tie the knot, tighten the cinch just enough to prevent it from hanging underneath the horse's belly. Then pull the latigo out to the side, cross over the top just underneath the rigging ring, and put the latigo up through the rigging ring again. Then place the end of the latigo underneath the loop you made when you crossed over the top.

With the left hand under the buckle to prevent pinching, tighten the cinch slowly, an inch or two at a time. Tightening it too quickly can cause your horse to be "cinchy," or irritable, during saddling. Some horses may

even begin biting or rearing when you tighten the cinch if they anticipate discomfort.

Tighten the cinch until it is snug enough to hold the saddle on the horse. You can tighten it more before mounting. Secure the end of the strap through the latigo carrier in front of the fender. Although most straps are not long enough to get stepped on, they should be kept up out of the way so that they do not blow against the horse's legs or belly.

If you have a rear cinch, fasten it so that your hand can fit flat between cinch and horse when the rider is mounted. It should not be excessively tight when the horse is first saddled, nor should it be so loose that a back foot could get caught in it. Rear cinches should have a strap connected to the front cinch to prevent it from getting into the flank area.

After the horse is walked to the mounting area, recheck the front cinch. You probably will be able to take it up another hole or two without getting it too tight. For riding, the cinch should be snug under the heart girth, but not excessively tight. You should be able to fit two fingers under the buckle without much difficulty. Check the cinch again after mounting, as some horses will "blow out" their lungs during saddling, only to relax after you mount, suddenly making the cinch too loose.

Check to be sure the saddle fits your horse. It should not put undue pressure on the withers or restrict the shoulders. The tree should be wide enough for the horse, but not so wide that it rubs the withers. With some saddles, you may be able to add more padding to correct the problem. If this does not help, you will need to use another saddle. If the saddle is too narrow at the gullet, it will make the horse's back sore. You may need to use a breast collar to keep the saddle from slipping too far back, depending on the horse's conformation and how well the saddle fits.

To unsaddle, simply reverse the above process. Always unfasten the rear cinch first to prevent an accident should the saddle turn while you are unsaddling. Your horse may panic if the saddle turns with the flank cinch fastened.

To remove the saddle, lift it slightly before pulling it off. This is more comfortable for the horse and easier on the saddle. As you pull the saddle off, place the cinch and right stirrup over the seat so that they do not hit you in the shins.

If you have had a hard ride, loosen the cinch gradually before taking the saddle off. This allows the blood to flow back under the saddle slowly.

BRIDLING

Untie your horse before bridling. Working on the horse's left side again, drop the nosepiece of the halter off the nose and refasten the crown strap around the neck. Avoid placing your face too close to the horse's head during bridling and use caution when handling the ears. This helps ensure that you do not get hit in the face should the horse toss its head.

If you have romal reins, or closed reins, place them over the horse's head and neck. If you have split reins, place them over your right shoulder, making sure they do not droop where you or the horse could step on them. Throughout this process, be particularly careful not to wrap any piece of equipment attached to the horse around your hand or arm, as it could wrap around your hand and cause serious injury.

Spread the crown of the bridle with the right hand and hold the bit in the left. Place your right arm over the horse's head between its ears and approach the horse's mouth with the bit. Be sure to keep the cheek pieces out of its eyes and avoid banging its teeth with the bit.

With the bit pushed lightly against the horse's lips, insert the left thumb in the corner of the mouth. There are no teeth here, so if necessary you can put pressure on the bar of the mouth with your thumb to encourage the horse to open its mouth. Many horses will open their mouths readily as you approach with the bit.

Lift the bridle upward with the right hand as you gently feed the bit over the teeth. Never jerk the bridle, and move with the horse if it moves its head. Place the crown of the bridle over one ear and then the other, bending the ears forward gently as you pull the bridle over them. Rough handling of the ears can cause horses to be head-shy and difficult to bridle. Be careful not to drag the cheek pieces over the horse's eyes. Straighten out the forelock to avoid irritation. Then fasten the throatlatch, allowing enough room for you to insert your hand sideways throughout the jaw area.

The bridle should be properly adjusted before you ride. Be sure the browband does not hang down in the horse's eyes and that the bit is neither too high nor too low. The bit should rest on the bars of the mouth. It should be high enough that it creates a small wrinkle at the corners of the mouth. If there are two or three wrinkles, the bit is probably too high. On the other hand, if the bit hangs so that it comes in contact with the incisor teeth, it is too low.

Also check the curb chain, or curb strap. You should be able to fit three fingers sideways between the horse's chin

and the chain, but the chain should be tight enough that it places pressure on the chin when you pull back on the reins. This ensures that you have enough control of your horse.

DRESS PROPERLY

Wear hard-toed boots with a heel at all times when handling or riding horses. The heel will help prevent your foot from sliding through the stirrup and the hard boot will protect your toes should the horse step on them.

Always wear long jeans, which protect your legs from saddle sores and from hazards on the trail. Avoid shorts and any type of pant made from slick material, such as nylon.

You may want to wear gloves for hand protection, particularly in the winter when hands will be exposed to harsh weather. Gloves also may help in the summer because your hands may sweat and make the reins slippery. If you lunge your horse before riding, always wear gloves in case your horse tries to pull away, pulling the line through your hand in the process. Chaps are another option as well. They provide protection for your legs and clothing, and they help to keep you warm in winter.

Avoid dangling jewelry that could get caught on the horse. Loose shirts are a hazard because they can catch on the saddle horn when you dismount. Long hair should be pulled back so your vision is not restricted.

Small children should wear a riding helmet to protect their heads in case of a fall. Their balance and strength is not as developed as that of an adult, so they are more likely to fall should the horse spook or get out of control.

Only wear spurs when necessary and be sure you have a well-developed leg before attempting to use them. Riders who do not have control of their legs can accidentally gouge or startle their horse. Have an experienced rider or trainer show you how to use them properly, as incorrect use can injure the horse and cause the horse to buck or run away.

MOUNTING

Mount your horse in an area away from buildings, trees, fences and objects on the ground. Pick a spot with good footing and be sure your boots are clean on the bottom. Otherwise, your foot may slip out of the stirrup as you are mounting.

Avoid using deep stirrups or oxbow stirrups for pleasure riding. These are meant for roping and cutting horse riders, and it is difficult to keep the foot in the proper

position for pleasure riding using these types of stirrups. The depth of a deep stirrup makes it easy for a small foot to go through and get caught.

Use of oxbow stirrups requires boots with strong arch supports. They are meant for cutting, where riders place their feet all the way forward in the stirrup. This position is not desirable for pleasure riding.

Before mounting, check the cinch again to make sure it is neither too loose nor too tight. Take one more look at your equipment to be sure everything is adjusted properly. It is proper to mount from the left side, but horses should be trained to allow mounting and dismounting from both sides in case you ever need to use the far side in an emergency. Handling the horse from both sides also helps prevent you and the horse from becoming "one-sided."

Hold the reins in your left hand, positioning your fingers on the reins just as you would when mounted. Take up the slack so that you have light contact with the horse's mouth. Facing the rear of the horse, twist the stirrup to receive your left foot. Make sure your horse stands still during this process. If it tries to walk away, tell it to whoa and pull back on the reins until it stops.

Keep your left hand at the base of the horse's neck and place the right hand on the fork of the saddle on the opposite side. Balance your left hand on the neck to be sure you do not bump the horse's mouth while mounting. If necessary, grab mane or hold on to the bony part of the withers.

Take one or two hops on the right foot and swing yourself up into the saddle, making sure your leg swings clear of the horse's rump. Bumping the horse could startle it, cause it to anticipate discomfort, or prompt it to move off before you are seated. Restrain the horse if it wants to walk off. Be sure your left toe is not pushing into its side.

Sit down softly in the saddle. Flopping down in the saddle could cause a cold-backed horse to show anxiety or even buck. Even the calmest horse may learn to dislike mounting if you do not show it respect throughout the process. Cold-backed horses usually can be spotted by their tendency to have a "hump" in their backs before riding. The back of the saddle may raise up slightly and the horse may exhibit a stiff walk. Consider lunging such horses before riding to prevent a bucking episode.

If the horse tries to buck, lift your hands and sit deep in the saddle to keep its head up and your body secure, keeping the horse moving forward. The tendency for beginning riders is to lean forward, but this only makes it easier for the horse to buck you off. It is more

difficult for the horse to buck with its head up, and you must sit up straight to keep the head up.

Horses should learn to stand after mounting and they should not walk away until asked. Stand quietly for several seconds before moving off so your horse learns that it must be patient and wait for you.

BASIC RIDING

Start out by riding in an area that is familiar to both horse and rider. Make sure you have the "kinks" out before riding on the trail or in new surroundings. The horse should be quiet and should listen to your cues. Ride with your reins at a comfortable length to encourage the horse to relax and move forward.

When riding on a road, the Missouri Highway Patrol suggests that you ride facing oncoming traffic. Riding on roads where there is high-speed traffic can be extremely hazardous and should be avoided if possible.

Be extremely careful when crossing pavement or hard road surfaces, especially if those surfaces are wet or have oil spots. Ride in these areas at a walk to prevent slipping and to preserve your horse's legs. Give yourself adequate time to cross between cars so you do not have to hurry.

Be aware that horses see differently than humans and may spook at strange objects. Keep this in mind as you approach unfamiliar territory so your horse does not jump out into traffic.

If your horse does spook at something new, do not increase its fear by punishing it. Simply keep it moving forward, possibly on a circle, moving back and forth past the object of its fear. Circling in this manner will give the horse an opportunity to see and smell without exaggerating the importance of the object, which will probably reinforce the horse's fear. Allowing the horse to stop and look at the object teaches it that spooking is a way to get out of work. Speak quietly to your horse and give it reassuring pats when it responds properly. Be sure that you remain calm.

When riding with friends, keep a safe distance between horses, whether riding side by side or in a line. When riding single file, keep at least a horse's length between horses. If you tailgate or ride up on the rear of another horse, you may be kicked or your horse may step on the other horse's heels.

When riding side by side, know that some horses do not like this and will try to kick the other horse. Be on the lookout for warning signs, such as pinned ears and one horse swinging its hind end toward the other horse.

If you ride in a group, remember that most horses do not like to be left behind. For example, if one rider is left behind to close a gate, the horse may become anxious and want to catch up. This makes mounting difficult and creates a dangerous situation for the rider. It is best to wait until the entire group is ready before moving away. Young horses may become particularly anxious when left behind and some may even panic.

Avoid riding up quickly behind other riders, as it is the horse's nature to join the group when other horses start to run. For example, do not lope past another horse at the walk, as this may catch the other rider unaware and cause their horse to take off running with you. It is not uncommon for young, green horses to panic and buck when other riders gallop by if they are not allowed to join in with them.

Riding double is not as safe as riding alone. Not all horses will tolerate two riders, so if you ride double, be sure your mount is suitable. The person riding behind should be a balanced, experienced rider, because if the horse gets nervous, the beginner's tendency is to squeeze with the legs or clench onto the front rider, which will only worsen the situation. Horses are particularly sensitive in the flank area. If the second rider is not careful, he or she can easily clench the horse in this area, causing the horse to buck or try to run away.

Allow your horse plenty of time and plenty of rein when crossing obstacles on the trail. Horses see differently than humans do and they need enough rein to raise and lower their heads to judge height and distance. This also allows them to balance themselves properly. Do not hurry your horse over rough ground. Give the horse time to pick its footing properly.

Always walk back to the barn. If you allow your horse to run home, it will become barn-sour and may become anxious or start trying to take off with you every time you turn toward the barn. These horses also may begin misbehaving upon leaving the barn. For this reason, it is a good idea to walk the last quarter-mile of your ride, which also allows the horse to cool down.

Clowning and showing off will increase the likelihood of an accident. Good riders do not need to exhibit their horsemanship skills by showing off. The calmest, safest horse can panic in unusual situations, so always keep this in mind and avoid showing off.

LOADING AND HAULING

Horse owners will usually find it necessary at some point in time to trailer their horses. Hauling may be necessary at the time of purchase or for horse shows, trail riding or medical emergencies. Being prepared and maintaining your trailer in a road-worthy condition prevents needless delays when the time to haul comes.

Make sure that the trailer is securely and properly hitched to the towing vehicle before loading your horse. Unhitched trailers can easily tip up under the weight of a moving horse. For more information, please refer to the trailer safety checklist.

It is important to have practiced loading and unloading in advance of any scheduled events. Horses not familiar with being hauled can create an unpleasant beginning to a day's journey. When working with young horses in trailers with partitions, you can boost their confidence if you enter first on the opposite side of the partition. Never go into the same stall you want the horse to go into unless there is an open escape door.

Promptly fasten the bar or chain behind the horse after it loads to prevent it from backing out before you are able to tie its head. When tying its head, use a quick-release knot or a tie with a panic/safety snap. Make sure the horse has enough rope length to permit head movement for balance, but not enough to get its head too low or over to the horse traveling alongside.

Once the horse is loaded and the gate is closed, check the latches to be sure they are tight and that they cannot bounce up and come loose. There are many types of latches, so be sure that the type you are using cannot come unfastened.

When on the road, stay back from the vehicle in front of you so that you will have adequate room to stop. The extra weight of the trailer will increase the distance normally required to stop your vehicle. Avoid hard stops as they tend to throw horses down. Even if the animals are not injured, they may become fearful and trailer-sour, which causes difficulty in hauling.

When you arrive at your destination, be careful where you unload. Leave enough room behind for unloading and unload on ground that will give good footing for the horse. Be sure you have untied the horse before you release the tail chain or gate. Horses that get unloaded part way and find their heads caught may panic and injure themselves.

TRAILER SAFETY CHECKLIST

Hitch — Be sure that the hitch is secure and your trailer is properly fastened. Use heavy safety chains to secure the trailer to the towing vehicle.

Tires — Follow the manufacturer's recommended inflation pressures. A good rule of thumb for safe tire tread is a minimum of 1/4-inch tread depth. Inspect tires for signs of dry rot. A tire with dry rot is not dependable. Don't forget to have a spare tire that is well-maintained.

Brakes — Replace worn components and test brake operation before beginning the haul.

Lights — Check for correct and full operation of brake, turning and marker lights. Interior lights are handy when loading and unloading at night.

Jacks and safety triangles — Have these available and in good working order in case of roadside breakdowns.

Floorboards — Horses apply a great deal of pressure on the small area under their hoofs. Floorboards should not be in a rotted or weak condition. Rubber mats on the floor and tailgate provide traction and cushion during loading, unloading and travel.

Wheel bearings — These need to be re-packed with grease and checked at least every year.