



Horse&Rider MONTHLY

AUGUST 2023

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Horse Life



HOUSEKEEPING / HEALTH



HEALTH

5 Signs of Saddle-Fit Issues

The largest and heaviest piece of equipment you use is your saddle. It is the foundation to your performance, and the fit of that saddle can affect your horse's comfort and athletic ability. A saddle that fits well connects you almost seamlessly to your horse, but an ill-fitting saddle can have disastrous consequences. While choosing an aesthetically pleasing saddle can be tempting, it's important to make sure the fit is comfortable for your horse.

From athletic maneuvers and the show pen to trails and ranch work, you demand a lot of your horses.

Dry Spots

After your ride, your horse's back should be evenly damp, with the exception on the spine. Dry spots on your horse's saddle area after a ride indicate too much pressure in one area and create saddle-fit issues.

It's important to note that not all dry spots are created equal. If the dry spot is smaller than your fist, it is a problem.

If the dry spot is larger than your fist, it is not necessarily a problem. Should you have large dry spots, you can fine tune the fit of your saddle by changing the thickness in your saddle pad to create a back with no dry spots at all.

Saddle Sores

Sores on your horse's back should be a red flag. Although they are not always caused by poor saddle-fit, if your saddle is too loose or tight it may be causing excess movement and rubbing your horse. If you have ever been forced to walk in shoes that have caused blisters, you can understand the discomfort these rubs are causing your horse!

White Hairs

Trauma from severe or chronic pressure causes damage to the pigment producing cells in the skin, resulting in the growth of white hair.

Saddle Tipping Up

Have you ever seen horses longing and noticed the saddle is tipped up off their back as they stretch their neck down? Lifting up in the back is a clear sign of an ill-fitting saddle.

Behavioral Issues

Oftentimes your horse will tell you something is wrong with your saddle-fit. This might look like swishing his tail more than normal, grumpiness when you tack up, inability to relax in your new saddle, and becoming crankier as your ride progresses. All of these signs may be your horse telling you he is not comfortable.



PHOTO COURTESY OF 5 STAR EQUINE

An even sweat pattern is a good sign. With custom designs to fit the toughest backlines, 5 Star has a pad for you.

Next Steps

Once you have evaluated your horse for signs of saddle-fit issues or soreness, you need to make a plan to heal his back. Obviously the first step is to eliminate the poorly fitting saddle. If you are not experienced in saddle fit, now is the time to hire a professional to help you find the perfect-fit for your partner.

The next step can be to evaluate what you are using under that saddle: your saddle pad. Synthetic pads can hinder your horse's natural cooling process, causing overheating and blistering of the back. A thin show pad may simply not provide the protection and padding your horse deserves.

A quality saddle pad like those by 5 Star Equine Products, offers additional padding in a natural wool felt material that maximizes the breathability and pressure reduction from your horse. A 100% Pure Virgin Wool Felt will be able to wick 20 times its weight in moisture, which in turn removes heat from your horse's back, helping to prevent further white spots and sores.

One of your greatest assets as a horseman is the ability to listen to your horse. A previously happy and easy-going horse that suddenly starts showing behavioral issues often in pain. Looking for signs of poor saddle fit and remedying any issues as quickly as possible can save both yourself and your horse from the pain and aggravation that a chronic issue can cause. You demand a lot of your horse, so making sure he is comfortable is paramount when evaluating saddle-fit. ★

How (and Why) To Find A Trainer

I once tried to save money by building my own hotrod, rather than hiring a pro to help me, or to help me find one that was ready to go. The result? I ended up struggling for three years to build it, and spending twice the money it would've cost me to either get professional help or have a pro help me buy a ready-made car. (I also lost money when I sold the one I built.)

What's the Point?

Why the hotrod anecdote? Because I often see people try to do the same thing with horses. Rather than hiring a professional to help them train and/or find a horse appropriate to their goals and abilities, they strike out on their own. And often have results similar to mine with the do-it-yourself car. Not to take away from those who are able to find success on their own, but many others only end up frustrated. They spend years and excess dollars trying to get the horse to a point at which they can enjoy him (if they can ever get him to that point).

Working with a good pro doesn't take away from your horse-training or horse-shopping experience. In fact, it can enhance the experience—and help make for a successful outcome.

Find the Right Fit

Keep in mind that the relationship between a customer and a trainer can be as complicated, fun—and at times, difficult—as a marriage. So I advise you not to “marry”

★ Learn Why Hiring A Trainer To Help With Your Horse (Or Horse Hunt) Can Be Money Well Spent. Then Use My Insights To Help You Find A Good One.

the first trainer you come across. Instead, treat your search as though you're trying to find your perfect “match.”

How do you do that? Here are some tips for finding Mr. or Ms. Right (Trainer).

Stop, Look, Listen

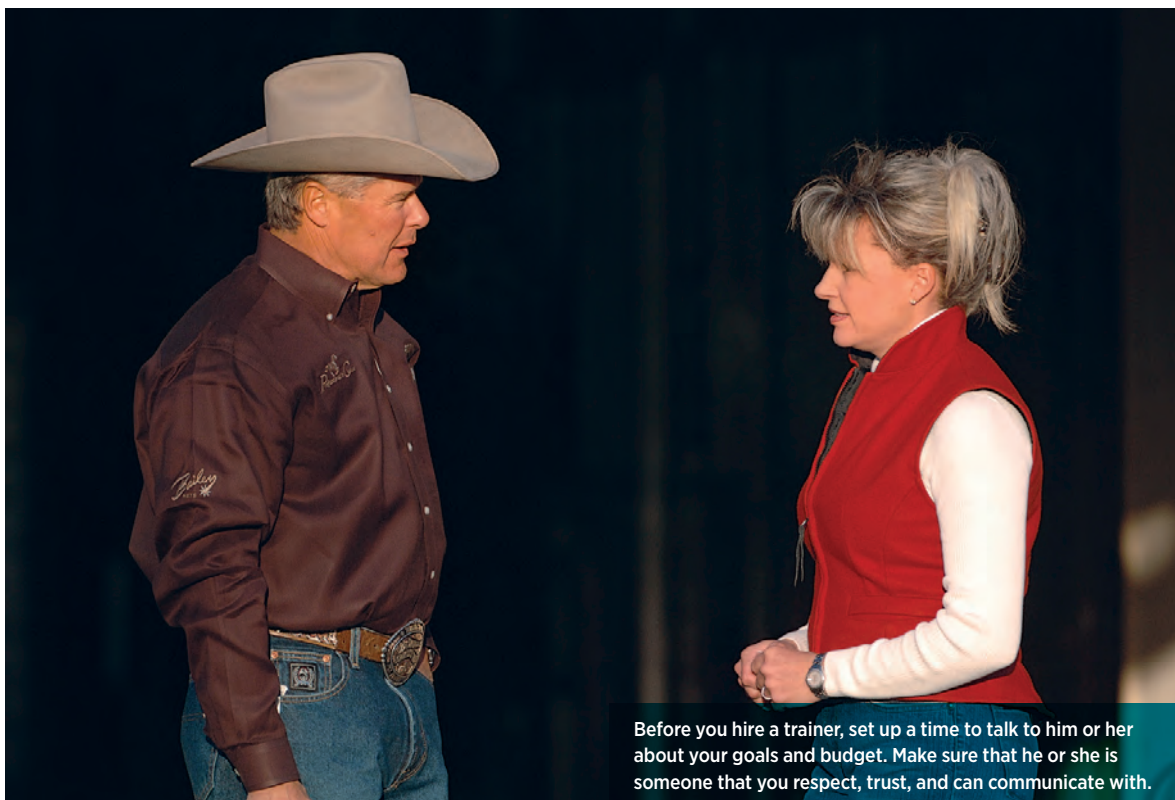
1. Use association resources. If you want to do Paint events, start with professionals within the American Paint Horse Association (APHA). If you want to do Quarter Horse events, go to the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA). Do likewise for other breeds if they interest you. Event associations are good resources as well. Associations generally have professional horsemen's groups or trainer lists. For instance, AQHA can help recommend someone in your state and chosen event.

Check Out Events

2. Go to an event or show that features your chosen activity. For instance, if you want to train your horse to be good on the trail, go to an organized trail ride in your area and ask around. Tell people that you're looking for a reputable pro who can help you with your horse. Don't ask just one person; ask as many as you can. Keep track of the folks who get consistent thumbs up; they're the ones you want to talk to. If you hear consistently about people to avoid, pay attention. Then “vet” the names



Working with a good pro can enhance your training experience. It can also help make for a successful outcome.



Before you hire a trainer, set up a time to talk to him or her about your goals and budget. Make sure that he or she is someone that you respect, trust, and can communicate with.

with the breed association, farriers, veterinarians, and other trainers in your area.

How Do They Treat Their Horses?

3. Study how the trainer treats his horses...and humans. When you get a short list of names, observe how each trainer works with his or her horses at a show or event. Ask yourself the following questions.

- How does the trainer care for his or her horse, mentally and physically? The horse will tell you. Is he relaxed, fit, slick, and turned out beautifully? Or is he scraggly, thin, anxious, and/or resentful, with dirty tack? A trainer whose horses are meticulously cared for is likely to be meticulous about all aspects of his or her program. Someone whose horses look scared and/or dirty is someone to avoid.
- Does he or she put too much pressure on a horse? Does the horse look confident? Or is his head in the air, his eyes bugged out, and his face tense with anxiety and/or fear? That's too much pressure. Cross him or her off your list.

Pay Attention

- How does the trainer handle his or her customers and staff, if applicable? How a trainer handles the humans around him or her can give you terrific insights into how he or she may handle your horse—and you. Is it with care and respect? That's a good thing. If not, that's a bad thing.
- How does he or she solve a problem? Maybe the horse is fresh, is spooky, or lacks focus. Perhaps

it's anticipating a cue. Does the trainer handle it confidently, calmly, and smoothly, without a fight? Or does he or she get into a battle with the horse, such that things go from bad to worse? The former is a good thing. The latter is a sign that the trainer is one to avoid.

- How are his or her stalls and trailer maintained? Find out where the trainers you are interested in are stalled at the show or event. (Or, drop in at his or her barn, if possible.) That'll tell you a lot about a trainer's management and his or her attention to detail. Are the stalls clean and well bedded? Do the horses have fresh, clean water? Are the aisles clear and organized? If so, that's a thumbs-up. If the stalls are dirty, and the aisles cluttered and unorganized, that's a "no!"

The Little Things

Try, too, to check out his or her rig. A trainer's rig can say a lot about his or her program. It doesn't have to be fancy, but if it's clean and in good repair, that's generally a good sign that the rest of the business will be, too. If not, keep looking.

The last word: Once you've narrowed down your list of potential trainers, set up a time to discuss your budget and goals with each of them—before you hire. This is a great way to determine whether a trainer will be someone you respect, trust, and can communicate with. (For more information, see "Making It Work," above) When you finally find someone with whom you click, congratulations! Now listen to his or her advice. After all, that's what you're paying for. ★

Nominate your trainer to be

TRAINER OF THE YEAR

Horse&Rider

2023

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NOMINATE NOW



A group of horses, including a grey, a brown, and a light-colored one, are running across a grassy field. In the background, there are trees and a body of water. The text "Pick a Performance Prospect That Fits" is overlaid on the image.

Pick a Performance Prospect That Fits

TOP TRAINERS **CASEY DEARY** AND
CLAYTON EDSALL OFFER 10 TIPS TO
FIND THE RIGHT HORSE TO HELP
YOU TO SHOW PEN SUCCESS.

PHOTO BY KATE BRADLEY BYARS



CASEY DEARY is a three-time NRHA Open Futurity Champion and NRHA \$3 Million Dollar Rider.



CLAYTON EDSALL achieved NRCHA Million Dollar Rider status in 2021 during the Snaffle Bit Futurity.

In today's horse market, there are multiple ways to find a potential prospect—private sale, online auction, in-person auction, and through a third-party sale site. But how do you know you're buying *the one*?

Whether you're able to put hands on a prospect or only evaluating from afar, advice and tips from National Reined Cow Horse Association Million Dollar Rider Clayton Edsall and National Reining Horse Association three-time Open Futurity Champion Casey Deary can help you make the most educated decision for the horse you'll take to the show pen.

It isn't easy to find a unicorn in the vast number of horses for sale and, unfortunately, not even being at the top of a trainer's game ensures a champion. However, Deary says it all comes down to focus, budget, and the end goal.

"What's your goal with that horse? Is it for a trainer to win a futurity or to buy a horse for you to fall in love with and show on weekends? You have to have an idea what you're after," he says. "A show horse, as a rule, I try to buy more horse than what they need at the time. If I have someone just learning to ride, I don't buy one that will only last a year."

Budget and the desire to have the right horse, right now, often drive a sale. For Edsall, wading through prospects for the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity can come down to his gut reaction. And, if the horse is for a client, it's more often that connection that makes a sale.

"If you see a horse and there is a connection between you and the horse, you'll get farther down the road than if a horse vets perfect and you don't get along," Edsall says. "If you like a horse, buy it—but I can't comment about the price because the horse market is what someone will pay for it. A horse that catches your eye and meets requirements doesn't have to do it all perfect, but if there is something you enjoy about watching that horse, then you're more than likely going to get along with it."

With time, and attention, finding the horse to fit your needs is attainable. The advice provided has come from years of looking at all ages of horses for sale in their respective disciplines, reining and reined cow horse.

BUYING TO SLIDE

Whether at a large horse sale or visiting a ranch with multiple prospects in a pasture, which is his preferred method to evaluate, Deary sticks to the same plan when looking to purchase. He wants a horse that's naturally inclined to perform the reining maneuvers, not one he'll have to force to be in the proper position.

1. Go Old School

"I am still a traditionalist. I like to pick the phone up, call and see what people have, and I ask for pictures before I drive out," Deary says. "I like the old-fashioned way of hunting them down and looking at a prospect in the pasture, where they live. I am not the guy who wants a horse to be worked for two weeks in the round pen before I look at them; I want to see that horse lope in its natural surroundings."

Don't be afraid to make a blind call to a trainer, breeder, or representative, he says. Horses are for sale to everybody, not just to horse trainers or big-name buyers. While videos are popular these days, there's nothing like seeing a horse in person, Deary says.

2. Find the Eye Appeal

For Deary, two things are equally important: eye-catching and a natural looper.

"When I walk out [in a pasture], I want a horse that grabs me because it will most likely have that same effect with the judge," he says. "The horse needs to be a naturally good looper because a good mover is going to do all the parts [of reining] easier than a bad mover. That's something I've found to be true. Conformation goes hand-in-hand with quality of movement. A horse that's

LEAGUE OF LEGENDS SALE

Since its inception in 2017, League Of Legends is a horse sale that takes pride in providing a sale specifically designed towards the needs of today's busy buyers with a supportive one-stop-shop buying environment catered to them. Produced by Turner Performance Horses, buyers are provided the best example of all-around legendary horses for the entire family, from beginners to seasoned professionals.

In 2022, the sale broke performance horse sale records with the top four horses bringing \$214,000 to \$310,000, with a sale average on 67 horses (plus one stock dog) to \$68,338.00. Each horse is approved to the sale after passing a veterinary inspection, as well as sale inspection that includes disposition and performance standards.

The Turners suggest buyers look at the following prior to attending a sale:

1. **Review the sales terms and conditions.**

One of the biggest complaints we hear is, "We didn't know," so be in the know and do your homework!

2. **Understand a horse's soundness issues.**

Does the horse you're eyeing require maintenance or has he/she had any serious medical issues? If the sale doesn't require a vet check, get one done with radiographs.

3. What is your skill set? Be honest about your skill level and what your goals are. If the horse is advertised, for example, as an exceptional trail horse, ask how often they're ridden on trails. Ask if the horse stays close to the barn or is ridden farther out, and how they handle new places. If your goal is in the arena and competition, be specific on what level you are looking to compete. If you are looking for a reining horse for example, don't attend a sale specifically catering to cutting horses.

4. Schedule a time to ride. Ride several of the horses offered at any sale, if that's an option. You'll be surprised how often the videos and photos of the sale horse don't match with what you'll find in the saddle.

5. Be prepared! Be sure you have all the required methods of payment, paperwork, and documents to bid.

long-backed but deep strided can do the same thing as a short-backed horse can do; I don't think you can separate conformation from quality of movement."

Looking at a horse loping, Deary isn't focused on its headset. Instead, he watches the stride from wither to feet.

"I know that when I teach a horse to pick its back up, the neck will go flat to where it is the most efficient traveling," he explains. "If the wither stays elevated, I am more than likely going to be able to get that horse to operate the way I want it to operate."

3. Know Your Goal

First, decide if the colt or filly being purchased is eventually intended for the breeding barn, or if being a show horse is the only goal. It makes a difference, even looking at a yearling or a 2-year-old.

"If I'm looking at a breeding horse, I'm going to be extremely picky about straightness of the leg, how it comes out of the joint or twists," he says. "Realistically, there's a large number of breeding horses out there without ideal conformation to their legs. I am going to be a little pickier about that if I'm looking for a breeding horse for my customer because I don't want to breed to something a little crooked legged. I want to breed to something that will last a long time."

4. Be Picky; It's OK!

Watching those horses make a 230- scored run at the NRHA Futurity, some are more eye-catching than other and some much more natural than others. When a buyer has an ideal horse in their mind, one that looks nearly ready to show may not be the right one.

"A big turn off for me is buying a 2-year-old that is doing a lot," Deary explains. "I have trained enough horses to know that occasionally, a really special individual comes along and is great at it. Like Ten Thirty; he ran and stopped in the summer of his 2-year-old year with Dany Tremblay like he did when I won the Futurity on him. There are individuals out there, but they are so rare.

"Most of the time, a [purchaser] ends up buying something that has been really pushed on early. Then, when I need to build on it later, there isn't enough foundation there to build off a solid base that I need to work with, so I would caution against buying a horse just because it looks like it could win the reining Futurity now [as a 2-year-old]."

5. Do Your Homework

"Make sure you do your homework and go through the process of doing a pre-purchase [exam]," Deary says. "Take time and spend money to get a little help from someone [like a trainer] that can help you evaluate it. Just because the mom or the dad were successful, doesn't mean the baby will be."

Deary thinks back on horses he's purchased for clients that had good show careers, then had an injury that took them out of the pen. But owners kept the ones they could simply ride for pleasure.

"If you can only buy one horse, buy one you really enjoy. Don't talk yourself into one just to have it," he says. "Buy one you truly enjoy riding. There are so many nice horses out there and reputable places to buy them, make sure you're buying into one you love."

COW SMART SALE

In 2016, Edsall won the NRCHA World's Greatest Horseman, an event that pairs one horse and one rider, using the same bit, for four events: herd



PHOTOS BY ABIGAIL BOATWRIGHT

TOP: A horse that wants to naturally complete reining maneuvers is top on Deary's ideal prospect list. BOTTOM: A horse that lopes with its wither raised can naturally carry its head in an ideal position.

work, reining, working cow horse, and steer stopping. It takes a special horse, and finding those special individuals to cultivate from a yearling to an older traditionally trained cow horse takes a lot of commitment.

"Buying prospects has changed quite a bit! When I bought Skeets Oak Peppy, the horse I won the World's Greatest Horseman on, that year I bought three horses through the NRCHA Sale," Edsall recalls. "I was concerned with size, shape, feet, and conformation, but definitely size. I was dealing with a budget, and I had to hunt around."

Today, Edsall may have more freedom with the budget, but the need for conformation and cow smart is still a top requirement for his purchases.

1. Don't Just Check the Box

The Western Bloodstock-produced NRCHA and National Cutting Horse Association winter sales facilitate a lot of horse purchases for reined cow horses, selling yearlings and 2-year-old prospects. Yearlings can be tricky to evaluate, Edsall says.

"You're buying a horse and you don't know how they will react to riding," he says. "You're buying a set of papers and what you can see there at the sale, and that is a lot more difficult. There are an awful lot of yearlings that check a lot of boxes: good dad, good mom with produce record, full siblings that have a cool look to them. That's all good, and I go from there as to what I think their value is, but you can't only ride a bloodline. You have to feel out their attitude and judge their conformation and how all that will work out for us in the cow horse."

2. Connect the Conformation

From a foal to a show horse, Edsall believes that if you see that style or if the baby is "cute" it will find its way back to that no matter the awkward stage it goes through as it grows up.

"Style matters, but conformation is more important when you consider taking a horse down the fence to turn a cow," Edsall says. "I am always interested in a horse with a good back on them, being upright or level in the wither is a plus, but I've had a lot of horses that were a tick downhill but with a good shape to their back. The shape of the back and the way the shoulder and neck connects to the back is more important for me than if they're a little downhill on the front end. →

“The horse has to lope right. If they don’t lope well and the saddle doesn’t fit them and you constantly have to ready just that saddle so it feels right to use, but it doesn’t feel great to the horse, then you cinch them up tighter—at a certain point the horse will get sore in their belly, back, and shoulder blades. Where a horse that the saddle fits and you don’t have to cinch them up so tight, you will get farther down the road because they aren’t cranky or sore. You’re not trying to make that saddle fit the horse as you’re also training.”

3. Be Sale Video Savvy

“The popular thing right now is to put a yearling in the round pen because everybody wants to see how they lope: do they fall out of lead, how do they stop and come through a turn? There are quite a few people who are on to that explosiveness in the round pen,” Edsall says. “Just like everything, a horse can be trained to that more so than just a natural, traveling moving horse. To me, you have to be careful if you’re watching a horse in the round pen the first, fifth or 30th time. Have they been trained to look outstanding for the video and have been in that pen a lot? There are a lot of videos that look like one person is in the pen, but if you pan back, you may see more people in there creating that situation for that horse.”

For Edsall, watching the horse in the round pen the first time or a horse that hasn’t been fitted for a few months for a

sale provides more information to him about its natural ability.

“A lot of times those horses trained to the round pen will look 10 times better than how they would look the first time being moved around in the round pen,” he cautions. “If I like a horse, I’ll be into it through its looks and presentation, and I’ll be more influenced by that than how the horse goes around in the round pen.”

4. Ear Expression

Reined cow horse combines a rein work pattern and then working the cow; in the cow horse three-event Spectaculars, a horse must do herd work and take a cow down the fence. When the majority of a horse’s show pen success depends on how it reacts to and works that cow, the eye-appeal is a big factor.

“When I look at a 2-year-old, especially when it is working a cow or out on its own, I really enjoy a horse that has its ears up,” Edsall says. “Seldom do you watch a horse work a cow and enjoy doing that without it having ears up and expression doing it; those ears show intent and attitude. Bet He Sparks was always expressive with his ears and into it. I’ve had numerous horses come over the years and while that horse may not do one thing great, if they’re expressive with those ears, that shows me they want to learn and be intelligent.

“Any time I watch a horse go around, work a cow, and perk their ears, to me that means they are into their job and

there’s room to build on that. It’s easy to see a horse stop, or its color, but if that horse’s ears aren’t into it, there can be a lot of manmade influence in that.”

5. Don’t Forget to Evaluate Heart

Older show horses sold typically all receive a pre-purchase exam that includes a radiography showing an area of arthritis. Edsall cautions a buyer against discounting a horse that may need some maintenance over its ability and desire to do its job.

“All horses are going to need maintenance, there’s no way around it. We use horses a lot, and it’s hard to find a horse that x-rays perfectly. I’ve seen people turn down horses based on x-rays for small reasons. If you’re going to buy a horse, there’s a level of responsibility that should be understood for maintenance and vet bills. Just because it doesn’t x-ray perfectly doesn’t mean it can’t do a job,” he says.

“I’m not saying that big issues should be overlooked, but there’s a big benefit of a horse that wants to do its job and you have to overlook a few things. My old veterinarian, Marty Gardiner, said you can’t x-ray how much they give of their heart. If you have a horse that wants to do its job for you, it will overcome a lot of small things.” ★

LEFT: A 3-yr-old competing in the Snaffle Bit Futurity, as seen here, must have stamina, conformation, and the heart to control a cow. RIGHT: Bet He Sparks sizes up a cow with style and positive ear expression, which is one thing Edsall looks for in a prospect.





Choose the Right Reins

*Learn How Choose The Right Reins,
And Use Them Safely On The Trail,
• With Clinician Julie Goodnight.*

PHOTO BY GAYLE LAWRENCE/ADOBE.STOCK.COM



Romal reins work best for very well-trained horses, that neck rein easily.

H&R FILE PHOTO

On the trail, your reins need to be safe and functional and help your horse quickly and easily understand the slightest cue.

And, your reins need to be comfortable. If your reins are too long, too much to hold, or are just uncomfortable, you'll tend to shorten your trail rides. If they feel good to you, you'll relax in the saddle and enjoy long rides.

Your horse is highly attuned to how you hold and cue with the reins. When you move along at a casual pace, he appreciates a long rein to give him room to move. Your reins also need to be long enough so that your horse can reach down to drink.

At the same time, when you speed up, you need to be able to easily shorten the reins to collect your horse and give a more direct cue when necessary.

Here, top trainer/clinician Julie Goodnight will first cover rein quality, types, and attachments. Then she'll tell you the best ways to attach your reins to the bit and how to rein your horse. Next, she'll give you ground-tying safety pointers.

Overall Quality

"It's all about quality," Goodnight says. "The heavier the rein is, the easier it'll be for your horse to feel what you're doing with your hands and the more subtle a signal you can give.

"Plus, when the reins are made from quality leather or rope, your horse will feel the rein release right away, so he'll learn to be more responsive."

Riding with well-weighted reins will remind you to give your horse enough slack, because you'll feel the downward pull of gravity. He'll feel the rein's weight, and your cues will be amplified because of the weighted drape.

If you use reins made from inexpensive, lightweight material that flops around, your horse won't feel the rein and may have a tough time feeling your rein aids. This means you may find yourself pulling on the reins more than should be necessary (and therefore applying undue pressure to your horse's mouth) to get a response to your cues.

Rein Weight

To experience what your horse feels

when the reins are weighted just right, stand up, and place your arms straight out in front of you with your palms up.

Imagine you hold a penny on your right index finger and a feather on your left index finger. Now think what it would take to balance the item on each finger.

You likely imagine that you'd be able to balance the penny easily, but need to shift your finger to keep it under the feather. The same law of physics applies to how your horse feels and balances himself within the weight of your reins.

If your reins are made from lightweight leather or nylon webbing, there isn't much weight, and it becomes difficult for him to feel the reins and stay balanced.

With high-quality leather or a thick marine-type rope, your horse will be able to feel your hand movements and balance himself more easily. He'll know what you're asking because the weight of the reins echoes the slightest movement from your hand. →

Rein Types

Here's a rundown of common Western rein types and how to use them. Find reins that feel best in your hands and as you ride on the trail.

Split Reins

If you opt for split reins, choose quality leather. Split reins are long and versatile — you can make them long or short, and use them independently or ride one-handed. Split reins can be great for trail riding, because you can easily ground-tie by laying the reins down on the ground. But some find them hard to use, and they can be easily dropped.

You can hold split reins in a variety of ways. You can choose how you hold them and where you hold them to cue your horse.

The traditional pistol-grip hold is the rein hold used for competition. Hold both the reins in one hand with your index finger in-between the two reins.

The trainer's hold or bridge is made by laying one rein on either side of your horse's neck, crossing the reins over each other, and holding one rein in each hand or both in one hand. Hold your hands as though you're holding bicycle handles while making a "bridge" with two pieces of leather as the reins cross over your horse's neck. This allows you to ride with two hands and work each side of the bit independently. You can also use a bridge when riding one-handed.

When riding Western, the traditional rein hand is the left hand; it's assumed you'll need to use your dominant right hand to hold a rope, open a gate, rope, etc.

If you're riding with split reins, make sure the bight (the tail of your reins) lies on the same side of your horse's

neck as your rein hand so his neck doesn't interfere with your cues.

Continuous-Loop Reins

If you choose to ride with continuous-loop reins, choose high-quality, heavyweight rope for trail riding. These reins fill your hand for comfort and control. They're easy to use when you're following a trail and don't need to guide your horse's every step. Rope reins are easy to hold onto, as well as to shorten and lengthen.

Hold rope reins right in the middle to ride on a loose rein. "The reins I've designed have a marker in the middle so you can easily check to see your reins are even," Goodnight says.

Consider length. On the trail, your horse needs to be able to drop his head to drink and move in a relaxed frame. Most trail horses do well with a 9-foot rein.

However, if your horse has a very long neck, you may prefer a 10-foot rein.

Find a length that also helps you ride on a loose rein with a relaxed hand.

'Find a length that also helps you ride on a loose rein with a relaxed hand.'

Rein Attachments

Traditional Western reins can also include a mecate or romal. Here's what you need to know.

• **Mecate.** The mecate is a long lead on a continuous-loop rein that comes off of the left side of the bit. The reins are usually attached with slobber straps. Some trail riders love the convenience of the mecate; off the horse, there's a built-in lead line. But others find the extra rope bulky and a lot to handle.

"I prefer a halter and lead separate from the bridle," Goodnight says. "I either tie my halter and lead onto the saddle or sometimes ride with the halter beneath the bridle. This means there's less to hold. And when you tie

your horse, you aren't tempted to tie with a rope that's connected to the bit."

• **Romal.** A romal is attached to the set of closed reins; the entire assemblage is called romal reins. The romal was developed to help a rider move cattle. Romal reins are held without a finger between the reins, so you have less ability to articulate with the reins than you might with split reins. You ride with two hands — one hand cues your horse, while the other holds the romal.

Bit Connections

Goodnight advises against using a metal snap to attach your reins to the bit. Although convenient, the metal-to-metal connection can annoy your horse. The metals rub and vibrate, which he feels constantly.

A rope or leather bit connection gives you a better feel and helps you know when your horse moves or makes a change. You don't need to change the bit or reins frequently; take a few extra moments to tie on your reins or otherwise secure them without a clip.

"A leather or rope connection is fine," says Goodnight. "Although I'm not a fan of decorative slobber straps — they're too bulky and don't allow me to finesse the reins. Plus, they're cumbersome to put on and take off."

The ideal connection for a continuous loop rein is a corded quick connect, says Goodnight. "A corded quick connect allows you to put the reins on easily, and also allows the reins to drape and easily communicate with your horse."

A split rein will usually have a tied-on connection — a kind of slobber strap made from the same leather as the rein. The leather piece is a break-away and may save your horse from getting hurt if you drop a rein and he steps on it. If that piece does break, it's easy to repair while on the trail.

Holding The Reins

Whether you ride with one hand or

two depends on the type of bit you use, and your horse's training level and obedience.

Snaffle bits (bits without shanks) are designed to be ridden two-handed with a direct rein (applying pressure from the rider's hand to the bit's mouthpiece). Riding in a snaffle bit with one hand causes the bit to collapse around the horse's tongue and pinch his jaw in a nutcracker effect.

Curb bits (bits with shanks) are designed to be ridden one-handed. However, if the bit is designed so that the shanks move independently from each other, you may also ride with two hands when your horse is in training.

Ground-Tying Safety

When you dismount and lay the reins on the ground, a horse trained to ground tie knows that means he should stand still. Laying the reins on the ground should only be done with a split rein, not a continuous loop rein.

Split reins have no dangerous hoof catching loop. In the worst-case scenario, your horse may break the split-reins' leather, but he won't get caught up or pull excessively on the bit with a material that won't break.

Never drop loop or continuous-rope reins in front of your horse. Rather, hold loop reins in your hands or over your arm to keep the loop far from your horse's feet.

If you want to ground-tie with a loop rein, keep the loop over your horse's neck, or attach a lead rope to a halter beneath your bridle, and allow this lead to hang down. Or you can use the traditional neck rope for this purpose, known as a "getdown" rope.

For safety's sake, make sure that some part of your reins, bit, and headstall is made of a breakaway material. For instance, if you have rope reins, connect them to a leather headstall. Something needs to give in case of an emergency. ★



The traditional pistol-grip hold is the rein hold used for competition. Hold both the reins in one hand with your index finger in-between the two reins.

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