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Saddling and Bridling Horses Safely¹

Dawn M. Richard and Karyn Malinowski Ph.D.²

Although up to the preference of the individual, many riders choose to saddle the horse first and then bridle it. In this way you can still restrain the horse on cross-ties or with the lead while you saddle up. Remember, never tie a horse by the bridle. The horse should be tied while saddling to avoid the chance of it running away with the saddle half cinched.

Groom the horse before tacking up. Pay special attention to the areas where equipment will touch. While grooming, check these areas for injuries. If you notice any abnormality that might hinder your ride, it is better to wait until the injury heals before riding. Riding a horse with bruised or broken skin can cause a gall, which frequently results in the white saddle marks seen on the withers and backs of some horses. When you finish grooming, make sure all of the hair that is to lie under equipment is brushed in its natural direction. Ruffled hairs under the saddle or girth can cause irritation and saddle sores. Make sure to pick out the horses feet before you ride.

Check the equipment for safety and cleanliness. Routine leather care is important in keeping tack in good repair. Do not use any piece of tack that is frayed or has cracked leather pieces. Never use a bit with cracks or sharp edges that can cut the horses mouth.

SADDLING

Generally, you saddle from the left or near side, but your horse should accept saddling from either side. Stand slightly behind the shoulder of the horse and place the saddle pad or blanket, with the fold facing front, just behind the horses shoulder blades, partially covering the withers. Now slide it over the horses back leaving about 1 inch over the withers. This straightens the hair that is to lie under the saddle. Make sure equal portions of the pad or blanket are on each side of the horse.

Pick up the saddle and arrange it so the stirrups, girth or cinch are not underneath the saddle or dangling. With an English saddle, the stirrups should be run up on the leathers and the girth draped over the seat. On a Western saddle, the right stirrup and the cinches are placed over the seat.

When all of the right-side equipment is secure, place the saddle gently on the horses back. *Never* throw the saddle on the horses back or drop it suddenly into place. This thoughtless practice can cause the horse to bolt putting you in a position for injury. The pain can cause the horse to drop its back and cringe resulting in a coldbacked or cinchy horse. You may also injure the horses kidneys which lie along the top of the back.

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2. Dawn M. Richard, Graduate Assistant, Department of Animal Sciences, and Karyn Malinowski, Ph.D., Specialist in Horse Management, Department of Animal Sciences, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, PO Box 231, New Brunswick, NJ 08903-0231.

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With the saddle in place, secure the girth or cinch to the saddle on the off-side first. With both English and Western, the girth should hang about 4 inches behind the point of the elbow. Do not allow the girth to swing and hit the horses legs. Go around to the other side of the horse. Reach under the belly and grab the free end of the girth, making sure it is not twisted. Keep an eye on the horse as you do this. Some horses may try to kick or nip when you are not looking. Be prepared to reprimand the horse if it acts up.

If you are using any straps that connect to the girth, such as a breastplate or martingale, remember to connect it before you secure the girth on the near side.

Secure the near side of the girth loosely at first, not all at once with a quick jerk. Some horses have learned to hold their breath and bloat making it necessary to readjust the girth several times. By walking the horse forward a few steps or using your knee against its stomach, you can coax the horse into exhaling so you can tighten the girth. The girth should be tight enough to slide your fingers between the girth and the horse.

Make sure hair under the girth is lying flat and the girth or cinch is not pinching the horses skin. Smooth any wrinkled skin under the girth by bending each front leg at the knee and gently stretching it forward from the elbow.

If you have a rear cinch on your Western saddle, first fasten the front cinch, then the rear cinch. Tighten the rear cinch enough to prevent a hind leg from getting caught but not as tight as the front cinch. Use a connecting strap between the front and rear cinches to keep them in place. When unsaddling, unfasten the rear cinch first then the front cinch.

Check the saddle gullet to make sure it is not exerting pressure on the withers. Severe bruising of the withers can result in fistulous withers. To prevent this from occurring, there should be some distance between the gullet and the pads.

Make sure to adjust the stirrup length before you mount. With an English saddle, stretch the stirrup leather against the underside of your arm while holding the stirrup against your armpit. Your fingertips should touch the top of the leather where it attaches to the tree. Run the stirrups up the leather until you are ready to mount. Always check the girth or cinch three times before you start to ride, *after*: 1) saddling, 2) walking the horse unmounted for a few steps, and 3) after mounting and walking a few steps.

BRIDLING

With the horse saddled, you are now ready to bridle. As with all other tack, check the bit and bridle for safety and cleanliness. Remove any dirt, dried sweat, or grass from the leather and bit.

To keep the horse under control while you bridle it, unbuckle the halter and slide it off the horses head and rebuckle the crownpiece around the animals neck, with the lead still attached. This arrangement will enable you to hold the horse if it decides to walk away.

Pick up the bridle by the middle of the crownpiece and carry the reins either over your shoulder or in your other hand. Stand to the side and just behind the horses head on the left side. Standing in this position will protect your head from a blow if the horse tries to throw its head to avoid the bridle. Place the reins over the horses head. Now you can restrain the horse with the reins and the buckled halter. With your right hand, raise the crownpiece up to the horses ears as you guide the bit into the horses mouth with your left hand. Be careful not to knock the bit against the horses teeth or the horse may become head shy. Do not try to force the bit against the horses teeth or lips. If the horse refuses to accept the bit, open its mouth by inserting your fingers through the bars of the horses mouth. Be sure to keep the crownpiece raised once you insert the bit or the horse will open its mouth and drop the bit. Once the bit is in the horses mouth, settle the crownpiece behind the ears. Carefully fold the ears forward. Do not bend the ears. Smooth any loose mane hairs that might be under the crownpiece. Pull the forelock over the browband or braid it, whichever you prefer.

Adjust the bridle for comfort and appearance. The throatlatch should be fastened loosely enough to fit your whole hand between the strap and the horses jaw. The bit should be adjusted so that it causes one wrinkle to form at the corner of the horses mouth. If the bit hangs too high or too low, it can be adjusted by the cheekpieces. Tuck all loose strap ends into their keepers. Remember, the three points to check to be certain the bridle is adjusted to fit the horse: a) placement of the bit, b) adjustment of the curb strap, and c) adjustment of the throatlatch.

With the bridle properly adjusted and the horse saddled, you are now ready to mount. First unbuckle the halter from around the horses neck and pull the reins over the horses head to lead it. Remember to check the girth or cinch again before you mount.

UNTACKING

After you have dismounted, lead the horse back to the area where you will untack, preferably a place where the horse can be tied. Make sure the stirrups are run up the leathers. To unbridle the horse, simply reverse the process of bridling. First place the reins over the horses neck. With the halter on your right arm, undo the throatlatch. As you slide the crownpiece over the ears and down the horses head with your left hand, grasp the horses nose with your right hand to keep its nose down low enough to enable you to halter it. Also, with the head down the bit will not hit the teeth when removed. The reins can be removed from the horses neck and the horse either cross-tied or tied with the lead.

Unsaddling is also in reverse order. Make sure the stirrups are run up on an English saddle and that the right stirrup is secured on the horn of a Western saddle before removing the saddle. With a double-rigged saddle, unfasten the rear cinch first, then the front cinch.

Groom the horse after untacking. If the horse is sweaty, towel it dry and blanket it with a wool cooler in cold weather. In warm temperatures rinse it with a hose or give it a sponge bath. Clean all the tack before you put it away. Brush off loose hairs, saddle soap all leather after each use, and wash pads often. If you care for your equipment after each use, it will wear and remain in good repair longer. Cleaning tack often also enables you to keep up on maintenance needs and notice any repairs that should be made before you ride again.

With all of this mind, enjoy the day with your horse.