

Talking Tack: Stay safe by keeping your tack in good condition

By **Dennis Moreland**
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Accidents can happen around horses, no matter how careful you are. But being careful is the first step toward preventing disaster, and that includes making sure your tack is in good repair. A few minutes checking your equipment before you ride is an investment in safety.

- Check your equipment every time you ride. Glance over your equipment as you put it on your horse to make sure it isn't too worn or cracked. A periodic cleaning with saddle soap, followed by a good leather conditioner, will keep your tack supple. Dry leather is more likely to break when sudden pressure is put against it. This includes reins, latigos, headstalls and tie strings. If adjustment holes are worn, that means the equipment needs to be replaced because they can tear out easily, usually at the wrong time.
- If your headstall or reins have Chicago screws, make sure they are screwed in all the way. A little dab of clear nail polish in the threaded hole will keep the screw in place but will still be easy enough to unscrew if you want to take the bit off.
- Before saddling up, clean all the dirt, caked sweat and debris off your horse's back so he will have no irritations under the saddle. You'll also want to thoroughly clean under his belly where the cinches go. Since you can't see underneath him, use an ungloved hand to feel his cinch area to make sure nothing is there. Something caught under the cinch can cause almost any horse to act up.
- After putting the saddle on, use your left hand on the front of the blanket and your right hand on the horn to lift both saddle and blanket over the withers. You want there to be a 3- to 4-inch space

between the bottom of the blanket and your horse's withers. That prevents the blanket from binding or pinching. You'll also want to keep your saddle blankets clean from caked-on sweat and dirt. Using the high-pressure hose at your car wash is a quick, economical way to wash blankets. A clean blanket not only allows for better ventilation, but also absorbs sweat better.

- It's especially important before each ride to inspect your latigo tie strap where it goes around the dee ring. Also check the string that ties it closed. Make sure the latigo is not worn over the dee ring and that the holes are not as well. If any of these pieces of equipment are worn, they can break and cause the saddle to come off, and you can be seriously injured. Also, be sure to check the strands of the cinch to make sure they are in good repair.
- If you use a back or flank cinch, pull it snug to the horse's belly (after you've tightened the front cinch). If the flank cinch is left hanging loose, your horse could kick at a fly and get his back foot caught. Or if you're trail riding or working in a pasture, a branch could run through the gap between the horse and the loose cinch, which can cause a lot of trouble. Also, be sure to inspect the connecting strap between the front and back cinches. If this breaks, the flank cinch could work back, which could cause an unscheduled bronc ride.
- If you use a breast collar on your horse, be sure it is adjusted properly. It shouldn't be so tight that it chokes the horse or so loose that the horse could put a foot through it. Also check the straps to be sure they are not worn or torn, especially where they circle the rings of the breast collar and the saddle.
- Stirrup leathers can wear thin over the bars of the saddle and at the buckle holes. A broken stirrup leather at the wrong time is an invitation to injury. Always check the condition of the buckles and leather to be sure that they are in good repair.

- Never tie a horse by the reins. If the horse decides to set back while tied, the reins will likely break. If you have to tie your horse but don't have a halter and lead rope available, simply wrap the reins around the fence a couple of times. Most horses will take a step back and stop. But if the reins were tied so that they couldn't slide, you'd likely be dealing with broken reins and a loose horse. A "get-down" rope is a good piece of equipment to use in case you need to tie up while riding, such as on a trail ride.
- Don't leave a halter on a horse that is turned out. It may seem easier, especially if your horse is hard to catch, but it poses too much of a safety risk. The horse could easily get the halter caught on a fence post or catch a hind foot in it if he's scratching his face with a hind foot. Nylon and rope halters are designed not to break, so your horse could sustain serious injuries. 🐾

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